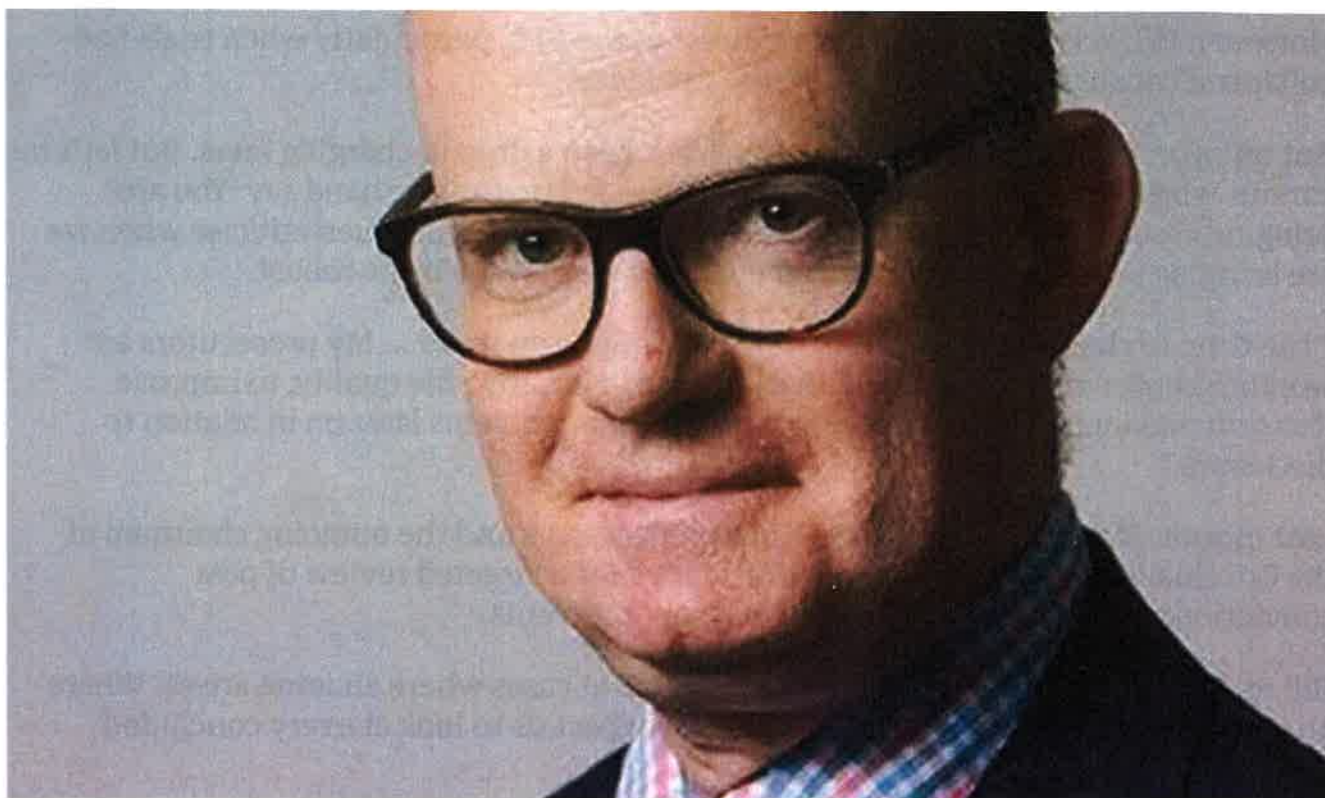


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Director of public prosecutions defends 23% fall in rape charges

Max Hill says decline due to prosecutors trying to improve 'quality' of cases going to trial



Max Hill did acknowledge that some trials had collapsed due to a failure to disclose evidence. Photograph: Home Office/PA

Matthew Weaver

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The new director of public prosecutions has defended the steep decline in the number of people charged with rape, but denied prosecutors were given targets to screen out weak cases.

In his third week in the job, Max Hill said he understood concerns about the fall in the number of rape charges, which dropped by 23% last year to its lowest rate in a decade.

But in his first interview in the role, Hill predicted the decline would not continue and suggested last year's fall was the result of prosecutors trying to improve the "quality" of cases brought to trial.

In September, the Guardian revealed that rape prosecutors in specialist training seminars had been urged to take a more risk-averse approach to rape cases after criticism of low conviction rates.

This led the Women's Equality party to express concerns that the most vulnerable victims were being denied justice because they were not considered the right kind of victim.

Hill denied this in his interview with BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "That is absolutely not part of the Crown Prosecution Service thinking.

"We don't screen out. We don't set targets. We don't have any statistical evaluation. We apply the code for prosecutors. That means in any and every case where there is sufficient evidence and it is in the public interest we will charge."

However, Hill acknowledged "past failures" at the CPS, particularly when trials had collapsed because of a failure to disclose evidence.

But on rape charges he added: "Yes, there has been a drop in charging rates. But let's be careful what we are criticising the CPS for. We can't on the one hand say 'You are bringing cases too soon, you are not looking at disclosure' and then criticise when we are bringing cases in slower time and making sure they are more robust.

"The drop in charging rates I don't think is a long-term trend ... My prosecutors are working harder in conjunction with the police to improve file quality, to improve decision making, and therefore to drive down any problems later on in relation to disclosure."

Last month, Richard Foster, one of Hill's predecessors and the outgoing chairman of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, called for a targeted review of past convictions to expose the extent of disclosure problems.

Hill rejected the proposal, saying: "We will look at cases where an issue arises. Where no issue arises you could not and should not expect us to look at every concluded case."

He also defended his predecessor, Alison Saunders, pointing out that she had to make a 30% reduction in the annual operating budget of the CPS.

"That was an extremely difficult task but was managed. I take no credit for it," he said, while suggesting the CPS could not take any further budget cuts. "We are operating efficiently and at capacity."

Topics

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