

Response from NICtS

“The Northern Ireland Court Service welcomes this inspection on the standard of service we provide to our customers. We are pleased that this independent review confirms that we are providing quality customer services at Bangor, Downpatrick, and Newtownards. We also recognise that there are some aspects of customer service that we could do better and are conscious that the design and structure of some of our older buildings can be restrictive. However, we are keen to continuously improve facilities, information and services within our budget. Inspection recommendations will be addressed through an Action Plan, which will be monitored to ensure progress is made. Each of these court venues achieved Charter Mark last year in recognition of the quality of customer service delivered there. Some of these improvements are relevant to other court venues and will be implemented there too. We look forward to working with MCSI as they conclude their inspection programme and review what action we have taken to address their recommendations in previous inspections at other courthouses.”

MCSI contact details:

This leaflet can be provided, on request, in Braille, larger print and languages other than English. For information, or for more copies of this leaflet, please contact the Publications Team on 0117 950 7960.

Or go to our website: www.mcsi.gov.uk



assessment for continuous improvement

How good is customer service in the Division of Ards?



About MCSI Inspection of Court Services

MCSI Inspection of Court Services is an independent inspectorate, which means that we check how well courts are managed and what the service is like for people who use the courts. We want to help courts give a better service. We will praise good ideas and ways of working, but we will also say when we find things that are not working well. We are separate from the court management. Our reports go to the Lord Chancellor and other Ministers, but we make them public too.

We work by talking to people involved in court cases (including agencies like the police and Victim Support), checking courthouses, looking at how cases are dealt with in court, talking to court staff and judges and reading court documents. We compare what we have seen and heard to our standards and then tell the courts if they need to tackle any important issues. We are open and always tell the courts when we are coming. Our Inspectors want to hear people's views, but will come to their own professional judgements based on all the evidence they have.

About our work in Northern Ireland

We have been asked by the Northern Ireland Court Service (called NICtS in this leaflet) to inspect its service, because it wants to do the best it can for the community in Northern Ireland.

We have agreed to start by looking at '*customer service*'. This means:

- **how comfortable, safe and private the court buildings are for all the people who use them**
- **how well staff treat members of the public and other court users**
- **how helpful the court is in providing leaflets, direction signs and other information to let people know what happens in court.**

We inspected all the courthouses in Northern Ireland between March and December 2004 and are now writing a formal report about these inspections. If you would like to see a copy of this please contact us – our details are at the end of this leaflet.

This leaflet explains what we found at the Bangor, Downpatrick and Newtownards courthouses. These courthouses make up the Ards Division and deal with criminal and civil cases in the Crown, county and magistrates' courts. We inspected these courthouses in November 2004 and were pleased to find that, overall, customer service is good.

What we found in the Bangor, Downpatrick and Newtownards courthouses

■ how comfortable, safe and private the court buildings are for all the people who use them.

In this section we are looking at whether everyone can get into and around the courthouse; whether the courthouse is comfortable if you have to wait; whether you can speak to people privately and how safe and secure the courthouse is.

We found that, although people can get into most parts of each building, it is difficult for people in wheelchairs to get everywhere they need to. For example, it would be very difficult for a juror in a wheelchair to reach all the areas he or she needs to. Staff at each courthouse do know about most of the difficulties at their buildings and are ready to give assistance to anyone who needs it. NICTS has thought about and taken steps to provide some of the things that people might need. For example, there are induction loops or infrared systems in each courthouse for people who use hearing aids. We think that NICTS needs to continue to look carefully at each courthouse and make sure it is doing all it can to help people who need assistance, especially jurors.

The standard of facilities provided in courthouses is reasonable as long as people do not need to wait long to have their cases heard. We did find though that some areas of Newtownards Courthouse are not as clean as they should be and some parts need repairing. Although some waiting areas have enough seats, some do not and the seating in the main waiting area at Downpatrick Courthouse is uncomfortable. Vending machines are available in each courthouse so that people can get

something to drink while they are waiting. All courthouses have private places for people to wait or talk to their representative although these can be crowded at busy times. NICTS is considering what it can do to make further improvements.

Buildings are generally safe and secure but we have given some advice to NICTS about how some things can be made even better.

■ how well staff treat members of the public and other court users.

In this section we are looking at whether people are treated with respect and offered help when they need it, whether everything is done to reduce the time that people have to wait to go into court and how well NICTS deals with complaints.

People are treated with respect and if they ask court staff for help it is given willingly. It can be hard for people to find out how long they will have to wait to go into court. At the moment, NICTS expects whoever asked you to attend court (for example solicitors, barristers, prosecutors or police) to tell you that kind of information. We found that some people still did not know what was happening in their case and there can be a problem when people don't have a representative. We think that NICTS has a duty to be sure that everyone has the information they need and it is helpful that there are notices telling people to speak to a member of court staff if they need help.

At the moment, NICTS does not know how long people have to wait to go into court. It is very important that cases are not rushed through and

everyone is given enough time to have their say, so some people will always have to wait to be seen. Several cases are listed at the same time because sometimes cases are settled by agreement or are put off to another day, and then other cases can be heard instead. Some people we spoke to had waited a long time, but we don't know how often that happens. Waiting times are difficult to control but we think that NICtS needs to measure them to know if there is a problem, and then it should work with other people to reduce the problems that can stop cases from being ready. This might be, for example, because defendants are late arriving from prison or solicitors haven't seen their client before the day of the hearing. We have asked NICtS to think about how it can give people better information about when they will be seen.

NICtS has a good complaints system and complaints are generally handled well. We found that court staff try, where possible, to sort out straight away any complaints made to them in person. Court staff showed us that they keep a record of complaints made and these are looked at to see if things need to be changed. They also put up posters showing what complaints have been made and what has been done about them. We pointed out to NICtS that having a combined system for complaints and comments can be confusing and suggested this should be reviewed.



■ **how helpful the court is in providing leaflets, direction signs and other information to let people know what happens in court.**

In this section we are looking at whether people are given clear written information about their case in a way that they can understand, and also whether signs make it easy for people to find out where to go without having to ask.

We found that there are leaflets available about the courts and a lot of helpful information is displayed on notice boards in all the courthouses. This is important because many people don't know what to expect when they come to court and can be nervous. We were pleased to see that NICtS had asked outside groups what sort of information should go into the leaflets. Unfortunately, NICtS does not make sure that the useful information gets to everyone who might need it. The leaflets are not always sent out with court papers or given to people by the police when they charge them. We have suggested to NICtS that it think about how to get the information out to people, and how to find out if it was useful so that it can be made even better in the future.

Most people in Northern Ireland speak English but we would also like NICtS to make it easier for someone who doesn't speak English to get information about the courthouses and how they work.

The NICtS website is very good (www.courtsni.gov.uk). It has useful information for someone who is coming to court, such as directions and details of public transport and information for jurors. NICtS has plans to make its website even more helpful and informative in the future.

It can be difficult for people to find the courthouse for the first time as there aren't many road or pedestrian signs to tell people where the courts are. Although the signs in courthouses do help people to find their way around, it is not always easy for people who have not been in a court before to know where to sit or who the people are in the courtroom.