

Independent assessment for continuous improvement

# Public Information Booklet

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The quality of service for victims and witnesses  
in the Humber courts

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May 2005





## **Quality of Service for Victims & Witnesses in the Humber Area**

We have recently looked at what kind of service is being provided by the courts in the Humber Area for people who have to come to court as a victim or witness in criminal cases. We looked at:

- what kind of facilities are provided at the courthouses;
- whether the information given is useful and helps make the experience easier;
- how well people are treated when they come to court;
- how long people have to wait; and
- whether the needs of all types of witnesses are taken into account.

We also looked at the way the service is organised to see whether everything is being done to make witnesses, including children, feel safe and supported.

This booklet tells you what we found.

We visited the eight courthouses that deal with criminal cases in the Humber Area in late May 2005. They are the Hull and Grimsby Combined Courts (which deal with the more serious Crown Court cases) and the six magistrates' courts at Hull, Beverley, Bridlington, Goole, Scunthorpe and Grimsby.

Our inspection took place just after a major change to the way the Humber courts are managed. In April 2005 the management of all the courts (magistrates, Crown and county) were joined together into a new organisation called Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS for short). We looked at how well HMCS is taking care of victims and witnesses at the eight courthouses we visited.



We are pleased to say that, overall, we found the service provided to victims and witnesses is satisfactory. There were some good things about the ways that every one of the Area's eight courthouses looked after witnesses. When we asked witnesses for their views, most people said that they were satisfied with how they were treated, the information they had and with the court buildings. But the courts do things differently and don't always put the best ideas into action in every courthouse.

We also found that HMCS wants to help all victims and witnesses but finds it easier to help prosecution witnesses. This is because there are good systems to find out who prosecution witnesses are and what special needs they might have. It is harder for the court to know who are defence witnesses, or victims who did not witness the crime and who are not due to give evidence. This means that, while court staff do their best to help victims and defence witnesses on the day of the hearing, the help is less planned.



## How comfortable, safe and private the court buildings are

It is good that at every courthouse there are private areas for witnesses to wait. HMCS has tried hard to make the best use of these spaces and to make them as welcoming as possible. Courts have special rooms for child witnesses or other vulnerable people to wait. Some of the children's waiting rooms have been decorated with bright, colourful pictures. The Crown Court in Grimsby has excellent private waiting areas, including a quiet room and a smoking room. We found that the courts often tried to provide toilets in the private areas. This was not always possible and sometimes the witness had to go into the public area, and might meet other people involved in the case. Someone from the Witness Service can escort witnesses but it would be best if everything that witnesses need, like toilets, snacks and drinks, was in the private areas. (The Witness Service is an independent charity that looks after witnesses in court.)

We found that many of the private waiting areas are not very big, which means that it can be hard for everyone who wants to use them to fit in. This also makes it hard to allow prosecution and defence witnesses somewhere private to wait, but be kept apart. It is disappointing that the space is so tight in such new court buildings.

We were pleased that all victims and witnesses can get in to all the courthouses and that some very good changes had been made to courthouses so that this could happen. For example, several lifts have been put into Grimsby Magistrates' Court so that a person who uses a wheelchair can get into all areas. We were told that, at Bridlington Magistrates' Court, there are problems with the equipment to help people who have difficulty hearing. We have asked court managers if they can make sure that all court users can find out about the equipment and how to use it properly.

The courthouses are generally kept clean and tidy but we have asked the court managers to improve the men's toilets at one courthouse, where the ceiling had been covered with graffiti.

We found that the Humber courts are safe and secure, and many witnesses told us that they did feel safe in court. The biggest problems were about people standing on the steps at the court entrances, making witnesses feel nervous about walking past them. The courts try to keep the entrances clear but sometimes they do not have the power to ask people to move on. HMCS will need to work with the police to make all court users feel safe to enter the buildings. They already check before the day of the trial if witnesses feel especially nervous and find ways of helping with this. We have told court managers about some ways that they can make the courthouses even safer, especially if it is necessary to evacuate the building.



## How well victims and witnesses are treated

We found that victims and witnesses are treated with respect and their questions are dealt with as quickly as possible by court staff, like ushers and receptionists. All the public area staff work well together to help victims and witnesses, but sometimes it isn't clear exactly who should offer some kinds of help. There are systems to find out who will be a witness, what extra needs they have and to give them information about their case and how the court works. These systems work well for prosecution witnesses but less well for defence witnesses. This may be, for example, because defence solicitors think that they should help their witnesses. Victims who are not due to give evidence are not part of these systems. We have asked the court managers to find out the appropriate needs of witnesses and of victims who are not due to give evidence, and then make plans to meet those needs without waiting for people to ask for help.

When you give evidence you will be asked to swear an oath or make an affirmation. It is good that in Humber the difference between swearing an oath and making an affirmation is explained to witnesses and that holy books of all religions are available. When swearing an oath or affirming, it is easier for you if court staff ask you to repeat the words after them. Instead, we found that often witnesses are expected to read the words from a card. This may be embarrassing if you have difficulty reading — for example, because you have forgotten your glasses or you do not speak English very well.

We found that there are some differences in the way that victims and witnesses are treated, such as whether they have to stand up when they give evidence, or how much information people are given about the way HMCS pays out expenses or compensation. We have suggested that staff agree the best ways of doing these things and then make sure they are used everywhere in the Humber courts. Unfortunately, sometimes people who are owed compensation must wait for other orders to be paid first because of the computer system. We will talk to HMCS about how this can be changed.

## How helpful HMCS is in providing leaflets, direction signs and other information to let people know what happens in court

Court staff have worked well with some agencies to print good information that can be seen by prosecution witnesses before they come to court. Most of the prosecution witnesses that we spoke to felt that they did have enough information, but some police officers would like more. It is important that the courts find ways of getting information to all witnesses and victims.

We found that information about complaints is displayed differently in each courthouse and not always in a way that is easy to find. For example, complaints leaflets can sometimes become hidden under other leaflets, or you can only get them by asking at the counter. Information about the Crown Court, and what HMCS has done to make things better in the future, is more easily found. It is displayed in the entrance halls for court users to read.

A new HMCS complaints and feedback policy will be used from July. We hope that the Humber Area will use that as a chance to think about how it can get more comments on what it is like to use its courts and how it can use good and bad comments to make things better.

It is good that there were some courts with special information signs for people with a disability, and it would be helpful for all courts to have them in future.



## Making improvements

Witnesses are often concerned with things like how long they have to wait on the day and how long it takes before their case goes to court. The government has decided that some of these subjects are important enough to set national targets for. It is good that the Humber Court Area looks at how well it is doing and tries to meet national targets. The Area does not have any local targets at the moment but there are Charters which set out what kind of service people can expect. We were disappointed that the Area does not always measure what it said it would do in its Courts Charters. So there is not much information available for victims and witnesses to see how good a service is being provided.

The Area does have some good plans to improve the service for victims and witnesses over the next year. They intend to ask witnesses what could have been better and what they need, for example.

We understand that, because HMCS only began in April of this year, court managers have not yet had time to do many of the things they plan. We are confident that, once they do these things — particularly asking people who use the court what the service has been like — HMCS will be able to improve its services to victims and witnesses.

The Humber Area has people of many different backgrounds and HMCS has shown us that it is very keen to meet the needs of everyone who uses the courts. We found that senior managers take this subject seriously and we saw this in things like court staff training. We applaud HMCS for working to get Charter Mark — an award that shows the high standard of service — for the magistrates' courts alongside the Crown Court, which already has it.

## Working with other agencies

We were pleased to see that HMCS has a particularly good relationship with the Witness Service and Humberside Young Witness Service. Between them, they make sure that many witnesses at all courthouses in the Humber Area are well looked after. An example of this is when they arrange for a witness to visit the court before attending to give evidence. This helps the witness understand better what is happening on the day.

We were also pleased to see that HMCS works well with other people such as the police and Crown Prosecution Service. An example of this is, staff meet often to look at cases where there is a 'not guilty' plea, to make sure there are as few delays as possible in those cases. This means that witnesses should not have to attend court if they aren't needed.

## Conclusion

HMCS is a very new organisation, which is still settling in. It is good that services to victims and witnesses have not suffered during the changeover. We are also pleased that the new management has agreed to make some changes we have asked for.





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