

6 FEBRUARY 2006

Defendants in the Cheshire Courts

The first inspection of the criminal courts in Cheshire, since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in November. A Public Information Booklet entitled *How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts' Service in Cheshire?* has been published today. Inspectors looked at:

- What kind of facilities are provided at the courthouses
- Whether the information given to defendants is helpful
- How well people are treated when they come to court
- How long people have to wait at court; and
- Whether the needs of all types of defendants are taken into account.

Inspectors found that, overall, the service provided to defendants by Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Cheshire is satisfactory. There is a clear commitment to provide high quality services to all court users in Cheshire, including defendants. The wide involvement of staff in HMCS's application for Chartermark is already increasing customer focus and an awareness of defendants as customers. The court staff in Cheshire give professional, courteous and helpful service to defendants at all court locations. Inspectors were pleased to see court staff treating defendants with respect and courtesy. They were willing to answer questions, and to provide help and advice. Staff are sensitive to defendants' needs.

At all court locations, there are arrangements to help defendants to understand the proceedings. There are helpful notices around the courts about oath and affirmation procedures, and about how to give feedback on services or to make a complaint. Surveys show that waiting times at courts for defendants in Cheshire are generally shorter than in many other Areas of the country. HMCS works well with the Witness Service – an independent charity that looks after witnesses at court, including defendants' witnesses.

There are some good court buildings and facilities, for example at the Crown Court centres at Chester and Warrington. Inspectors were pleased to find that, at all court buildings, both public and custody areas were commendably clean. People with mobility problems can get into and around the court buildings. But some of the buildings have real limitations, for example Macclesfield, Runcorn and Northwich magistrates' courts. Some buildings make it difficult to maintain a separation between witnesses for the prosecution and defence, and some waiting areas provide limited comfort. HMCS Cheshire deserves credit for maintaining and improving buildings and facilities, despite the constraints. They would like to replace some of the buildings when funds are available for this.

Inspectors have suggested ways that HMCS can improve the services it offers, for example by working with other agencies to make sure that defendants' needs are fully identified, and by improving the information available to the public (including signage, and information available in varied languages.)

HMCS in Cheshire has responded positively to the inspection, and is taking forward the recommendations we have made.

Comment from the Cheshire Area

Julia Eeles, the Area Director for Cheshire, replies:

"We are very pleased that the Inspectorate has assessed the service provided for defendants in the Cheshire courts as satisfactory. However, we are not complacent and intend not only to take appropriate action in response to the Inspectorate's two recommendations for improvement, but also to strive to improve the service provided to all users of the courts in Cheshire."

E N D S

Notes for Editors

1. **HMICA:** HMICA is an independent inspectorate. Being independent means we report direct to Ministers about what services are like for those who have to come to court. We will praise good ideas and ways of working but we will also say when things are not working well. If necessary, we ask for improvements to be made. We look at how well the Crown, county and magistrates' courts are managed. We check if the people who use the courts are given good service. We do **not** inspect or comment on judicial decisions.
2. **HMCS:** The purpose of Her Majesty's Courts Service is to deliver justice efficiently and effectively. It administers the civil, family and criminal courts in England and Wales. This covers Crown, county and magistrates' courts.
3. This inspection forms part of a series of inspections of HMCS Areas looking at the quality of service provided to defendants and their witnesses in the criminal courts. After each Area

inspection a public information booklet will be published which will give local people information about the service provided. Following the series of Area inspections, an overview report on the way defendants are treated by HMCS will be produced.

4. Inspection reports are public documents. Copies of **HMICA's publications**, including annual reports and thematic reviews, may be obtained from:

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