



**EMBARGOED UNTIL 17 November 2005**

## **Staffordshire courts build on solid foundations**

The first inspection of the Staffordshire criminal courts, since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in September. A Public Information Booklet entitled: ***The quality of service for victims and witnesses in the Staffordshire courts***, has been published today. The inspection looked at:

- What kind of facilities are provided for victims and witnesses at the courthouses
- Whether the information given to witnesses is useful and helps make the experience easier for them
- How well victims and witnesses are treated when they come to court
- How long witnesses have to wait; and
- Whether the needs of all types of witnesses are taken into account.

We found that the Staffordshire courts provide **satisfactory** service to victims and witnesses.

The eight courthouses that deal with criminal cases in Staffordshire were inspected. There are a wide range of facilities available across the county – some very good but some much poorer. Staffordshire Crown Court centres already have a Charter Mark for a high standard of service and the magistrates' courts are working hard towards gaining theirs.

The courts work well with the local Witness Service to make the experience of attending court less stressful for witnesses. They are also working hard, with other criminal justice agencies, to reduce victims' and witnesses' stress by holding trials as quickly as possible and to cut the number of trials postponed due to lack of court time. In fact, Staffordshire court waiting times are *better* than national standards and this should be publicised.

Inspectors have identified some areas where the comfort and safety of victims and witnesses can be developed. These include:

- improving the layout of buildings so that vulnerable people don't have to walk through public areas
- improving ease of access to some buildings
- providing waiting rooms for defence witnesses, and special waiting rooms for young people in the magistrates' courts (although games and toys are provided for children)
- making increased use of existing video-link facilities between courthouses, to enable vulnerable witnesses to give evidence from other buildings
- making more effort to keep victims and witnesses informed about how long they will have to wait, in liaison with the Witness Service, and
- displaying more relevant information in languages other than English and advertising the complaints procedure.

**Comment from the Staffordshire Area Director:**

This independent assessment in the very early stages of HMCS makes a welcome contribution in our efforts to provide excellent customer service to all court users. The services we provide to victims and witnesses are especially important if they are to feel comfortable, cared for and at their best to give evidence. There are straightforward things we can and will do at relatively low cost. However the report serves to highlight the significant differences and facilities there are within the courthouses. I will be trying to secure funding to bring about physical improvements within the fabric of some buildings where it is practical and affordable to do so. The report is enabling us to prepare an improvement plan with timescales and responsibilities for individuals in the area. We will have made improvements in our services to victims and witnesses when HMICA conduct a follow up visit.

**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 Services 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 victims and witnesses in the criminal courts. After each Area inspection a public information booklet will be published that will give local people information about the service provided. Following the series of Area inspections, an overview report on the way victims and witnesses are treated by HMCS will be produced.
4. **Contacts:**

### HMICA:

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

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