



PRESS RELEASE

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Valuing Victims and Witnesses

Today sees the publication of the report by HM Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) of the quality of service provided to victims and witnesses in the criminal courts by Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS). The report is an overview, summarising the evidence from eight Area inspections undertaken in 2005. It also reviews national approaches to victim and witness care.

Inspectors were pleased to find that:

- Court staff at the 'front line', who work in often stressful conditions, treat those who come to court as witnesses and victims with courtesy, respect and sensitivity. This good face-to-face treatment often makes up for facilities that are less than good.
- Some courthouses – especially those newer and purpose-built – offer excellent facilities for victims and witnesses
- Vulnerable and intimidated witnesses are looked after satisfactorily
- Court staff work well with the Witness Service volunteers, who provide an excellent service to victims and witnesses
- HMCS recognises the need for greater focus on the customer, and is implementing measures to achieve this
- HMCS is co-operating successfully with other criminal justice agencies to increase the number of trials that proceed on the scheduled date – reducing the number of occasions when witnesses attend court unnecessarily.

The report also identifies Inspectors' concerns:

- Some courthouses are old and no longer fit for purpose, despite the efforts made by HMCS staff to reduce the negative impact on victims and witnesses
- There are no standards, across the board, for the training and accreditation of those who accompany children and young witnesses – particularly into videolink rooms, where they can give evidence away from the courtroom

- The many, worthwhile victim and witness projects underway need to be co-ordinated better to ensure they are delivered effectively, without wasting resources and duplicating effort. Similarly, HMCS needs to take a more holistic approach to developing policies affecting all court users, to ensure that the needs of victims and witnesses are also taken into account
- HMCS needs to pay greater attention to reducing waiting times on the day of a trial, if it is to meet the ambitious targets in the draft Witness charter
- HMCS could improve the information provided to witnesses and victims – before, during and after they attend court.

The report makes six recommendations, related to the points of concern above, and a number of suggestions for further action. HMCS has prepared an action plan to address these and Inspectors will evaluate the progress made over the next 18 months.

E N D S

Notes for Editors

1. **HMICA:** HMICA is an independent inspectorate, reporting direct to Ministers about what services are like for those who have to come to court. We praise good practice and, where necessary, make recommendations for improvement. We look at how well the Crown, county and magistrates' courts are managed. We do not inspect or comment on judicial decisions.
2. **HMCS:** Her Majesty's Courts Service came into being in April 2005, creating one unified service from 43 separate bodies. Its purpose 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 overview represents the findings from inspections of the following court Areas: **Dorset, Greater Manchester, Humber, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Suffolk, Staffordshire and Thames Valley.**
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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