

22 DECEMBER 2005

Spotlight on Greater Manchester Courts

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

Inspectors were pleased to find that, overall, the service provided to victims and witnesses by Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Greater Manchester is good. All the courthouses have waiting rooms for prosecution witnesses and, generally, these facilities offer a good level of safety and comfort. HMCS recognises that facilities for defence witnesses are more limited, and is already planning to address this.

HMCS staff show a keen awareness of the diverse needs of victims and witnesses. For example, to help those people who might have difficulty in getting into, or moving around, the court buildings, arrangements can be made to transfer cases to buildings that are better suited to their needs. In some courtrooms, wheelchair users can give evidence from a portable witness stand. Witnesses can make an affirmation or swear the oath on a variety of holy books, and there is an excellent booklet describing the different ways to do this.

HMCS is not so good at providing other information for witnesses, such as how to find the courthouses and what facilities are available. It also needs to consider what languages or special formats might be needed – for example, information for young witnesses.

Inspectors would also like to see the complaints procedure more widely promoted, and for HMCS to use the feedback from this to identify and improve the service provided.

Greater Manchester has responded positively to the inspection, and is taking forward the recommendations we have made.

Comment from Greater Manchester Area

This inspection has given us very helpful feedback on the quality of service we provide to victims and witnesses. Whilst we are doing well in some areas, there are aspects in which we need to improve. These recommendations will be complemented by other action we are taking as a result of issues highlighted by the work we did in preparing for the inspection. Through our close working relationship with the Witness Service, we will continue to aim to deliver the best possible service for all victims and witnesses in the courts in Greater Manchester.

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 victims and 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 victims and witnesses are treated by HMCS will be produced.

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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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