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Spotlight on the Courts in Kent

The first inspection of the criminal courts in Kent since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in March and April. A Public Information Booklet entitled *How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts' Service in Kent?* 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 visited the 12 courthouses dealing with criminal cases and were pleased to find that, overall, the service provided to defendants is satisfactory. Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Kent has looked after its courthouses well and improved facilities over the years, even though some buildings are old and money is short. Despite the limitations of some of the courthouses, HMCS successfully provides facilities for defendants that are generally good, and always adequate.

Courts staff in Kent treat defendants with courtesy and sensitivity. We were pleased to see staff giving special help to defendants who needed it, and that systems were in place to find out what those needs might be. The Area has good arrangements for providing interpreters, when necessary. There is also a good range of public information available in courthouses, but we have suggested that this be made available in a wider variety of languages. The courts perform well in customer satisfaction surveys but the results are not widely publicised – it would be useful to share these encouraging results with defendants and other court users.

The Kent Area regularly hits national targets for speeding up cases involving persistent young offenders, but is not currently performing well on adult trials. Too many defendants are waiting too long for their trials to come to court. HMCS is working hard with partner agencies to

improve this aspect of the service, and we have recommended that managers continue to find ways of reducing delays at all the courts.

We are pleased that HMCS in Kent has responded positively to the inspection, and is taking forward the recommendations we have made.

Comment from the Kent Area

We accept the findings of the report and had implemented changes to improve and publicise performance prior to the inspection. Other recommendations are being acted upon, where possible.

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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