



Press Release

Embargoed until 1 June 2007

An encouraging first inspection of county courts

HMICA's Inspection report: ***Aspects of County Court Administration in Hampshire & Isle of Wight*** is published today. It is the first inspection of the civil courts conducted by HMICA. Eddie Bloomfield, HM Chief Inspector of Court Administration, said:

'The overall picture [of county courts in Hampshire & Isle of Wight] is that they are well-managed and are delivering improvements in services to the public.'

For this pilot inspection Inspectors looked at:

- the Quality of Service for Court Users
- Civil Money Claims
- Proportionate Dispute Resolution (*diverting cases away from the courts that should be more appropriately resolved in other ways, such as mediation*)
- and Strategic Leadership in relation to these elements of the operation.

Inspectors were pleased to find well-managed county courts, striving to improve service to the public at a time of budget cuts and continuing change in the courts service as a whole. Members of the public using the county courts are looked after well and, generally, cases are progressed efficiently.

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Area management have fused the separate court businesses (criminal and civil) in the Area into a unified whole, and Inspectors were encouraged by this. However, some inconsistencies in county court standards, facilities and performance remain and need to be addressed.

Overall, Inspectors made two recommendations for improvement concerning:

- Health & Safety, where performance varied from good to 'worrying' across the Area. In particular, the cells at Winchester Combined Court require urgent attention.
- the lack of planning and progress made in promoting Proportionate Dispute Resolution, which could help county court users to avoid the courts where appropriate.

The Hampshire & Isle of Wight Area has accepted these recommendations. Peter Downton, Area Head of Operations said:

'Hampshire and the Isle of Wight are pleased to note the comments of the Inspectors that Hampshire and the Isle of Wight are well-managed courts. As the Inspection Team stated, we are constantly striving to improve our performance, and have accepted the recommendations made. Action plans are already in place to address these issues, and we will continue to develop the service offered to our customers.'

New horizons for HMICA:

In his foreword to this pilot report, Eddie Bloomfield, Chief Inspector, says:

'HM Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was created in April 2005 at the same time as HM Courts Service (HMCS). For the first 18 months HMICA concentrated on inspecting aspects of the criminal (Crown and magistrates') courts. While it may not receive such high media profile, a significant part of HMCS' business is concerned with civil matters. So in October 2006 we decided to launch a pilot inspection of the civil work undertaken by the courts in the Hampshire & Isle of Wight (HloW) Area. A conscious decision was made to limit the scope of the inspection in terms of the functions we would look at. This inspection will pave the way for future county court Area inspections, which will have a gradually extending remit across all aspects of the work of the county and family courts. In time it is possible that we will examine all aspects of an Area's work – criminal, family and civil – in the same inspection.'

ENDS

Notes for Editors

- This Inspection report is entitled:

*HMICA Inspection of Aspects of County Court Administration:
Hampshire & Isle of Wight HMCS Area.*

It will be available on HMICA's web site (www.hmica.gov.uk) from 1 June 2007.

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

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