



assessment for continuous improvement

How good is customer service in the Division of Londonderry?



About MCSI Inspection of Court Services

MCSI Inspection of Court Services is an independent inspectorate, which means that we check how well courts are managed and what the service is like for people who use the courts. We want to help courts give a better service. We will praise good ideas and ways of working, but we will also say when we find things that are not working well. We are separate from the court management. Our reports go to the Lord Chancellor, or other Ministers, but we make them public, too.

We work by talking to people involved in court cases (including agencies like the police and Victim Support), checking courthouses, looking at how cases are dealt with in court, talking to court staff and judges and reading court documents. We compare what we have seen and heard to our standards and then tell the courts if they need to tackle any important issues. We are open and always tell the courts when we are coming. Our inspectors want to hear people's views, but will come to their own professional judgements based on all the evidence they have.

About our work in Northern Ireland

We have been asked by the Northern Ireland Court Service (called NICtS in this leaflet) to inspect its service, because it wants to do the best it can for the community in Northern Ireland.

We have agreed to start by looking at ‘customer service’. This means:

- **how comfortable, safe and private the court buildings are for all the people who use them**
- **how well staff treat members of the public and other court users**
- **how helpful the court is in providing leaflets, direction signs and other information to let people know what happens in court**

We will be inspecting all the courthouses in Northern Ireland between March and December 2004. We will then write a formal report about these inspections, which you will be able to see. Please contact us to ask for a copy of this – our details are at the end of this leaflet.

This leaflet explains what we found at the Londonderry, Limavady and Magherafelt courthouses. These courthouses make up the Londonderry Division and deal with criminal and civil cases in the Crown, county and magistrates’ courts. We inspected these courthouses in June and July 2004 and were pleased to find that, overall, customer service is good.

What we found in the Londonderry, Limavady and Magherafelt courthouses

- **how comfortable, safe and private the court buildings are for all the people who use them**

In this section we are looking at whether everyone can get into and around the courthouse, whether the courthouse is comfortable if you have to wait, whether you can speak to people privately and how safe and secure the courthouse is.

We found that, although people can get into parts of each building, it would be difficult for people in wheelchairs to get everywhere they need to. Staff at each court do know about most of the difficulties at their buildings and are ready to give assistance to anyone who needs it. NICTS has thought about, and taken steps to provide, some of the things that people might need to help them. For example, there are induction loops in each courthouse for people who use hearing aids. We think NICTS needs to look carefully at each courthouse and make sure that it is doing all it can to help people who need it.

Buildings are comfortable and clean, and there is a good café at Londonderry. There is currently nowhere at Limavady or Magherafelt for people to get anything to eat or drink, but NICTS plans to provide vending machines and watercoolers. We have suggested to NICTS that it should make sure that everyone coming to court can at least get a drink if they want one. There are enough seats in the waiting areas of all courts, but these are usually hard wooden benches and we have asked NICTS to see if it can improve the comfort of the seating. The Londonderry courthouse has lots of private places for people to wait or talk to their representative. This is especially important for people who are nervous about coming to court. The Limavady and



Magherafelt courthouses are small and there are not really enough places for people to wait in privacy.

Buildings are generally safe and secure, but we have given some advice to NICTS about how a few things can be made even better.

■ **how well staff treat members of the public and other court users**

In this section we are looking at whether people are treated with respect and offered help when they need it, whether everything is done to reduce the time that people have to wait to go into court and how well NICTS deals with complaints.

People are treated with respect and if they ask court staff for help it is given willingly. It can be hard for people to find out how long they will have to wait to go into court. At the moment, NICTS expects whoever asked you to attend court (for example, solicitors, barristers, prosecutors or police) to tell you that kind of information. We found that some people still did not know what was happening in their case and there is a problem when people don't have a representative. We think that NICTS has its own duty to be sure that everyone has the information they need.

At the moment, NICTS does not know how long people have to wait to go into court.

It is very important that cases are not rushed through and everyone is given enough time to have their say, so some people will always have to wait to be seen. Several cases are listed at the same time because sometimes cases are settled by an agreement or are put off to another day, and then other cases can be heard more quickly. Some people we spoke to had waited a long time, but we don't know how often that happens. Waiting times are difficult to control but we think that NICtS needs to measure them to know if there is a problem, and then it should work with other bodies to reduce the problems that can stop cases from being ready. This might be, for example, because defendants are late to arrive from prison or solicitors haven't seen their client before the day of the hearing. We have asked NICtS to think about how it can give people better information about when they will be seen.



NICtS has a good complaints system. Court staff showed us that they keep a record of all complaints made. These are looked at to see if things need to change if a complaint shows that the court had caused a problem. We found that court staff try to sort out straight away complaints made to them in person.

- **how helpful the court is in providing leaflets, direction signs and other information to let people know what happens in court**

In this section we are looking at whether people are given clear written information about their case in a way that they can understand it, and also whether signs made it easy for people to find out where to go without having to ask.

We found that NICTS has written a lot of good leaflets that explain what the courts do. There is some good information for witnesses. This is important because many people don't know what to expect when they come to court and can be nervous. We were pleased to see that NICTS had asked outside groups what sort of information should go into the leaflets. Unfortunately, NICTS does not make sure that the good information gets to everyone who might need it. The leaflets are not sent out to people with court papers, or always given to people by the police when they charge them.

We have suggested to NICTS that it thinks about how to get the information out to people, and how to find out if it was useful so that it can be made even better in the future. Most people in Northern Ireland speak English, but we would also like NICTS to make it easier for someone who doesn't speak English to get information about the court.

The NICTS website is very good. It has useful information for someone who is coming to court, such as pictures of what the courthouses look like inside, some court lists so that people can see when a case is being heard, and information for jurors. NICTS has plans to make the website even more useful in the future.

We found that the signs in the courthouses do help people to find their way around. There aren't many road or pedestrian signs to tell people where the courts are, but we did not meet anyone who had any problems in finding the courthouses.

Response from NICtS

“The Northern Ireland Court Service welcomes this first inspection on the standard of service we provide to our customers. We are pleased that this independent review confirms that we are providing quality customer services at Londonderry, Limavady and Magherafelt courts. We are pleased that Londonderry courthouse recently achieved Charter Mark accreditation and are currently working towards accreditation for Limavady and Magherafelt. We also recognise that there are some aspects of customer service that we could do better and are conscious that the design and structure of some of our older buildings can be restrictive. However, we are keen to continuously improve facilities, information and services within our budget. An action plan to take forward each of the inspection’s recommendations will be implemented, and monitored to ensure progress is made. Some of these improvements are relevant to other court venues and will be implemented there, too. We look forward to working with MCSI Inspectors as they continue their inspection programme.”

MCSI contact details:

This leaflet can be provided, on request, in alternative formats and languages other than English. For more information, or more copies of this leaflet, please contact the Publications Team on 0117 950 7960.

Or go to our website: **www.mcsi.gov.uk**

