



assessment for continuous improvement

How good is customer service at the Enforcement of Judgments Office?



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 solicitors), 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 Enforcement of Judgments Office (called the EJO in this leaflet). The EJO is in Bedford House, Belfast and has a storage warehouse at Lisburn. The EJO mainly deals with the enforcement of money orders and the enforcement of possession orders for land and goods.

We inspected the EJO in June and July 2004 and were pleased to find that, overall, customer service is good.

What we found in the Enforcement of Judgments Office

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

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

We found that people can easily get into most parts of the EJO offices in Bedford House but that it would be difficult for people in wheelchairs to get into the interview rooms on the 9th floor. There is a disabled toilet in the building but this is kept locked and there are no signs saying who holds the key. NICTs has thought about some of the things that people might need to help them. For example, there are induction loops at public counters for people who use hearing aids. We think NICTs needs to look carefully at the EJO offices and make sure that it is doing all it can to help people who need it.

The building is comfortable and clean and there is a water cooler in the waiting area on the 7th floor. We have asked NICTs to put one in the waiting area on the 6th floor, too. There are enough seats in the waiting areas but there are not enough interview rooms. We were pleased to find that NICTs is already looking to see how it can provide more.

Bedford House is 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.

We found that staff in the EJO want to provide good customer service and are trying to do this. They have appointed Customer Liaison Officers and carry out a survey every year to find out what people think of their services. Most people we talked to are happy with the way they are treated by EJO staff, but would like their cases to be dealt with more quickly.

Customers who regularly use the EJO computers to search the records of previous enforcement applications are less happy with the service the EJO gives them. They think that the computer search software is not as good as it should be and that the computers provided for their use are unreliable. We have suggested to NICTS that it should find out what the problems are with the hardware and software. We have also suggested that NICTS should talk to these users and try to sort out any problems they have.


The EJO does not currently measure how long people have to wait at their offices but this does not seem to be a problem for most users, especially as many court hearings are set for specific times.

The EJO has recently introduced a new complaints system. 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 EJO had caused a problem. We found that 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 the EJO produces good, clear information for users on how to enforce a judgment or what to do if you are having a judgment enforced on you. The EJO does not produce any information showing the location of its offices or storage warehouse, or giving details about the facilities for users. We were pleased to find that NICTS is planning to produce an information leaflet for the EJO.

There is a good section on the NICTS website about the EJO. This contains some useful information, such as the fees payable for applications. NICTS is developing an online *EJO Register of Debtors Search Facility* and *Case Tracking Service* to provide information to people taking enforcement action.

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

Response from NICtS

“The Northern Ireland Court Service welcomes this 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 the EJO. We also recognise that there are some aspects of customer service that we could do better and 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. We look forward to working with MCSI Inspectors as they continue their inspection programme.”

MCSI contact details:

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www.mcsi.gov.uk

