

7 APRIL 2006

Defendants in the West Midlands Courts

The first inspection of the criminal courts in the West Midlands, since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in January and February. A Public Information Booklet entitled ***How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts' Service in the West Midlands?*** 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 found that, overall, the service provided to defendants by Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in the West Midlands is satisfactory. We were pleased to see that court staff across the Area are enthusiastic about helping defendants and treating them with respect and courtesy. They were willing to answer questions, and to provide help and information. This is particularly important for young defendants, and those who don't have a solicitor.

We visited all of the 17 courthouses that deal with criminal cases. Some of the court buildings are well designed and maintained, offering good levels of comfort and privacy. Others need refurbishment or replacement. The Victoria Law Courts (VLC) in Birmingham present particular problems, and HMCS in the West Midlands would like to build a new courthouse to replace it. In the meantime, despite the efforts the Area has already made to overcome the building's deficiencies, the standard of facilities falls short of what we, and the Area, would like to see.

One aspect that impacts directly on the experience of defendants and their supporters is whether refreshments are available while they wait. Some provision is made in all the

courthouses, but this varies from simply a drinks vending machine to a café serving food. Only in the Solihull and Warley magistrates' courts, and the Wolverhampton Crown Court, is it possible to obtain food and drink throughout the court business day.

Across the West Midlands, conditions in some of the custody suites are unacceptable, with limited services for defendants with disabilities and some problems with keeping the cell areas clean. The Area is planning to address these problems, and some refurbishments are already under way, with positive results.

Inspectors recognise that HMCS is working hard to improve its performance. It is trying to shorten how long defendants have to wait for their hearing date, and is becoming more successful in making sure that hearings go ahead on the scheduled day.

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

Comment from the West Midlands Area

Mark Swales, the Area Director for West Midlands, replies:

"We are committed to, and will continue to provide, the best possible service that we can for defendants in the West Midlands courts within the resources available to us. Improvements will continue to be made locally wherever this is possible and affordable. However, as HMICA recognises, for a number of the premises issues identified there is no immediate nor cheap solution that can be implemented. On these issues we will continue to pursue long term solutions whilst making the best we can of the premises available to us in the meantime."

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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