

Independent assessment for continuous improvement

## Public Information Booklet

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How good is the service provided for defendants  
by the Courts' Service in the West Midlands?

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February 2006



## Quality of service for defendants in the West Midlands

Defendants are people who have been charged with a crime, and who are called to court for their case to be heard. We have recently looked at what kind of service is being provided by the courts for people who have to come to court as a defendant in a criminal case. We looked at:

- what kind of facilities are provided at the courthouses;
- whether the information given is useful and helps make the experience easier;
- how well people are treated when they come to court;
- how long people have to wait; and
- whether the needs of all types of defendants are taken into account.

We also looked at the way the service is organised to see whether everything is being done to make sure that all

defendants, including children and those in custody, feel safe. This booklet tells you what we found.

We visited the 17 courthouses that deal with criminal cases in the West Midlands in January and February 2006. These are the magistrates' courts at Aldridge, Birmingham (the Victoria Law Courts), Coventry, Dudley, Solihull, Halesowen (& Stourbridge), Sutton Coldfield, Walsall, Warley (Oldbury), West Bromwich, Wolverhampton; the Combined Court centres at Coventry and Wolverhampton; the County Courts at Dudley and Birmingham (the Priory); the Youth Court and the Crown Court sitting at Birmingham. We are pleased to say that, overall, we found the service provided to defendants is satisfactory. We also found some things that we think could be improved.

Our inspection took place soon after a major change to the way the courts are managed. In April 2005 the management of all the courts (magistrates', Crown and county) were joined together into a new organisation called Her Majesty's Courts' Service (HMCS for short). We looked at how well HMCS was taking over responsibility for providing services to defendants and their witnesses at the 17 courthouses we visited.



## How comfortable, safe and private the court buildings are

Court buildings in the West Midlands vary in size, age, and condition. Some are well designed and maintained and provide a pleasant and practical setting in which to come to court. Others are in a poor condition, are not well designed and are having difficulties keeping up with modern standards. HMCS recognises this and would like to improve or replace some of its courthouses.

Birmingham magistrates' court (also known as The Victoria Law Courts or VLC) is the biggest and busiest courthouse in the West Midlands and is housed in a grand, old, listed building. This means that there are tight limits to how it can be improved and it is expensive to maintain. The Area would like to build a new courthouse to replace the VLC but knows that this is unlikely to be completed for some years. In the meantime, it has spent a large amount of money on repairs and maintenance of the courthouse. Despite this, the facilities fall short of the standard both the Area and we would like to see. One of our main concerns is the poor choice of food and drink defendants can buy at the VLC. This is made worse by a policy that stops people bringing their own refreshments into the building with them. The building was also untidy when we visited, with quite a lot of litter on the floor. This was worst in the public toilets.

We were pleased to see that there are some West Midlands court buildings that offer good levels of comfort and privacy. Extra interview rooms, where defendants can speak about their cases in private, have been added to some courthouses across the Area. Although staff like to know in advance if possible, defendants who use wheelchairs can get into all courthouses. Not all of them have signs in Braille, but each has at least one courtroom with a hearing loop. We found that conditions in the custody suites are not always acceptable. There are limited services for defendants with disabilities and some problems with keeping the cell areas clean, fresh and free from graffiti. The

Area plans to improve cell conditions and is in the middle of refurbishing some of its custody suites. We were pleased to see that, where improvements have already been made, the conditions for defendants are much better and staff are working hard to keep them that way.

We like to see facilities that allow people on different sides of a case to wait in separate areas. This is even more important when young people are involved. We found that, where defendants ask for it, arrangements can be made for them to wait separately. But, generally, it is difficult for young defendants to be separated from main waiting areas. Where these facilities do exist we were concerned to learn that court staff do not always encourage people to use them.

Levels of security vary across the West Midlands. In some courthouses security officers patrolled the floors regularly but in others their presence was barely felt. Security officers will always confiscate offensive weapons when they find them but people are searched differently, depending on which courthouse they go to. But we were pleased to hear that, generally, defendants feel safe and secure in courthouses across the Area.



Inspectors also looked into health and safety in courthouses and often found that, although staff knew the evacuation procedure, there was no information to help defendants know what to do – for example, when an alarm sounds, and they have to leave the building. We have asked HMCS to look at security, and health and safety procedures, and improve these.

Waiting at court can be stressful for defendants and it helps to be able to get refreshments, especially if you're there for a long time. Every courthouse in the West Midlands offers some kind of refreshment. In some courthouses, you can only get drinks from a vending machine. In others, a café is open until early afternoon but after this time you can't get anything to eat or drink. There are only three courthouses, Solihull and Warley magistrates' courts and Wolverhampton Crown court, where you can get food or a drink from either a café or vending machine all the time the courts are open.



## How well staff treat people

We were pleased to find that staff across the Area are enthusiastic about helping defendants and treating them with courtesy and respect. Staff are usually available to help defendants as they arrive at the courthouse. They will often try to assist if they hear of any special requirements on the day, for example, needing to leave the courthouse to collect children. Defendants can wait a long time, after they arrive in the courthouse, to be called in to court. There are many reasons for this, some of which are not the responsibility of HMCS. But defendants can find the wait very frustrating as court staff do not always tell them what is happening during this time. We have asked HMCS to improve the information and support given to defendants on the day of their court hearings.

The court staff in West Midlands see serving the customer as an important part of their job. The Area plans to train staff this year to help them do this even better. Each courthouse has a customer services officer. Defendants can easily find out how to make complaints or provide feedback to the courts. We were also pleased to hear about changes that had been made to services following complaints from defendants.

Defendants in custody in some courts, who may have mental health difficulties, can see health care professionals who visit on a daily basis. HMCS is currently working with other agencies to introduce something similar for the whole Area. We are pleased to see CCTV has been fitted in some cells to help protect vulnerable defendants in custody.

## How well defendants are helped to understand what happens in court

The Area has produced a leaflet with information about coming to court. It tries to provide these leaflets to defendants but it is not clear that they always receive them. Some defendants told us that they had difficulty finding their way to court and were unsure what to do when they got there. At Birmingham Crown Court it can be difficult for a defendant to discover which courtroom their case will be heard in. At some other courts defendants were sometimes unable to find staff to help them with their enquiries, as the reception desks were not always staffed.

It was good to find the Area committed to improving performance. Most defendants would like their cases to be completed as soon as possible. HMCS is trying to shorten how long defendants have to wait before their hearing date. The Area is also trying to make sure that hearings go ahead as planned on the day and, more often than not, is succeeding with this.



We were pleased to see court staff explaining clearly to defendants what was happening and helping them understand what they needed to do after the court had made its decision. This is really important for young defendants, especially those attending for the first time, and defendants who don't have a solicitor.

Defendants are asked to take an oath, or affirm that they will tell the truth, before giving evidence in court. We were pleased to see staff explaining to defendants how to take an oath or affirmation. This often happened before they entered the courtroom, which we think is the best way to do it. We were also pleased to see that staff were helpful to defendants with different religious needs.

Some courthouses display a good range of information, for example, Wolverhampton and Birmingham Crown courts, Coventry and Sutton Coldfield magistrates' courts. But we were disappointed that the information is not often available in the different languages used by people in the West Midlands. Usually, court staff work well with other agencies to arrange for interpreters to be present when they are needed, although this doesn't always happen when defendants come to court for the first time.

Many defendants, who are in prison at the time of their hearing, are given the opportunity to use a live video link system, which means they can take part in some hearings without having to leave prison.

## Conclusion

HMCS is a new organisation, which is still settling in. It is good that services to defendants have not suffered during the changeover. We are also pleased that the new management has accepted our suggestions for making improvements to their services to defendants.



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