

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 Royal Courts of Justice. The Royal Courts of Justice recently achieved Charter Mark accreditation in recognition of the quality of customer service delivered there. We 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. Inspection recommendations will be addressed through an Action Plan which will be 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 as they continue their inspection programme.”

The Lord Chief Justice, Sir Brian Kerr, has also welcomed our report. When we met him to explain our results he commented that he was keen for our proposals to be considered carefully and sympathetically and for changes to be introduced where possible.

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**

MCSI

INSPECTION OF
COURT SERVICES

assessment for continuous improvement

How good is customer service at the Royal Courts of Justice?



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 Royal Courts of Justice in Belfast (called the RCJ in this leaflet). This courthouse deals with criminal and civil cases and contains the Court of Appeal and the Chancery, Queen's Bench and Family divisions of the High Court. We inspected the RCJ in September 2004 and were pleased to find that, overall, customer service is good.

What we found in the Royal Courts of Justice

■ how comfortable, safe and private the court building is for all the people who use it.

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 most people can get into most parts of the building fairly easily. Some of the doors are very heavy and would be difficult for some people to open without assistance, but staff are ready to help anyone who needs it. The waiting area in the Main Hall can get very crowded and noisy and it is difficult to hear and understand announcements made on the tannoy. We are pleased that NICTS plans to install new speakers to improve this.

NICTS has thought about and taken steps to provide some of the things that people might need. For example, there are infrared systems in each courtroom for people who use hearing aids. We think NICTS needs to look carefully at the RCJ and make sure it is doing all it can to help people who need it.

The RCJ is comfortable and clean and there is a café where people can get something to eat or drink. There are enough seats in the waiting areas of the RCJ but there are not always private places for people to wait or talk to their representative although staff will do their best to arrange private waiting areas for anyone who may be nervous about coming to court.

The RCJ 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.

People are treated with respect and if you 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 can be a problem when people don't have a representative. We think that NICTS has a 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. Although some cases in the RCJ are given appointments at specific times, most are listed at the same time because sometimes cases are settled by agreement or are put off to

another day, and then other cases can be heard instead. Some people wait 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 the other groups of people involved to reduce the problems that can stop cases from being ready. 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 be changed. We found that court staff try to sort out straight away complaints made to them in person. They also put up posters showing what complaints have been made and what has been done about them.

■ **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, and also whether signs make it easy for people to find out where to go without having to ask.

We found that the RCJ has written a lot of good leaflets that explain what the different courts and offices in the RCJ do.



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 useful information gets to everyone who might need it. The leaflets are not always sent out to people with court papers. 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.

The RCJ also produces a very useful newsletter which contains lots of information that people who come to court might want to know.

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 and court lists so that people can see when a case is being heard. NICTS has plans to make the website even more useful in the future.

Although the signs in the RCJ are generally quite good, there is currently a lot of building work in the RCJ. When this is complete, NICTS should make sure that all signs are easy to see and read and that they help people find their way around the building. There aren't many road or pedestrian signs to tell people where the RCJ is, but we did not meet anyone who had any problems in finding it.