



assessment for continuous improvement

When MCSI inspected Belfast Combined Courts



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:

- **what facilities the court buildings provide and how easy it is for all kinds of people to use them**
- **how well people are treated at court**
- **whether people have the right information to understand and take part in court hearings**

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.

What we found in the Belfast Combined Courts

This leaflet gives our findings for the service offered at the Laganside and Old Town Hall buildings in Belfast. These courthouses are called the Belfast Combined Courts and deal with criminal and civil cases in the Crown, county and magistrates’ courts. We inspected these courthouses in February and March 2004 and were pleased to find that the service overall was good in many ways.

What facilities the court buildings provide and how easy it is for all kinds of people to 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 the Belfast Combined Courts are easy for all people to get into and around. The buildings have ramps, lifts and disabled toilets. There are other kinds of help, like induction loops to help people who use a hearing aid and counters that are low enough for someone who uses a wheelchair to reach. We found that NICTS has made good efforts to think about these things, but sometimes it wasn't made clear to people that all this help was there.

Buildings are comfortable and clean and there are helpful facilities like the café and children's play area in Laganside courthouse. There are usually enough seats for everyone, but it is sometimes crowded in the Old Town Hall Building and the food and drink there only comes from a machine.

NICTS has created lots of private places for people to wait or talk to their representative. This is important for people who are nervous about coming to court. Laganside has good separate rooms for witnesses to wait and give evidence by video.

The main jury waiting room was good, with things like television to help pass the time, but sometimes jurors had to wait in less comfortable rooms nearer the courtrooms.

Buildings are generally safe and secure, and some problems are helped by having extra security staff. We have given some advice to NICTs about how a few things can be made even better.

How well people are treated at court

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. But we found that 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 are having 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 many 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 also 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 kept a record of all complaints made, and we saw how systems had been changed when a complaint showed that the court had caused a problem. We found that court staff tried to sort out complaints made verbally straight away if they could.

Whether people have the right information to understand and take part in court hearings

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 make it easy for people to find out where to go without having to ask.

We found that NICTS had written a lot of good leaflets that explained what the courts did and the people they would see there. 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 did not make sure that the good information got to everyone who might need it.

The leaflets are not sent out to people with court papers, or always given to the police to pass on when someone has been charged.

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. It is a good idea that people can look at the website in the Laganside café and at the NICTS Information Centre in Bedford Street. NICTS has plans to make the website even more useful in the future.

We found that the signs in the courthouses did help people to find their way around. There weren't many signs in the city centre to tell people where the courts were, 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 Belfast Combined Courts. 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. 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.”

MCSI contact details:

This leaflet can be provided, on request, in alternative formats and languages other than English. For more information, copies of MCSI inspection reports or more copies of this leaflet, please contact the Publications Team on 0117 950 7960. Or go to our website:

www.mcsi.gov.uk

