

7 APRIL 2006

Defendants in the Cumbria Courts

The first inspection of the criminal courts in Cumbria, 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 Cumbria?* 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, Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Cumbria provides a good service to defendants. The leadership of HMCS shows a strong commitment to ensuring an excellent service, which is reflected in the attitude and actions of the court staff across the Area. We saw many good examples of staff treating defendants with courtesy and respect. Comprehensive guidance has been issued to staff describing different religions and cultures, so that individual needs can be dealt with appropriately.

We visited the seven courthouses dealing with criminal cases, and found that they generally provide a good level of comfort for defendants and their supporters. There are cafes and vending machines where people can buy refreshments, and all courthouses have rooms where defendants can meet privately with their solicitors. But the level of soundproofing in some interview rooms is inadequate, and we have asked the Area to review this. Although we were pleased to see a security policy clearly displayed, and a visible security presence in courthouses, we have also recommended certain improvements for HMCS to consider.

HMCS dealt well with the problems arising from the flooding of Carlisle magistrates' court in January 2005, using other facilities in the city, and ensuring custody cases are heard at nearby Penrith, to minimise disruption to defendants, their families and solicitors.

There are good links with the Witness Service throughout Cumbria to ensure that all defence witnesses attending court are offered appropriate support. HMCS recognises the need to increase the accommodation provided for witnesses at Barrow, Carlisle and Workington, and has plans to do so.

HMCS also works well with other criminal justice partners – and with defence solicitors – to improve in areas such as the length of time it takes for trials to come to court and how long people have to wait on the day of a hearing. In these categories Cumbria performs well, and is among the top ten Areas in England and Wales. But waiting times can vary across the county, and HMCS needs to examine why this is happening. We have also suggested that the information given to defendants about waiting times could be improved.

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

Comment from the Cumbria Area

Simon Evans, the Area Director for Cumbria, replies:

"I am very pleased that the inspection team described the staff of the Courts in Cumbria as excellent. Providing an excellent service for all court users is a key business objective within HMCS Cumbria. It is vital that all court users, including defendants, are assured that the level of service that they will find within each of our courts or offices is of the highest standard. This helps us to instil confidence within the criminal justice system in Cumbria.

The findings from the inspectorate's visit to Cumbria highlight the good practices that have been taking place within the County for some time and I am grateful to all of the staff involved in providing services for defendants and achieving such a positive review.

I have found the recent inspection to be an excellent opportunity to review our systems and practices and have already embarked upon a programme of activity to meet the inspector's recommendations".

ENDS

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:

Lori Buckley, Publications Manager, HMICA
Block 2 Government Buildings, Burghill Road, Westbury-on-Trym,
Bristol BS10 6EZ

Tel: 0117 959 8203 / 8200

Email: lori.buckley@hmica.gsi.gov.uk

Or via our website at: www.hmica.gov.uk

HMCS Cumbria Area Contact:

Tel: 01228 552920

Email: lorraine.edgar1@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk