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A Good Service for Defendants in the Durham Courts

The first inspection of the criminal courts in County Durham since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in May 2006. A Public Information Booklet entitled *How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts Service in County Durham?* 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 visited the seven courthouses dealing with criminal cases and were pleased to find that, overall, the service provided to defendants is good. Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in County Durham works well with its partners in the criminal justice system – such as the police, the probation service and solicitors – to improve services for defendants. Together, they have been successful in cutting down the time it takes for trials to come to court. The Area is also in the top ten in the country for the shortest waiting times on the day of a hearing.

HMCS staff in County Durham are excellent – we saw many good examples of the ways they provide a helpful, professional service to everyone, and treat defendants with respect. HMCS also has good links with the Witness Service (an independent charity that looks after witnesses at court) which ensure that defendants, and defence witnesses, receive help and support.

We were pleased to find that all the courthouses in County Durham were clean, light and free of graffiti, most of them offering a good range of facilities and levels of comfort for defendants and their supporters. The older courthouses, like Durham Crown Court, do present some problems – such as restricted access for people using wheelchairs. This court is a listed building, which makes it difficult for HMCS to make the kind of improvements that would give

easier access. However, in such cases, HMCS can move the hearing to another location, such as the Crown Court at Teesside or Newcastle.

We have also suggested ways that HMCS can improve its service even further, by:

- Making its public information available in more of the community languages (other than English) spoken in County Durham, and in other formats such as large print
- making better efforts to ensure that young defendants and witnesses are kept separate from adults within the courthouses, to protect their privacy and safety
- Doing more to ensure that defendants in custody receive information about the complaints and feedback system. HMCS responds well to the feedback it does receive, so it would be good to make this facility more available to all defendants in order to improve the service overall.

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

Comment from the County Durham Area

David Keane, Area Director for County Durham, replies:

"I am delighted that Durham has received such a good report from the Inspectorate. The staff in Durham work hard to provide an excellent service to all its court users, and I think this report goes some way to confirming that.

We now look forward to working on the recommendations that the Inspectorate has made."

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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