

21 JULY 2006

Essex Courts Achieve Excellence

The first inspection of the criminal courts in Essex since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in May and June 2006. A Public Information Booklet entitled *How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts Service in Essex?* 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 12 courthouses dealing with criminal cases and were pleased to find that, overall, the service provided to defendants is excellent. Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Essex is constantly striving for improvement, and this is reflected in good performance figures and effective ways of ensuring that all defendants are treated well.

Essex court buildings offer generally good levels of comfort and facilities – and some courthouses are excellent in this respect – providing a pleasant and practical setting for all court users. The exceptions are the magistrates' courts at Chelmsford and Colchester. These courts are in shared, listed buildings, which restricts the kind of improvements that can be made. HMCS already has plans to replace its poorer buildings with new, specially designed courthouses. Inspectors also have some concerns about aspects of security, and health and safety issues, and we have made a recommendation about this.

But we were pleased to see that, where the facilities in buildings were limited – for example, not enough waiting areas designated for vulnerable defendants and their witnesses to wait separately and securely, away from other court users – court staff make special efforts to overcome this. Court staff in Essex consider good customer service a very important part of their job – we often saw court staff going out of their way to help defendants.

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 Essex, and taking a more systematic approach to meeting preferences for taking the oath, or affirming to tell the truth, when giving evidence in court
- Doing more to promote its complaints and feedback system.

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

Comment from the Essex Area

Mike Littlewood, the Area Director for Essex, replies:

"I am very pleased that the services provided for defendants, by HMCS Essex, have been recognised by the inspection team as excellent. We are committed to the provision of high customer service standards for defendants and all court users, and will continue to prioritise and strive to improve these within the services we deliver.

It is right that the inspection team has recognised the challenges presented by a number of our court buildings which, despite best efforts, hinder a consistently excellent service provision at all courts. It has been recognised that our staff and working practices have more than met the required standard, regardless of our estate that we hope to improve through a new building scheme awaiting approval.

I found the recent inspection an excellent opportunity to review our systems and practices, and we have already commenced work to ensure the recommendation and suggestions of the inspection are met."

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:

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 Essex Area Contact:

Mike Littlewood, OBE
Area Director
Tel: 01245 287974