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HMICA's year of challenge, change and development

The second Annual Report of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) is published today. Eddie Bloomfield, HMICA Chief Inspector since June 2005, says:

'This year has been a year of challenge, change and development. Our inspection programme in HM Courts Service has included a series of national thematic inspections and our first inspection of the civil courts. The year has also seen significant progress made with the development of the first joint Business Plan between the five Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors¹. This provides an exciting opportunity to offer end-to-end inspection of the criminal justice system and significant improvements to all users. We look forward to seeing this work make a real impact in the coming year'

Inspection work over the last year

Our inspections have identified much good practice in the Crown, magistrates and county courts. Last year our inspections focused on geographical areas. This year we have worked on a very diverse and challenging series of national inspections covering a broad range of themes. Each inspection revealed both good practice and areas for improvement; the latter being addressed by recommendations:

- **The service provided to jurors in the Crown Court**

We found that, overall, jurors were glad to serve but expressed dissatisfaction with lengthy delays. There was evidence of outstanding efforts by court staff to make jurors feel at ease.

¹ The five Criminal Justice Inspectorates are: HM Inspectorate of Constabulary; HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate; HM Inspectorate of Court Administration; HM Inspectorate of Prisons; and HM Inspectorate of Probation.

- **The implementation of Youth Court Guidelines**

Inspectors were impressed by the hard work and dedication shown by everyone involved in the Youth Courts and Inspectors saw excellent examples from court staff throughout the inspection.

- **Internal communications in HM Courts Service**

Inspectors were pleased to see staff thinking about innovative ways to improve internal communication.

- **The quality of service provided to defendants**

Inspectors found that the quality of service ranged from excellent to satisfactory and generally defendants were treated with respect.

- **The way courts deal with feedback and complaints**

Inspectors found that a lot of progress had been made but that, at an operational level, procedures were not being consistently applied.

- **Assisting families by Court order (CAFCASS)**

Family Assistance Orders provide support to families experiencing difficulties in agreeing arrangements for their children after separation or divorce. Inspectors found wide regional variation, but no difference in the nature of the cases before the courts that could explain this. Recommendations were made to improve the situation.

- **Front-line practice in private law (CAFCASS)**

Inspectors found many service users experienced a courteous, timely and caring service – but some perceived a lack of clarity and purpose in assessments. There was evidence of high quality work with both children and adults.

- **Promoting race equality (CAFCASS)**

Inspectors found effective action had been taken to improve the recruitment of black and ethnic minority staff, but CAFCASS' approach was too broad to address the specific requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and there were some worrying examples of racist attitudes and behaviour.

- **Adoption – the new law (CAFCASS)**

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 represents the largest reform in adoption for 30 years. Inspectors found that, despite teething problems, CAFCASS staff and court staff were working hard to make the two administrative systems work together.

- **CAFCASS Cymru**

Since devolution to the Wales Assembly, CAFCASS Cymru has maintained service delivery without delay. However, Inspectors found that the quality assurance and performance management systems were weak.

- **Inspection of Northern Ireland Coroners Service.**

HMICA has no statutory remit in Northern Ireland but inspected the Coroners Service by invitation. Inspectors were pleased to find the Service focusing on the needs of bereaved families and working hard to improve the rate at which cases are resolved.

Inspecting the Civil Courts for the first time

HMICA's remit since April 2005 requires us to inspect the work of the county courts. This year we have therefore conducted a successful pilot Inspection of Hampshire and Isle of Wight county courts, and plans are in place to further develop this avenue of inspection in 2007–08. Inspectors were pleased to find a well-developed performance management culture and some impressive customer service, especially from ushers. We made recommendations about health & safety and security, and to encourage the promotion of Proportional Dispute Resolution (PDR) in the Area.

Looking to the future

Eddie Bloomfield, the Chief Inspector says:

'Looking ahead to the coming year, alongside a full programme of single agency and joint-agency inspection work, we will be undertaking a strategic review of our own structures and methods of working as we continue to evolve as an organisation, build on opportunities and shape our place within the new Ministry of Justice and the wider criminal justice system'.

End

Notes for Editors

Copies of the Chief Inspector's Annual Report were laid before Parliament and placed in the libraries of both Houses on 19 July 2007.

About HM Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA)

HMICA was launched on 1 April 2005 with a remit to inspect Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) under the Courts Act 2003 that embraces inspection of the Crown Court and county courts, as well as the magistrates' courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). The unified court service, HMCS, also came into existence on the 1 April 2005.

HMICA is headed by the Chief Inspector, Eddie Bloomfield. Inspectors are based in London, Bristol and Leeds. HMICA is independent of Her Majesty's Courts Service, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education and Skills. On inspection matters, since 28 June 2007, Eddie Bloomfield reports directly to the Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor and, for CAFCASS, to Parmjit Dhanda MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children, Young People and Families.

This is the final year that we will be reporting on inspection of CAFCASS as that element of our work has migrated, from 31 March 2007, to the new Ofsted.

Contact:

Copies of HMICA's publications, including the Annual Report, may be obtained from:

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