



**EMBARGOED UNTIL 17 November 2005**

## **Thames Valley courts look to the future**

The first inspection of the Thames Valley criminal courts, since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in September. A Public Information Booklet entitled: ***The quality of service for victims and witnesses in the Thames Valley courts***, has been published today. The inspection looked at:

- What kind of facilities are provided for victims and witnesses at the courthouses
- Whether the information given to witnesses is useful and helps make the experience easier for them
- How well victims and witnesses are treated when they come to court
- How long witnesses have to wait; and
- Whether the needs of all types of witnesses are taken into account.

We found that, overall, the Thames Valley courts provide **satisfactory** service to victims and witnesses, although the quality of service varied across the Area. We welcome the Thames Valley Area's commitment to improving the service provided.

The eighteen courthouses that deal with criminal cases in the Thames Valley Area were inspected.

Staff treat victims and witnesses with courtesy and respect and provide for diverse needs. For example, we were pleased to see the court staff and the Witness Service worked together to establish the specific religious needs of witnesses for oath-taking, and that the oath is administered correctly (with people being asked to repeat rather than read the oath). In some of the smaller courts it can be harder to find someone to help, owing to limited resources. We have asked HMCS to ensure that someone is always available to offer advice and help to victims and witnesses.

The court staff work well with other agencies, such as the Witness Service, to look after people while they are at court. For example, keeping them informed about waiting times. However,

more information could be displayed in a wider variety of languages and the complaints/feedback procedure should be more widely publicised for when people want to comment. Victims awarded compensation need more information about how the compensation will be paid.

The courts provide varying levels of facilities with one or two courthouses being particularly good. However, Inspectors feel that facilities could be used more effectively and better provision made for the special needs of some users, such as children, in the magistrates' courts.

The courts work well with other criminal justice agencies, but it is not always clear who is responsible for providing services to witnesses and information about vulnerable victims and witnesses is not always passed to HMCS in advance to allow special arrangements to be made. HMCS is working to overcome this problem.

Across the courts better mechanisms to identify and spread good practice need to be developed.

#### **Comment from the Thames Valley Area Director**

Her Majesty's Court Service in Thames Valley is committed to improving services to victims and witnesses when they attend court to give evidence. It is pleasing to see that the Inspectorate recognises that, overall, the courts in Thames Valley are currently providing a satisfactory service to victims and witnesses. Some improvements to facilities have been identified in a number of court buildings to ensure the same common high standard across all court premises, and there are plans being prepared to develop these facilities over time. In addition, ensuring that victims and witnesses continue to be treated well by all our staff when they are at court is of paramount importance and that there is good communications between agencies when dealing with their attendance at court. Her Majesty's Court Service in Thames Valley will continue to seek the views of Court Users to assist us to further enhance our services in the future.

**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 Services 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 victims and witnesses in the criminal courts. After each Area inspection a public information booklet will be published that will give local people information about the service provided. Following the series of Area inspections, an overview report on the way victims and witnesses are treated by HMCS will be produced.
4. **Contacts:**

### HMICA:

Inspection reports are public documents. Copies of HMICA's publications, including annual reports and thematic reviews, may be obtained from:

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