

HM Inspectorate of Court Administration

Inspection of internal
communications within
Her Majesty's Courts Service

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HMICA
HM Inspectorate of Court Administration

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HMICA is an independent, statutory inspectorate created by the Courts Act 2003 as amended by the Police and Justice Act 2006. Our duty is to:

- inspect and report to the Lord Chancellor on the system that supports the carrying on of the business of the courts (the Crown Court, county courts and magistrates' courts) and the services provided for those courts
- discharge any other particular functions which may be specified in connection with the courts listed.

HMICA is not empowered to inspect persons making judicial decisions or exercising any judicial discretion.

Definition of inspection

HMICA is committed to the definition of inspection in the Government's *Policy on Inspection* (2003) which states that inspection is an external review that should:

- be independent of service providers
- provide assurance, to Ministers and the public, about the safe and proper delivery of those services
- contribute to improvement of those services
- report in public
- deliver value for money.

HMICA is also committed to the ten principles of inspection set out in the same policy. These state that public services inspection should:

- pursue the purpose of improvement
- focus on outcomes
- take a user perspective
- be proportionate to risk
- encourage self-assessment by managers
- use impartial evidence, wherever possible
- disclose the criteria used for judgement
- be open about the processes involved
- have regard to value for money, including that of the inspecting body
- continually learn from experience.

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Chief Inspector's foreword

For any organisation to be successful in achieving its aims, it is vital that internal communications are as effective as possible. Not only does this allow all members of staff to understand what is being asked of them and why, but it also helps them to feel part of the organisation. This engagement will, in turn, bring rewards as staff take a sense of pride in the levels of service that they offer – and in their own, and the organisation's, performance.

This inspection looks at how effective internal communication is within Her Majesty's Court Service (HMCS) – not only from the Communications Directorate, but between all parts of the business. It comes at a crucial time in the development of what is still a very young organisation. HMCS is currently undergoing a major restructuring as it reduces the number of operational areas from 42 to 25, while still dealing with the challenges arising from its creation some two years ago.

While I am pleased to report that we have found that internal communications have improved recently, HMCS can still make many improvements to how its constituent parts communicate. Ensuring that communication is seen to form part of every manager's responsibilities, is of vital importance. This approach offers the opportunity to place suitable emphasis on how messages are delivered at every level of HMCS. We have made four recommendations that should help HMCS further improve internal communications. I welcome the fact that HMCS has developed an action plan to address these recommendations and has already taken steps to make some immediate improvements.

We have also identified examples of good practice in the various parts of HMCS that we visited. These are highlighted in the text, and I would encourage HMCS to ensure that good practice is shared across the organisation as much as possible.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this inspection. We visited over 30 locations, making this the most extensive inspection HMICA has undertaken. In many places, the inspection took place against a background of organisational change and considerable work pressures and upheaval, and I am grateful that so many people made the time to meet with the inspection team and contribute to this vitally important inspection.



Eddie Bloomfield

HM Chief Inspector of Court Administration

May 2007

Section 1

Format of this report

- 1.1 After the Executive Summary and Recommendations, by way of context for the findings of the inspection, there is a short introduction to the benefits that good internal communications can bring to an organisation. We then look at HMCS' internal communication strategy and associated policies before considering how effective internal communications are within HMCS. This section is split into five parts:
 - how well messages are communicated
 - how well messages are targeted
 - how effective written communications are
 - how effective electronic means of communication are
 - how corporate information is communicated through meetings and Team Briefings.
- 1.2 Finally, we examine the effectiveness of multi-directional communication.
- 1.3 The methodology used for this inspection is set out at Annex A.
- 1.4 In the context of this inspection, 'internal' is taken to mean 'within HMCS'; thus, communication with other stakeholders – for example, the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) or the judiciary – does not form part of this inspection.
- 1.5 The report includes boxes highlighting examples of good practice that Inspectors saw during the fieldwork period. The examples are not exhaustive – there may be other courts, areas or regions that also exhibit the same, or different, good practice.

Section 2

Executive summary and recommendations

- 2.1 HMCS is a relatively young organisation which is undergoing further structural change. This inevitably has an effect on how internal communications are perceived. It is important, therefore, to recognise that many members of HMCS staff commented how internal communications had improved in the last six months.
- 2.2 Internal communications in HMCS are being increasingly evaluated to ensure that both messages and means of communication are effective, and that improvements continue to be made.
- 2.3 A wide variety of methods is used by HMCS to communicate internally, but none of these is fully effective in delivering messages to all members of staff in a consistent and timely way.
- 2.4 Although there are examples of good practice, staff with diverse needs – such as those on reduced hours or long-term sick leave – are not always well-catered for.
- 2.5 HMCS cannot assure itself that there are reliable procedures in place in all parts of the business to ensure that messages are targeted appropriately, or that messages are understood by recipients.
- 2.6 Some, but not all, parts of HMCS communicate effectively with each other. While there are processes in place designed to ensure that multi-directional communication is possible, these have yet to become established and awareness of them is low.
- 2.7 Feedback from staff is not always used effectively to inform the business, and staff are often not told about how their feedback has been used.

Recommendations to improve internal communications within HMCS

We make the following recommendations:

Strategy

Recommendation 1

That HMCS review and develop the internal communications strategy and supporting policies in order to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to internal communications across HMCS.

Increased effectiveness of internal communications

Recommendation 2

That HMCS underpin the strategy and policies, and improve the effectiveness of internal communications, by ensuring that:

- messages are targeted appropriately
- the communication of policy initiatives is co-ordinated to avoid overload
- an effective method is introduced to ensure ZZ lists are owned and regularly reviewed to keep them up to date
- a review of *In Court* is undertaken to provide assurance that it is an effective means of delivering corporate information.

Improved use of electronic communications

Recommendation 3

That HMCS improve the effectiveness of electronic methods of communication by:

- ensuring that staff in unLINKed county courts are given improved and easier access to appropriate information systems
- ensuring that induction training includes a module on use of the intranet and email
- increasing awareness among current HMCS employees of the intranet resource and providing additional training where appropriate
- consulting a diverse mix of employees during the redesign of the intranet pages
- revising and reissuing the email protocol.

Meetings and Team Briefing

Recommendation 4

That HMCS ensure that the Team Briefing system is an effective method of communicating corporate information by:

- taking appropriate steps to make certain that communication is part of every manager's responsibilities
- requiring all parts of HMCS to deliver the core briefing material within the briefing cycle period to all members of staff, and to record attendance, which should be monitored at an appropriate level
- obtaining feedback from staff, considering this feedback at corporate level and informing staff of the outcome of this feedback during the subsequent briefing cycle.

Section 3

The benefits of successful internal communications

- 3.1 The Phillis Review¹ into Government Communications, published in January 2004, was commissioned by the Government to address concerns over the relationship between the Government, the media and the public. As such, its primary focus was on external communications.
- 3.2 In response, the Heads of Internal Communications Group of the Government Information and Communications Service (GICS) wrote a paper to the new Permanent Secretary of Government Communications, proposing that internal communications across government should be reformed and play a more central role in government communications. The group found, following an audit across government, that internal communications were seen as:
- peripheral to the setting and achievement of business strategy
 - the sole concern of those working in internal communications
 - taking second place to external communications
 - an ‘add on’ in the business planning process
 - an expensive overhead
 - solely concerned with pushing information at staff – rather than actively engaging with them.
- 3.3 They commented that *‘this is in sharp contrast to best practice in both the public and private sectors, where effective and strategically driven internal communications is often one of the defining characteristics of “high performing” organisations’*. The group then went on to propose how internal communication should be viewed in a government context. It should be:
- a strategic function – capable of much more than delivering information
 - central to the senior management agenda within departments/agencies
 - a key enabler of staff engagement
 - a necessary and worthwhile investment
 - a core leadership and management skill.
- 3.4 This inspection has taken on board this vision of internal communications in a public sector setting. Of particular interest is the notion that effective internal communications is a ‘key enabler of staff engagement’. HMCS is an executive agency that has been formed from 43 organisations, all of which had differing cultures. One of its key challenges is to engage staff in the unified organisation, and good internal communications is one of the most important ways to help achieve this.

¹ An Independent Review of Government Communications. Cabinet Office. January 2004.
www.archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/gcreview/New/FinalReport.pdf

Section 4

Strategy

4.1 The HMCS Communications Strategy was published in November 2006. It *'sets out the communication principles and standards that everyone with responsibility for internal and external communication should adhere to within Her Majesty's Courts Service. The purpose of this document is to help senior managers develop local/regional communication plans based on a national strategic framework and our core principles'*.

4.2 The third objective of the strategy relates to internal communications: *'[communication will] facilitate positive and active engagement with the courts from customers, stakeholders and staff'*. The strategy lists ways in which these objectives will be achieved, including using all available channels of communication and opening a *'virtuous circle of listening – communication – feedback – communication'*.

4.3 The strategy lists the operating principles which all communications should follow. These core principles are that all messages should be:

- timely
- targeted
- trusted
- transparent.

HMICA agrees that, if these principles are followed, internal communications within HMCS should be more effective.

4.4 The strategy then discusses different audiences, including staff, before introducing the communications environment for HMCS. It is a complex environment with the following key features:

- it is multi-directional, with the centre, regions, areas and courts communicating with each other
- it operates as part of the wider justice system
- communication is not controlled centrally – business areas at the centre often issue their own messages, and regions and areas have also established their own channels
- there is a limited IT structure in place, which results in managers having greater responsibility to cascade information
- the Department for Constitutional Affairs is responsible for HR and IT issues.

4.5 The HMCS internal communications strategy was also published in November 2006, incorporated into a document entitled *Her Majesty's Court Service Communications Directorate*. This document also sets out the roles and functions of the Directorate. The strategy is reproduced in full at Annex B. The objective and outcomes are described as follows:

Objective

- To develop our internal communications activities to support the objectives as set out in the HMCS Business Strategy and business plan for 2006/07.

Outcomes

- To increase staff commitment to HMCS's aims and objectives
- To enable staff and managers to make real use of information flowing up, down, and across the organisation and facilitate joined up working to deliver the business
- To enhance the reputation of the organisation as an employer of choice, attracting and retaining staff
- To support managers to communicate with their staff and stakeholders effectively, providing them with the necessary tools and guidance.

4.6 The strategy then goes on to set out its customers, the first of which are 'HMCS Staff', and then its key deliverables. This is, in essence, a list of what the Directorate seeks to achieve, from launching and embedding regular Team Briefings within HMCS to advising the Chief Executive on his visibility and communicating his vision and direction for the organisation.

4.7 Finally, the document states that the effectiveness of the strategy will be evaluated and monitored using a variety of sources, and a virtuous circle of communication will be created using the feedback loop in the Team Briefing system and the Touchstone communications group. The membership of this virtual group consists of HMCS staff who have expressed an interest in communications.

4.8 Inspectors found that awareness among HMCS staff of the internal communications strategy was low, although it is accepted that the strategy was issued at the same time as the fieldwork period started. It was also noted, however, that both the HMCS Communications Strategy and the document about the Communications Directorate (incorporating the internal communications strategy) were issued together, and that this had caused some confusion among staff. Indeed, this confusion often meant that neither staff nor Inspectors were sure which document was being discussed. Some staff had not realised that these were two separate documents, while others commented that they had not seen either.

4.9 Among those staff who had read the internal communications strategy, many believed that it added little value, or was not relevant to them. Inspectors also heard that staff had received little guidance in how the strategy should be delivered locally, and were thus unsure what was required of them. Some people also thought that the strategy was too full of jargon – examples include '*objective temperature checks*', '*Launch eNews...which gives a quality control and gateway process to emails*' and '*undertake stakeholder mapping*'.

- 4.10 Inspectors shared many of the same concerns – there had been confusion between the two documents, there was terminology used in both that was suitable for communications professionals but not necessarily HMCS staff, and the internal strategy did not give enough guidance on how to deliver internal communications locally. Given this, Inspectors felt that it would be beneficial for HMCS to review the internal communications strategy in order to assure itself that all relevant staff in HMCS know and understand what the strategy expects of them.
- 4.11 Inspectors were provided with several examples of other internal communications strategies, or policies that had been introduced by other parts of HMCS prior to publication of the internal communications strategy. These came from both areas and regions, though it was noted that not all parts of HMCS have communications policies in place. Those that were seen were generally impressive, and gave clear guidance on who was responsible for different types of communications, while in some cases there was also a schedule telling staff which communications they should expect to receive.

Good practice

London Regional Estates Branch and Lincolnshire Area have both produced comprehensive documents detailing how people should communicate and what they should expect from others

- 4.12 Inspectors were also pleased to note that there was evidence of the sharing of good practice between areas and regions, with regard to the development of these policies. This had, however, been on an ad hoc basis, with people using personal contacts rather than going through a central point.
- 4.13 There was no review process in place to ensure that locally produced policies are compatible with, or support, the national strategy, or to enable good practice to be shared across the organisation. These processes would enable HMCS to assure itself that there is consistency across the organisation on how communication is carried out internally, and that there is an effective method for good practice in communication to be spread across the organisation. Inspectors feel that HMCS Communications Directorate is best placed to achieve this.
- 4.14 Inspectors make the following recommendation in order to ensure a consistent approach to internal communications across HMCS, with an overarching strategy supported by policies which can adapt to local circumstances but which also tie into the central strategy.

Recommendation 1

That HMCS review and develop the internal communications strategy and supporting policies in order to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to internal communications across HMCS.

Innovation in internal communications in HMCS

Inspectors were pleased to see that staff across HMCS were thinking about how to improve internal communications and were using innovative methods to bring about this improvement.

These were some of the examples we found:

- The development of the *eNews* system.
- The availability of *In Court* electronically.
- Production of training videos in London Region to communicate information on Fine Enforcement and Chartermark – these are cheaper to produce than a more formal training regime would have cost.
- Increasing use of flow chart diagrams to help people understand HR processes.
- Use of web-based systems to enable courts to deal with managing agents – Estates teams can monitor and take information from the site, thus reducing the need for direct communication. London Region has also produced help-desk cards for courts.
- Plans are in place to roll out internal communications workshops for managers in each region.
- xHibit can be used by managers to communicate with front-line staff while they are in court.

Section 5

Effectiveness of internal communications

How well messages are communicated

- 5.1 In order for internal communications to be effective, it is essential that messages are delivered to the right people, at the right time and in the most appropriate way, and that the messages are clearly understood. Overall, Inspectors found that this was not always the case.
- 5.2 If a message is to be useful, the recipient has to understand it. There were several factors, however, that caused people to be unclear about the meaning of some messages, or unable to deal effectively with them. These included:
- use of jargon and acronyms
 - misuse of terminology by the communicator
 - the length of documents or attachments, often with no summary attached
 - lack of co-ordination about when important messages and policy implementations will be released
 - volume of messages to be dealt with.
- 5.3 The use of jargon and acronyms was a particular problem. HMCS is a relatively new organisation, and it is inevitable that terminology which was used in one of the constituent parts will continue to be used. Inspectors recognise that HMCS has introduced a style guide. It is important, however, that originators of messages keep the use of jargon and acronyms to an absolute minimum to ensure that their message is accessible to all in HMCS. Where acronyms are used, they should be fully explained. No evidence was found that the style guide was being used effectively.
- 5.4 As well as the use of jargon, Inspectors were given examples where terminology had been used that did not apply to all constituent parts of HMCS. The most cited example was references to ‘court managers’ of magistrates’ courts in areas where this position did not exist. Concerns were raised that originators of messages did not always understand the nature of the operational side of the business, and this in turn inhibited staff engaging with HMCS. This is an example of how poorly communicated messages can alienate staff.

Good practice

HMCS Communication Directorate rejected the name ‘Communications Champions’ in favour of the ‘Touchstone Group’ (see paragraph 6.3). ‘Communications Champions’ had been used by the Court Service and the Directorate wanted to ensure a fresh start for HMCS.

- 5.5 The length of documents or attachments was also quoted as an inhibiting factor in people understanding messages. This is particularly unfortunate as these messages tend to be important and complex – hence their length – and thus recipients need to have time allocated to them for the message to be understood. Equally unfortunately, these messages are also, through necessity, targeted at members of staff who are likely to have many competing demands for their time – such as Regional or Area Directors, or court managers and their equivalent – and who are thus not able to devote sufficient time to these documents. Few such documents have summaries attached, when the use of these would allow the recipient to see quickly whether the document applied to them, or needed actioning.

Good practice

London Region produces Health & Safety and Diversity notices that clearly state the purpose of the notice, the originator and whether anything needs to be actioned by the recipient.

- 5.6 The length of documents is exacerbated by the lack of co-ordination through HMCS in terms of communications. As the communications strategy mentions as part of the section on the ‘Communications Environment’, communications are not controlled centrally. This means that key personnel may receive several large, but important, messages at about the same time. Interestingly, the HMCS Change Programme seeks to address this issue, within the change programme, by trying to ensure that policy release is co-ordinated between the constituent parts of the programme. In order to ensure that staff get appropriate and adequate time to consider and implement policy effectively, HMCS should apply this approach more widely. This will ensure that messages delivered from the centre are co-ordinated in an agreed manner.
- 5.7 Certain members of staff mentioned, when interviewed, that they believed that communication was poor with people on reduced hours, or during extended periods away from the workplace, such as maternity leave, long-term sickness absence or secondment. Other staff reported that these concerns were taken into account. HMCS should ensure that all managers are aware of their responsibilities in this regard. Changes to operational organisation in some areas may increase moves towards a ‘hub and satellite’ system, with the majority of staff being in one place and small numbers working remotely. It is important that in such cases managers understand the need to communicate regularly and effectively with all staff, including ensuring that they are highly visible to their staff and that they have frequent face-to-face contact. Managers also need to ensure that messages are understood when delivered in this way.

Good practice

Courts in Staffordshire, Gwent and North Wales ensure meetings are held at different times to allow staff on reduced hours to attend when possible.

A bailiff manager based at Stoke-on-Trent Combined Court has responsibility for bailiffs at four satellite courts and ensures that they are visited at least once a fortnight.

5.8 HMCS has also been proactive in ensuring that Welsh-speaking members of staff receive as much information as possible in Welsh as well as English, even though internal communications is not currently mentioned under the Welsh Language Act. Inspectors visited the Welsh Translation Service as part of the inspection of the Wales and Cheshire Region, and were impressed with the commitment at all levels in the region to ensure that internal communication is bilingual wherever possible. It is important, however, for the central directorates also to be aware of this issue, and to consider possible Welsh language issues at an early stage when planning communications with staff to ensure that bilingual communication is achieved simultaneously. Inspectors are pleased to note that an Information Review has been launched since the inspection which is intended to address the issue of bilingual provision of information.

How well messages are targeted

5.9 It is important that messages are targeted effectively in order to ensure both that the contents of the message are actioned appropriately and that people do not waste time reading messages that do not concern them. Inspectors found, however, many people reporting that messages are not targeted effectively. One of the frequent comments made to Inspectors was that managers often received the same message from several different sources – for example, from the centre, region and area. These messages would usually come at different times, meaning that the recipient would need to read them all to ensure that they had already seen the message. This causes time to be wasted.

I find quality of communication generally good but quantity can be too much as you can receive the same emails two or three times.

Comment from HMCS staff member

5.10 Targeting of messages can be improved with the effective use of ZZ lists. These allow emails to be sent to pre-defined groups of people, which should ensure that only those who need the message receive it. While use of ZZ lists is common, many people were unsure about who had ownership of the ZZ lists and who kept the lists up to date. Without this process being in place, it is easy for the lists to become inaccurate, which, in turn, means that messages do not reach the right recipients – and, also, that people who have moved on receive messages that they no longer need. HMCS should ensure that ZZ lists are kept up to date and that there is a clear pathway for people to be able to access and amend the lists when necessary.

5.11 Shortly before the fieldwork period for this inspection commenced, HMCS Communications Directorate replaced the previous system of issuing Business Information (BI) letters by separate departments with the launch of eNews. This is a weekly bulletin of current HMCS news, divided into three sections – business, corporate and staff. The business section replaces the old BI letters; corporate information includes information such as finance news and minutes of meetings; and the staff section focuses on matters such as pay, training and HR. It is issued every Wednesday, with advance copies sent to Area and Regional Directors. Should other messages need to be sent between the regular issues, there is a process in place to facilitate this called eNews extra.

- 5.12 Although eNews was relatively new at the outset of the inspection, Inspectors received a good deal of positive comments from staff about it. BI letters were unpopular because they were issued when required, which could mean that several appeared at the same time, and were often then forwarded by several different sources (see paragraph 5.9). However, eNews can be sent as a hyperlink which takes the user back to the relevant page on the intranet site. It was praised for being easy to use and for reducing the amount of information sent.
- 5.13 Several people commented that they would like further categories to be added to eNews to make it easier for them to see what is relevant. This has, in fact, already happened, for example the 'Business' section includes separate areas for criminal and civil work when appropriate.
- 5.14 Inspectors had one reservation about eNews – that it requires people to access the intranet. Intranet access is discussed further from paragraph 5.25.

How effective written communications are

- 5.15 An important way of ensuring that all staff have access to key messages is the use of the HMCS staff magazine, *In Court*. This is a magazine published nine times a year and distributed to every member of HMCS staff. 28,000 copies of each edition are published, with wider circulation to others in the DCA family and criminal justice family. It is positioned to be a business magazine, and thus to communicate business information. In this way, it can be differentiated from the DCA staff magazine, *hearsay*, which has a wider remit covering business, staff and social stories. *hearsay* is currently distributed on a 'one copy between two basis.
- 5.16 Inspectors found that there was confusion between the two magazines. Many staff members did not seem to realise that they were different, and could not name them – despite the differences in the formats in which they were printed, the variety in content and the distribution policies. Indeed, when asked which parts of *In Court* people enjoyed, the most frequent answers were letters, puzzles and photographs of people they knew – all of which appear in *hearsay* but not *In Court*.
- 5.17 It also became clear during the inspection that many people did not read *In Court* at all, despite the distribution policy. Some reasons that were given for this included a feeling that it was propaganda and that there was not enough time to read it. Many people commented that a glossy magazine was a waste of money at a time of budget cuts. (During the course of the inspection, *In Court* appeared as an electronic version on the HMCS intranet, and senior HMCS managers expect that this will lead to significantly fewer copies being produced in the future.) Among those who did read it, however, the content was described as 'interesting' and some commented that it was good to hear about what was happening in other parts of HMCS.
- 5.18 Overall, Inspectors found that *In Court* could not be regarded as an effective means of ensuring messages are delivered. Although distribution methods are in place to ensure that there is a copy available for each member of HMCS staff, there is clear evidence to suggest that many people do not read it. It is also weak as a brand, with confusion between it and the DCA staff magazine. As such, HMCS cannot assure itself that messages delivered via *In Court* are received and understood by all staff.

The glossy magazines which are sent by various bits of our organisation are merely puffs and a complete waste of money.

Too much time and money spent on magazines/posters etc – not enough on staffing levels and necessary equipment.

Comments from HMCS staff members

- 5.19 Other written materials are generally well received. There are many examples of locally produced staff newsletters, such as those produced by the national Safety and Security Team and the Midlands Region. Inspectors also saw good examples of informative newsletters produced for all court users, but which also had relevance to staff, in several courts. These should be reviewed regularly to check that they offer value for money and meet the needs of the business.
- 5.20 Overall, internal communications within HMCS cannot be described as fully effective at the moment. There is too little targeting of messages to relevant people; there is a lack of co-ordination of policy release and some other communications; not enough is done to ensure messages are easy to understand; and *In Court*, although widely distributed, is not widely read. The introduction of *eNews* is, however, an encouraging sign that HMCS is making efforts to address some of these issues. As a way of making further improvements, Inspectors make the following recommendation:

Recommendation 2

That HMCS underpin the strategy and policies, and improve the effectiveness of internal communications, by ensuring that:

- messages are targeted appropriately
- the communication of policy initiatives is co-ordinated to avoid overload
- an effective method is introduced to ensure ZZ lists are owned and regularly reviewed to keep them up to date
- a review of *In Court* is undertaken to provide assurance that it is an effective means of delivering corporate information.

How effective electronic means of communication are

- 5.21 The use of information technology has made timely communication easier in the last few years, with the advent of email and web-based systems. As a new organisation, HMCS has inherited several legacy IT systems from the previous organisations from which it was formed; and it is also now in the process of rolling out a new IT system (LIBRA) across magistrates' courts.
- 5.22 Not all parts of the HMCS estate have access to similar levels of IT. County courts use the LINK network. However, when this was rolled out, many of the smaller county courts were not provided with access to this network, and there are currently no plans to do so. At these courts – several of which were visited as part of this inspection – the court manager has access to a stand-alone computer that can be linked to the network via a dial-up system.

This can be slow and it is not always possible to access the network if demand from other users is high. HMCS does try to ensure that messages are delivered to these courts by other means – such as sending a copy of eNews by first class post the day prior to releasing the information on the intranet – but it does mean that HMCS cannot get messages electronically to all staff at the same time, and also that staff at these locations may be at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues. Given that many of these courts are at fairly remote locations, this can lead to a lack of engagement with HMCS. The following two comments provide good examples of this:

The fact that not all staff are treated the same – and, just because they work in a small office, are not offered the facilities such as email and internet access – makes us feel like second class employees who no-one cares about. This can be very demoralising as we feel like the forgotten army and that there may be a hidden agenda behind the fact no-one is willing to spend money on these small courts.

I feel that I am being discriminated against as I do not have access to the intranet (only with permission of my line manager) and I can't access it when I want. I am part of the Rainbow Network and I would like to feel that I can have access to the Rainbow Network intranet page without having to ask my manager. Also I do not have access to the internet as our computers are not linked, where the far majority of Her Majesty's Courts Service do. Why should I not have access to this facility when a higher percentage do, it's not very diverse especially where the Platinum rule states 'treat others as they would like to be treated' and I am NOT being treated the way I would like to be.

Comments from HMCS staff members

5.23 The two major electronic forms of internal communication are email and the HMCS intranet. Email is an invaluable tool when used effectively and efficiently as it allows people to communicate with many recipients quickly and, with judicious use of attachments, comprehensively. As mentioned in paragraph 5.9, it is important that emails are targeted appropriately to avoid overload. This was the most common complaint that Inspectors heard during the fieldwork period – that staff received too many emails. One court manager said 'if I read everything I received I wouldn't be able to do my job'. Several respondents did also say that the problem was not as bad as it was at the creation of HMCS.

Examples of 'email overload'

- duplication of the same email from different sources
- message could be distributed in a different format, for example via *In Court* or *eNews*
- email used instead of telephone
- mailboxes for managers are too small to cope with large attachments
- legal information not sent directly to Justices' Clerks but routed through Area Directors to cascade.

- 5.24 HMCS has an email protocol in place, and this was issued in the August/September issue of *In Court*. Given Inspectors' concerns over the current efficacy of *In Court* as a means of communicating, there are similar concerns over whether the protocol will have been understood by all staff. The protocol is very comprehensive, but it may prove productive to highlight a few key messages in order to reduce further the inefficient use of email. Inspectors were pleased to note that there was also local instruction on the use of emails, for example in both London and Midlands Regions.
- 5.25 HMCS has its own intranet site. This is another important means of communication with staff. It holds corporate and business information, is the host for *eNews*, has pages devoted to directorates, regions and areas, and has links to the HMCS public website and DCA pages (especially those devoted to HR issues).
- 5.26 HMCS conducted a review of the intranet site during the fieldwork period of this inspection, although the results of this review were not available to Inspectors. While preparing for the inspection, Inspectors regularly checked the intranet pages, and it was noticeable that the area and regional pages were used in markedly different ways. For example, the London regional pages were updated regularly and provided a source of current news and communication from the Regional Director; whilst other regional and area pages had not been updated since their creation in April 2005. One Area Director commented that the format of their pages was too restrictive and didn't really feel as if the area owned them. While accepting the benefits of regions and areas having ownership of their pages and updating them according to local requirements, HMCS should ensure that they are regularly updated and of sufficient standard to make them effective as a means of communication with staff.
- 5.27 Of more concern, however, was the limited uptake by HMCS staff of the intranet pages. The last available figures (August 2006) showed that less than 50% of staff members accessed any intranet pages during that month. Although this figure has been increasing month on month, it suggests that the intranet site also cannot be considered effective as a means of communication as the majority of staff will not read messages delivered by this method. There are several reasons for this. The first is the lack of IT infrastructure, as previously mentioned. Another is that many front-line staff – for example, enforcement staff, ushers and legal advisors – spend the majority of their working day unable to access the intranet, and they will have other priorities when they can access IT. Many staff stated that they do not access that intranet because they are not confident with IT, that they found it difficult to navigate or, in one case, that they were concerned that their use of the intranet would be monitored.

The layout of the internet/intranet is particularly poor – this starts with the names given to the navigation buttons – they are not meaningful and open to too much interpretation – it tends to be pot luck is something is filed under one or another. This is then replicated throughout regional and area sites. You need only look at other agencies sites within DCA family to see good examples.

Too little use is made of the intranet where timely, consistent information could be posted for those who are interested.

Comments from HMCS staff members

5.28 Given that eNews is hosted on the intranet, and *In Court* is now also available electronically on the site, it is imperative that more people access the intranet if internal communications within HMCS are to become more effective. Inspectors make the following recommendation to assist in making further improvements:

Recommendation 3

That HMCS improve the effectiveness of electronic methods of communication by:

- ensuring that staff in unLINKed county courts are given improved and easier access to appropriate information systems
- ensuring that induction training includes a module on use of the intranet and email
- increasing awareness among current HMCS employees of the intranet resource and providing additional training where appropriate
- consulting a diverse mix of employees during the redesign of the intranet pages
- revising and reissuing the email protocol.

How corporate information is communicated through meetings and Team Briefings

5.29 Inspectors were consistently told by HMCS staff that the preferred method of communication was being given information face to face – and that there was not enough of it.

I can fully understand that it is far easier, and cost effective, to distribute materials via email. There is also more reliance on use of the internet, both for research and to access general information. However, during the recent introduction of the Criminal Defence Service Act 2006, there was a specific request to conduct face-to-face briefings rather than simply cascading the material by email. I was responsible for briefing the Legal Advisers in Gwent, all of whom commented that it made a refreshing change having information given to them face-to-face rather than them having to plough through a wad of emailed material, particularly as time is somewhat limited. So, whilst email and the net are useful communication tools we must be careful not to totally replace face-to-face contact with staff by overuse of electronic communication methods.

Comment from HMCS staff member

5.30 A key deliverable of the HMCS internal communications strategy is that an effective system of Team Briefings should be launched and embedded. The Team Briefing system provides a method of ensuring that important messages are communicated directly to staff within a defined timescale and, vitally, it also offers the opportunity for staff to ask questions and give

feedback on the issues being discussed. HMCS Communications Directorate delivers core briefing materials (this can come from both HMCS and DCA), and managers can add local briefing topics. It is important that the feedback gained from these briefing sessions is collated centrally, and issues addressed, before forming part of the next briefing cycle. When this operates well, it is a good method of engaging staff, by seeking their views and showing that their opinions are fully considered by the relevant part of HMCS.

- 5.31 Inspectors found, however, that the briefing system was not in place effectively throughout HMCS. In some courts – notably those from the old Court Service, where a similar system had been in place – briefings were timetabled to ensure maximum attendance, with different sessions being run to accommodate working patterns. Feedback was collated and returned to the Communications Directorate. In other courts, Inspectors found no awareness at all of the briefing process, while in some the briefings were held in such large groups – up to 90 staff – that people felt uneasy about asking questions or offering opinions. Very few people said that they had received responses to their feedback.
- 5.32 It is possible that briefings were delivered, and feedback answered, but that staff did not realise it – perhaps as it had been part of a wider meeting. It could be, therefore, that the messages are being delivered. In terms of engaging staff, however, an opportunity is being missed to show that staff opinions are taken into account and are used effectively to deliver improvements to the business. HMCS cannot assure itself that Team Briefings are being delivered effectively to staff, nor that best use is being made of them where they are delivered.
- 5.33 Given the key role of managers in communicating with staff, their responsibilities should be made clear and form part of the appraisal process. This would help ensure that communication is given the appropriate priority at all levels of HMCS. It would also give HMCS some assurance that managers are delivering messages effectively and consistently. Inspectors make the following recommendation in order to ensure that the Team Briefing system is effective and that managers are aware of their responsibilities for communication:

Recommendation 4

That HMCS ensure that the Team Briefing system is an effective method of communicating corporate information by:

- taking appropriate steps to make certain that communication is part of every manager's responsibilities
- requiring all parts of HMCS to deliver the core briefing material within the briefing cycle period to all members of staff, and to record attendance, which should be monitored at an appropriate level
- obtaining feedback from staff, considering this feedback at corporate level and informing staff of the outcome of this feedback during the subsequent briefing cycle.

5.34 Other meetings held throughout HMCS are effective, with clear agendas and minutes generally being made available where appropriate. There were also good examples of meetings being combined, or scheduled appropriately, where the same or similar groups of people were involved.

Good practice

- Several areas and regions use their intranet sites to publish the minutes of management meetings – which also reduces the use of email attachments, and encourages use of the intranet.
- At Stafford Combined Court, 24 hours is allowed after Team Briefings for staff to raise any issues arising from the meeting before minutes are produced and signed off.
- In Lincolnshire, there is a checklist for managers to help them decide what should go on internal notice boards.

Section 6

Effectiveness of multi-directional communications

- 6.1 HMCS is a complex organisation, with its operations arranged in regions and areas, and supported by directorates based in London. There is a further division on the operational side – different types of court are responsible for discrete areas of work (HMCS is responsible for managing the magistrates’ courts, the Crown Court, county courts, the High Court and Court of Appeal in England and Wales). It is essential that there is an effective way for all these parts of the organisation to communicate if HMCS is to ensure that business is conducted smoothly and a good service provided to the public.
- 6.2 As mentioned in paragraph 5.6, there are issues with how HMCS corporately communicates with the regions and areas. The lack of co-ordination is part of this issue, but Inspectors also received comments that people did not think that those at the centre appreciated what the operational part of HMCS did. Indeed, several people expressed their dislike of the terms ‘centre’ and ‘field’, given that service delivery should be at the heart of the organisation – and this happens primarily at court level.
- 6.3 HMCS Communications Directorate has also tried to engage with regional and area staff through the creation of the ‘Touchstone Group’. This is a self-appointed, ‘virtual’, group (there are no meetings) which HMCS sometimes uses to identify concerns and to check products and messages. Inspectors found, however, that even some members of the group were unsure of what was expected of them and that awareness of the group more widely was poor. This means that it is unlikely that Touchstone Group members would be aware of concerns of people in their area or region, or that people knew who to take these concerns to.
- 6.4 At regional and area level, there are good systems in place to ensure communication is effective. In all three regions visited, a method had been introduced to allow for the regions to communicate effectively with all areas. In London, there is a dedicated Communications Officer, whose role involves keeping the website updated, issuing press releases and so on, but who is also a primary contact for the spreading of good practice and standardisation across the region. In Wales and Cheshire, a Communications Network has been established which meets on a regular basis, and an Area Director has been given the lead on communications issues. Inspectors were invited to attend a meeting of the network. They were impressed that a communications audit had been undertaken across the region, and that the meeting included a self-evaluation session on the effectiveness of the network itself. A similar forum exists in the Midlands. HMCS Communications Directorate has also recently piloted a web-based survey there to seek the views of Midlands staff on the effectiveness of internal communications in the region.

Communication within the area office is good – Area Director and managers within this office ensure that they pass info on relevant matters to staff. If communication within HMCS generally was half as good as it is locally, perhaps I and other staff working in this office would not have spent the last six months worrying that we might not have jobs by the end of the year.

Comment from HMCS staff member

- 6.5 There is only sporadic evidence to suggest that there is much communication between different types of court; this is especially so between the criminal and civil sides of the business. Many staff commented that they were not that interested in finding out about the other parts of HMCS, and only a minority said that they saw the opportunities that were available as a result of the establishment of the new agency. Improving links between courts, and ensuring that staff are aware of the many parts of the business, would be another way of increasing staff engagement with HMCS.
- 6.6 Perhaps it should not be surprising that many staff in magistrates' courts feel that they have been taken over by the old Court Service. This is another cause of a lack of engagement with HMCS. Inspectors found during interviews that negative comments concerning all aspects of internal communications came most often from magistrates' court staff. One interviewee commented that this would be a good time to review how magistrates' courts in particular are communicated with, and use the results to ensure that these staff are encouraged to engage with, and exploit the opportunities presented by, HMCS.
- 6.7 Inspectors received several comments about the visibility of senior managers. While Area Directors were seen as being relatively visible to operational staff, Regional Directors and especially senior managers from HMCS Directorates were not. Indeed, these comments came from staff whose courts had been visited by some of these senior staff and who felt that not enough effort had been made to engage with all levels of staff.
- 6.8 The issue of feedback was raised in relation to Team Briefings at paragraph 5.32. More widely, however, some staff said that they didn't feel comfortable about giving feedback in open forums as they felt that this may be used against them later. However, they also felt that decisions had already been made and that there was no point in offering their opinions privately.

We have received little information on the vision of the department in the future on the eve of major change. We are nurturing a culture of not being able to speak your mind about changes, for fear of how it might affect your career. This hampers the each-way flow of communication.

Senior managers could be more visible during this difficult time and be available to take Q&As.

Comments from HMCS staff members

Annex A

Methodology

HMCS was inspected against the following key function:

HMCS communicates in a direct, open and effective way with all members of staff, taking into account their diverse needs, ensures that communications are understood, that appropriate channels are in place to facilitate multi-directional communication and that communication contributes to HMCS achieving the aims of its Business Strategy and Transforming our Business Change Strategy.

Prior to the inspection, the inspection framework was consulted upon and agreed with HMCS.

During the inspection, Inspectors visited:

- **27 courthouses**
 - **Lincolnshire:** Grantham Magistrates' and County Court (co-located); Boston Magistrates' and County Courts (co-located); Skegness Magistrates' and County Courts (co-located); Lincoln Crown Court; and Lincoln Combined Court.
 - **London (North West, Central and Civil & Family Areas):** Brent Magistrates' Court; Harrow Magistrates' Court; Harrow Crown Court; Haringey Magistrates' Court; City of London Magistrates' Court; City of Westminster Magistrates' Court; Middlesex Guildhall Crown Court; Inner London Family Proceedings Court; Mayor's and City of London Court; Bromley County Court; Edmonton County Court; and Willesden County Court.
 - **Gwent:** Blackwood County Court; Newport County Court; and Pontypool County Court
 - **Staffordshire:** Stafford Combined Court; Stafford Magistrates' Court; and Stoke Combined Court
 - **North Wales:** Caernarfon Magistrates' Court; Llangefni County Court; Mold Law Courts; and Wrexham Magistrates' Court
- **seven Area Director's Offices**
 - **Lincolnshire**
 - **Staffordshire**
 - **North Wales**
 - **Gwent** (including the court staff based at Gwent House)
 - **London** – North West, Central and Civil & Family

- **three Regional Offices**
 - Wales & Cheshire
 - Midlands
 - London
- **four HMCS Directorates**
 - Communications
 - Enforcement
 - Estates
 - Resources
- **The Welsh Translation Unit**, based at Holyhead Magistrates' Court
- **The Central Finance and Enforcement Unit for Staffordshire**, based at Rugeley.

The visits consisted of interviews with staff in a wide variety of roles at a mix of locations to ensure as many parts of HMCS were part of the inspection process.

The findings of this inspection are based on the following types of evidence:

- **Self-assessments** provided by each Area, Region and Directorate visited (and supported by other written materials)
- **Inspectors' findings**, based on interviews with, and comments received from, members of HMCS staff and observations of various forms of communication methods.

The inspection was carried out while HMCS was undergoing extensive structural change, with some areas merging. Of the areas visited during this inspection, only North Wales and the London Civil & Family Areas have remained as they were.

Annex B

Internal communications strategy and priorities

Introduction

The importance of robust internal communications is increasingly valued by today's organisations. For our business objectives to be met effectively, and for staff to perform their roles better, enjoy their working lives, and to spread positive messages about the organisation, it is essential that they are well informed and engaged. Our staff are also one of the most effective communications conduits to the outside world. What they say about the organisation to our stakeholders, members of the public and their own friends and family can impact on our reputation.

Effective communication with our staff during a time of immense change for the organisation is essential. It is also an integral part of the Investors in People standard and our statement of expectations as to how we in HMCS treat our people. Although responsibility for change communications within HMCS lies outside the directorate, we will advise and guide when required.

Internal communications requires commitment from the top of the organisation and active support from senior managers.

Evidence base

This strategy draws upon data from various sources.

- DCA Staff survey.
- CJS Staff confidence survey.
- Capability Review.
- Feedback from staff.

Managers play a vital role in providing feedback but we will also use other means to take objective temperature checks to inform our planning.

Objective

- To develop our internal communications activities to support the objectives as set out in the HMCS Business Strategy and business plan for 2006/07.

Outcomes

- To increase staff commitment to HMCS's aims and objectives
- To enable staff and managers to make real use of information flowing up, down, and across the organisation and facilitate joined up working to deliver the business
- To enhance the reputation of the organisation as an employer of choice, attracting and retaining staff
- To support managers to communicate with their staff and stakeholders effectively, providing them with the necessary tools and guidance.

Customers

Our customers are varied and have different needs for information at different times. We will apply the core principles of customer insights to inform our communication with the various groups.

The following are our key customers:

- HMCS staff (field and the centre)
- Chief Executive
- HMCS Board
- HMCS Senior Management Team
- Regional Directors
- Centre Directors
- Area Directors
- Line Managers
- Key networks

We also have a responsibility to communicate with staff in the DCA family, and we will do this by collaborating and working with our counterparts in DCA and other agency communicators.

Key deliverables

- Launch and embed regular Team Briefings within HMCS.
- Develop and update the corporate content on the HMCS intranet.
- Develop our regional communications contacts by developing a Touchstone Communications Group, which enables us to tap into front line thinking, identify concerns and reality check our products and messages.
- Launch *eNews*, a weekly electronic bulletin to HMCS court managers, which gives a quality control and gateway process to emails and replaces ad hoc Business Information emails.
- Write, edit and produce monthly business magazine for HMCS – *In Court*.
- Review the purpose of *In Court* as a business magazine for HMCS staff and implement design changes and electronic delivery mechanisms.
- Support managers to be effective communicators with their staff through training and sharing best practice.
- Undertake stakeholder mapping of national contacts and develop a toolkit to support managers in engaging their local stakeholders.
- Advise the Chief Executive and senior management team on content, messages and channels on business communication, and specifically relating to the change programme.
- Advise the Chief Executive on his visibility and communicate his vision and direction for the organisation.
- Ensure that we have effective mechanisms in place to handle communications relating to crises or emergencies.
- Ensure our internal communications is aligned with external communications; ensuring that staff hear about what may affect them from the organisation first and not from the media or outside sources.

Evaluation

We will draw on all our sources to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of our internal communications, while recognising that people's views about this will be coloured by their dislike for the message if not the channel or product.

We will also use the feedback loop in our new Team Briefing system and our Touchstone communications group to ensure a virtuous circle of communication. Specific projects and events will also be subject to evaluation.

Annex C

Action plan

Overall HMCS response

We welcome this report, which provides us with a roadmap to improve communication and engagement with our staff. Some of the recommendations are being addressed already; others will provide a useful platform to build on. We are pleased that Inspectors have noted that internal communication is improving and we will re-focus activity to embed best practice and raise standards across all parts of our business.

Recommendation 1 – Strategy

That HMCS review and develop the internal communications strategy and supporting policies in order to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to internal communications across HMCS.

Overall HMCS response

HMCS will review the existing national internal communications strategy to ensure it is fit for purpose and aligns with evolving business and local needs. We will put in place control, monitoring and evaluation processes to assure ourselves that there is consistency and coherence in approach and agreed principles are adhered to at all levels.

Recommendation 2 – Increased effectiveness of internal communications

That HMCS underpin the strategy and policies, and improve the effectiveness of internal communications, by ensuring that:

- messages are targeted appropriately
- the communication of policy initiatives is co-ordinated to avoid overload
- an effective method is introduced to ensure ZZ lists are owned and regularly reviewed to keep them up to date
- a review of *In Court* is undertaken to provide assurance that it is an effective means of delivering corporate information.

Overall HMCS response

HMCS will develop a communications resource bank consisting of guidance, best practice, templates and protocols to assist managers to undertake internal communications with confidence. We will work with policy colleagues to develop a forward planner to co-ordinate policy communications subject to ministerial and corporate constraints to minimise overload. We will improve targeting of messages through tailored distribution lists and introduce methods to ensure ZZ lists are owned by the relevant parts of the business and updated regularly. As part of our activity to improve corporate messaging we will relaunch *In Court* and position it as a crucial vehicle.

Recommendation 3 – Improved use of electronic communications

That HMCS improve the effectiveness of electronic methods of communication by:

- ensuring that staff in unLINKed county courts are given improved and easier access to appropriate information systems
- ensuring that induction training includes a module on use of the intranet and email
- increasing awareness among current HMCS employees of the intranet resource and providing additional training where appropriate
- consulting a diverse mix of employees during the redesign of the intranet pages
- revising and reissuing the email protocol.

Overall HMCS response

We acknowledge that staff in some areas of our organisation do not have ready access to electronic channels of communication, and will undertake a review and put in place actions to mitigate the risk of staff being information disenfranchised. Work on the HMCS intranet revamp is already underway to improve usability and usage, and we have and will continue to consult with a diverse mix of staff to ensure it is fit for purpose. Our aspiration, over the next 2 – 5 years, is to install IT at non-LINK courts so that we provide all our staff with access to the intranet.

Recommendation 4 – Meetings and Team Briefing

That HMCS ensure that the Team Briefing system is an effective method of communicating corporate information by:

- taking appropriate steps to make certain that communication is part of every manager's responsibilities
- requiring all parts of HMCS to deliver the core briefing material within the briefing cycle period to all members of staff, and to record attendance, which should be monitored at an appropriate level
- obtaining feedback from staff, considering this feedback at corporate level and informing staff of the outcome of this feedback during the subsequent briefing cycle.

Overall HMCS response

We will work with HR to ensure that all managers are made aware of their responsibility to communicate with staff. Awareness of this key competency will be raised through training and guidance, and highlighted in job roles, for example the court manager. Work is underway to identify barriers to Team Briefing being an effective tool for communication and this will inform our action plan to embed it and use it as an effective two-way dialogue between managers and staff.