

22 DECEMBER 2005

## Caring for Victims and Witnesses in the Norfolk Courts

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

Inspectors were pleased to find that, overall, the service provided to victims and witnesses by Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Norfolk is good. All the courthouses have waiting rooms for prosecution witnesses, although facilities for defence witnesses are more limited.

Because refreshments and toilet facilities are not always located in separate, secure areas, inspectors were pleased to see that court staff, or volunteers from the Witness Service, are available to accompany witnesses when they have to pass through the public areas of the courthouses, or to bring drinks for them into the witness waiting rooms. Inspectors saw that ushers and other court staff are willing to answer questions and to provide help and advice, treating victims and witnesses with courtesy and respect.

In most courts, separate rooms are available for children and young witnesses, with toys and games to keep them entertained. Most courthouses also have TV links, so that young and vulnerable witnesses, in particular, can give evidence without having to enter the courtroom. But these are not fully soundproofed, and Inspectors have asked HMCS to improve this.

HMCS has good systems for making contact with prosecution witnesses and for sending them information before they come to court, but is not so good at giving this kind of help to defence witnesses. There are also plenty of useful signs, in most courthouses, showing the layout of the court and what witnesses should do when they arrive

The Norfolk courts have a new complaints procedure, but Inspectors would like to see this better advertised, especially in areas where witnesses wait. There is a Court Charter, setting out what standards of service victims and witnesses can expect in the Crown Court, but HMCS does not issue any information on how well the Crown Court is meeting them. It is also disappointing that there are no such standards, at present, for the magistrates' courts.

Throughout the Norfolk Area, the courts work very well with the Witness Service – and other agencies, such as the police, CPS and defence solicitors – to make sure that most victims and witnesses are well looked after. They also meet together regularly to find ways of ensuring as few delays as possible, so that witnesses do not have to wait too long before the case comes to court.

### **Comment from the Norfolk Area**

HMCS Area Director, Pauline Cornford:

*"I am delighted with this first report, which clearly reflects the importance that all staff across the criminal justice agencies in Norfolk place in meeting the needs of victims and witnesses in Norfolk, and in recognising how important their contribution is. The facilities we offer, whilst of a reasonable standard, do need some further works and we have already commenced a programme of investment that will bring further improvements to the service we offer. There has been a very strong, positive record of agencies working together, with Witness and Victim Support groups across Norfolk, to develop better ways of working and supporting victims and witnesses of crime, which has been clearly recognised in this report."*

**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 victims and 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 victims and witnesses 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](mailto:lori.buckley@hmica.gsi.gov.uk)

Or via our website at: [www.hmica.gov.uk](http://www.hmica.gov.uk)

**HMCS Norfolk Area Contact:**

Pauline Cornford, Area Director

Tel: 01842 757302

Email: [pauline.cornford1@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:pauline.cornford1@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk)