

9 JUNE 2006

Spotlight on the Courts of South West London

The first inspection of the criminal courts in South West London, since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in March and April. A Public Information Booklet entitled *How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts' Service in South West London?* 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 13 courthouses dealing with criminal cases, and found that they provided varying standards of comfort for defendants and their supporters.

All have cafes or vending machines where people can buy refreshments, and every courthouse – even those falling short in other ways – have good, clear internal signs to show people where to go. These signs were also in Braille. Some courthouses have enquiry desks, with helpful information available.

Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in South West London has good arrangements for providing interpreters at courts across the Area. Every courthouse also has a useful leaflet about coming to court – such as what to bring with you, the facilities and security procedures, and how to find the courthouse – and written information is available in languages other than English. But most of the defendants we spoke to did not seem to have received this kind of information before they arrived. We have asked HMCS to make sure that these leaflets are getting to the people who need them.

There are good links with the Witness Service to ensure that all defence witnesses attending court are offered appropriate support. HMCS has also worked hard with other agencies – such as the police and the Crown Prosecution Service – to shorten the time defendants have to wait for their trial to be heard, and make improvements in other aspects of the service offered.

Despite these good points, Inspectors were disappointed to find that, overall, the service provided to defendants at the time of the inspection was less than satisfactory. Some of the courthouses – particularly older buildings – need repairs and other work to improve them. Not all are accessible to people with mobility problems, and conditions are poor and cramped in some of the cell areas, where defendants are kept in custody – sometimes for long periods – on the day of their trial. Many court buildings also lack sufficient suitable rooms where defendants can talk privately to their legal representatives.

Every courthouse in South West London has a good range of holy books, which are looked after appropriately. But there is no information in the public waiting rooms, or the cell areas, about making the choice between swearing an oath or affirming. Once in court, it is easier for defendants if court staff ask them to repeat the words after them, instead of reading the words from a card, but this isn't common practice in the South West London courts.

We have made recommendations to HMCS about how it can improve the information and support given to defendants on the day of their hearing. We are pleased that HMCS management has responded positively to the inspection, and is taking forward the recommendations we have made.

Comment from the South West London Area

“The inspection served to hasten existing plans for how we use our estate in regards to defendants across the Area. Many of our existing court buildings do not easily meet the standards of a modern criminal justice system and we are discussing with the judiciary and our agency partners how we can best deal with the issues raised.

We are also devising a new programme of training and support for our staff to assist them in providing a quality service.”

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:

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