

6 FEBRUARY 2006

Defendants in the Wiltshire Courts

The first inspection of the criminal courts in Wiltshire, since Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) was formed on 1 April 2005, took place in November. A Public Information Booklet entitled *How good is the service provided for defendants by the Courts' Service in Wiltshire?* has been published today. Inspectors looked at:

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

Inspectors found that, overall, the service provided to defendants and their witnesses by Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) in Wiltshire is satisfactory. Some of the court buildings – particularly in Salisbury and Devizes – are poor in terms of the access and facilities they provide. For example, not all of them have separate rooms where defendants can discuss their cases privately with their legal representatives. In some, it is difficult to maintain a separation between witnesses for the prosecution and defence. The new courthouse planned for Salisbury in 2008 should remedy this and, in the meantime, Inspectors have suggested ways that HMCS can improve the services it offers.

Inspectors were pleased to see court staff treating defendants with respect and courtesy. They were willing to answer questions, and to provide help and advice. There are excellent contacts with local schemes to provide help for people who have problems with mental health or drug addiction. HMCS also works well with the Witness Service – an independent charity that looks after witnesses at court.

The Area has an awareness of the diverse needs of people attending the courts. People with mobility problems can get into and around most court buildings, and staff make special arrangements for those attending courts where access is restricted. The Area is also good at finding special interpreters – to help those who do not speak English or who may be deaf - understand what is happening.

Both the Crown Court centres and the magistrates' courts have a Charter setting out the kind of service people can expect. There is a good system for dealing with written complaints about the service, but HMCS needs to give more guidance to its staff on how to deal with complaints made in person. The Area has produced some useful leaflets to help people when they attend court but it needs to ensure that these include details of how to claim costs if found "not guilty". The Wiltshire magistrates' courts have fair and useful systems to reduce waiting times on the day for defendants.

HMCS in Wiltshire has responded positively to the inspection, and is taking forward the recommendations we have made.

Comment from the Wiltshire Area

Norman Jeffery, the Area Director for Wiltshire, replies:

"I am very pleased the inspection identified that the staff of the Wiltshire courts were found to provide defendants with respect and courtesy, and were at the same time helpful. All staff do endeavour to deliver high levels of customer service and it is very encouraging to note this was identified by the Inspectors.

The Area does suffer from some inadequate court buildings where facilities are poor. It is, therefore, encouraging to report that planning permission for a new courthouse in Salisbury was granted by the local authority on 10 January 2006. This new building will replace the magistrates' court buildings in Salisbury and Devizes, together with the Crown and county courts in Salisbury."

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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