

PRESS RELEASE

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CPS CHESHIRE

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its report of an intermediate inspection of CPS Cheshire. Inspectors found that the Area was well led and managers have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. Casework standards have risen in a number of respects since the last inspection in February 2001. There was a particularly noticeable improvement in performance in Crewe cases which are now handled by a joint police and CPS criminal justice unit working together in one office. The report recommends the appointment of a senior manager to lead the project to establish similar arrangements at Chester.

The inspection team also found that the quality of decision-making during the initial and continuing review of cases by lawyers was very good; there has been improvement since the last inspection. Case preparation is generally prompt.

In addition the report highlights three significant aspects where improvement is needed:

- * Compliance with the prosecution's obligation of secondary disclosure;
- * The effectiveness of pre-trial reviews in order to reduce the high proportion of cracked and ineffective trials in the magistrates' court; and
- * The timeliness of the service of committal papers on the defence in cases proceeding to the Crown Court.

Stephen Wooler, HM Chief Inspector to the Crown Prosecution Service, said:

“Our report shows pleasing progress by CPS Cheshire since the last inspection in 2001. That is satisfying both for those inspected and for the Inspectorate. I am confident that managers and staff will wish to build on the report as part of their commitment to continuous improvement”

Other findings by the Inspectorate include:

- * The Area is developing a performance management culture in which standards are being set, performance is regularly monitored and actions taken as a result.
- * A self -assessment exercise undertaken in preparation for the inspection demonstrated a good level of internal awareness and understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Area performance.
- * CPS Cheshire plays an active and influential part in the development of the criminal justice system in Cheshire particularly in promoting initiatives relating to race relations. Its involvement with the local community is steadily developing and the Area is a key player in the local Connecting Communities project.
- * Despite the success of police/CPS co-location at Crewe, progress towards co-location elsewhere in the county has proved more problematic due to accommodation difficulties but a project team has been appointed to progress co-location in Chester.
- * Initial indications are that the Area has implemented the Direct Communication with Victims initiative well. The Area has itself identified aspects that require improvement, such as poor file endorsements and timeliness of letters to victims, and an action plan is being devised to tackle shortcomings. An external review has commended the Area on the way it has implemented the initiative.
- * The standard of CPS advocates is good with cases being prosecuted competently and professionally.

- * Appropriately experienced counsel usually prosecute Crown Court cases, however the performance of some counsel was below that expected. The Area's structured programme to monitor the performance of in-house advocates should be extended to cover agents and counsel.
- * Area performance in respect of disclosure of unused material has improved generally as a result of joint initiatives with the police; but the standard in relation to secondary disclosure remains unacceptable.
- * The Area needs to monitor the reasons behind cracked and ineffective trials. A recent magistrates' courts listing protocol has reduced over-listing, however cracked and ineffective trials remain a problem for the CJS area.
- * The Area has a very good approach to training and is committed to staff development.
- * The Area Business Plan demonstrates a good strategic focus but future planning could be improved by detailed action planning and increased focus on unit and operational issues.
- * Financial management arrangements are sound.

Responding to the report Chief Crown Prosecutor, Barry Hughes, said:

“I am delighted that the report recognises the substantial progress that we have made, progress that in itself is tribute to the commitment and hard work of our staff. We accept the areas for improvement but overall CPS Cheshire has never been in better shape. We are very well placed to deal with the challenges that lie ahead as we extend and improve our service to the community in bringing criminals to justice.”

An executive Summary of the report is attached.

Notes to Editors:

1. In November 2002 HMCPSI commenced its second programme of Area inspections of the reorganised CPS. The aim is to visit all 42 CPS Areas in England and Wales twice over a four- year period. During that period each Area will receive at least one full inspection; the second may be either full or intermediate depending on circumstances.
2. Following a risk assessment, the inspection of CPS Cheshire was an intermediate one rather than a full inspection. Inspectors focused primarily on the Area's work in relation to the disclosure of unused material; the effectiveness of pre-trial reviews (PTRs) in the magistrates' court and their bearing on cracked and ineffective trials; persistent young offender (PYO) performance; the timeliness of service of committal papers to the defence; and the operation of the Area custody time limit systems.
3. CPS Cheshire as an Area has three offices, at Chester, Warrington and Crewe. Area business is divided on functional lines between magistrates' courts and Crown Court work. The magistrates' court unit at Crewe is co-located with the police. The Area was previously reported on in February 2001.
4. The area covers magistrates' courts at Chester, Crewe, Macclesfield, Northwich, Runcorn, Warrington and Widnes, and Crown Courts at Chester, Knutsford and Warrington.
5. CPS Cheshire employs the equivalent of 107 full time staff; this figure includes a number of part-time staff.
6. In the year ending 30 September 2002 the area handled approximately 20,893 cases in the magistrates' courts and 2,040 Crown Court cases were handled during the same period, advice was given to the police before charge in a further 586 cases.
7. Before visiting the area the team of inspectors examined a total of 153 cases drawn from all units. The team visited the area for one week during December 2002. The inspectors interviewed staff of all levels from each unit. The team also spoke to representatives of other criminal justice agencies in the Area. Observations were made on advocates at magistrates' courts and Crown Courts, these included CPS lawyers, agents and counsel. The team was also assisted during the on-site phases by a lay inspector who looked at the handling of complaints and the treatment of victims and witnesses.
8. Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate was established by the Crown Prosecution Act 2000, which came into effect on 1 October 2000 as a statutory body. The Inspectorate had, previously, been a unit within the CPS headquarters. The Chief Inspector is appointed by and reports to the Attorney General.
9. For further information, please contact either Anisha Visram at HMCPSI (tel: 020 7210 1187; e-mail: Anisha.Visram@cps.gsi.gov.uk) or Judith Edwards at CPS Cheshire (tel:01244 408 611).