

PRESS RELEASE

(EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01hrs 21 MAY 2003)

21 May 2003

05/03

CPS NORTHUMBRIA

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its report of an intermediate inspection of CPS Northumbria. Inspectors found that the quality of casework is generally good. The quality of the initial and ongoing review of cases (the consideration given to them by lawyers out of court) is being strengthened through the implementation of a quality assurance scheme. The preparation of Crown Court cases is timely and of good quality; preparation for summary trial and committal is also good but there is work to be done on aspects of timeliness. The standard of CPS advocacy is also good.

The relationships with other criminal justice agencies serving Northumbria are very positive with the CPS playing a full part in the establishment of the new Local Criminal Justice Board. The Area has also engaged with a large number of community groups and established the Community Liaison Group for work with the minority ethnic community.

The report also identifies some aspects of performance which need to be developed. Some are specific to the CPS itself, whilst others will need to be addressed with other criminal justice agencies as part of ongoing work to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the criminal justice system as a whole.

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

“I am pleased to report a generally good standard of work by the Crown Prosecution Service in Northumbria. The public can be reassured as to the effectiveness and efficiency of the prosecution service locally. Inspections always identify aspects of performance which can be improved and Northumbria is no exception. Some can be dealt with by the CPS itself but others will need to be addressed through the newly established Local Criminal Justice Board in the context of improving the criminal justice system as a whole”.

Specific findings by the Inspectors include:

- * the quality of pre-charge advice to the police was good but the timeliness in more complex cases could be improved;
- * compliance with the obligations of prosecution disclosure has improved considerably since the previous inspection. Individual poor performance is dealt with through the Area’s quality assurance system; further improvement should focus on the handling of secondary disclosure and ensuring that actions taken are properly recorded;
- * the implementation of the scheme for Direct Communication with Victims was well planned and implemented effectively;
- * domestic violence and youth cases are dealt with well;
- * the decision-making and systems dealing with racial incidents need review;
- * there is a strong culture of continuous improvement which could be further strengthened by a more corporate approach;
- * the deployment of staff at several levels could be more effective;
- * staff training and development and the performance appraisal system are generally well managed;

- * a more structured approach to equality and diversity issues is needed;
- * the Area manages its finances satisfactorily and appropriate controls and systems are in place.

Inspectors found that CPS relationships with other agencies are good but all need to develop a more “joined up” approach; in particular, managers should improve the sharing and analysis of performance data between the criminal justice agencies with a view to analysis of trends and co-operative approach to improvement. Particular issues which would benefit from interagency attention include:

- * the establishment of an effective joint monitoring system for the quality of full files from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service;
- * the effectiveness of pre-trial reviews in magistrates’ courts;
- * liaison between the CPS and the Witness Service to ensure that the CPS is able to deliver a better level of service to witnesses in the Crown Court.

Nicola Reasbeck, Chief Crown Prosecutor for Northumbria, said in response to the report:

“I am very pleased that the Inspectors found much good practice in CPS Northumbria. This reports acknowledges the high standard of our work and some of our positive achievements over the past three years. We had already identified and actioned most of the points in the recommendations and are keen to give the best possible service to all our local communities.”

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 Northumbria was an intermediate one rather than a full inspection. Inspectors focused primarily on the Area's work in relation to disclosure, the monitoring of advocacy and all other aspects of management.
3. CPS Northumbria has offices at Newcastle, Cramlington and Washington. Area business is divided on functional lines between magistrates' courts and Crown Court work. They cover magistrates' courts at Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Alnwick, Bedlington, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Hexham, North Shields, South Shields and Sunderland, together with the Crown Court at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Some work from the Area also goes to the Crown Court at Teesside and Durham.
4. The Area was previously reported on in September 2000.
5. At the time of the inspection CPS Northumbria employs the equivalent of 215.1 full time staff; this figure includes a number of part-time staff.
6. In the year ending September 2002 the Area handled 52,404 cases in the magistrates' courts and 3,113 in the Crown Court. Advice was given to the police before charge in a further 1,229 cases.
7. Before visiting the Area the team of Inspectors examined a total of 164 cases drawn from all units. The team visited the Area for two weeks during January. 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 the Crown Court. These included CPS lawyers, agents and counsel. The team was also assisted during the on-site phases by a lay inspector who focused primarily on 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 Joy MacMahon at HMCPSI (tel: 01904 545490; e-mail: Joy.MacMahon@cps.gsi.gov.uk) or Brenda Flint at CPS Northumbria (tel: 0191 260 4241; e-mail: Brenda.Flint@cps.gsi.gov.uk).