

Press Notice

Embargoed until 00:00 17 August 2005



Justice System is Merseyside Going Forward

The Chief Inspectors of the Criminal Justice Inspectorates have today published their joint report on the Merseyside Criminal Justice Area.

The inspection team, drawn from the five inspectorates and Victim Support's quality & standards department, found that Merseyside Criminal Justice Board (MCJB) had been quite successful in driving up performance from a historically low level. Inspectors were pleased with the commitment demonstrated by senior officers within the Area to taking forward the work of the Board. They also discovered a variety of examples of good inter-agency co-operation between the members of the LCJB.

Merseyside has been successful in introducing the statutory scheme under which the CPS has assumed responsibility for the decision whether to charge offenders – previously a matter for the police. This closer working contributes significantly to bringing the right offenders to justice on the right charges. The scheme is generally well-managed and the quality of decisions made by in-house prosecutors is respected.

In Merseyside, inspectors found a genuine commitment across the agencies at all levels to enhance the treatment of victims and witnesses. This was reflected in the facilities provided at court and the level of care shown by individuals. Even so, there were some aspects of witness care where suggestions for improvement were made.

The Merseyside LCJB has been effective in driving down the rate of ineffective trials, as well as reducing the time taken to deal with Persistent Young Offenders – currently under the 71 day national target. The Area has performed soundly against a variety of national targets and initiatives.

The ineffective trial rate at Crown Court (ie cases listed for a contested hearing which do not proceed on the day) bettered the national target of under 18% in all but one month of 2004-05; and the rate also dropped significantly in the magistrates' court, from 35.8% in April 2004 to 24.1% in February 2005. The Area also exceeded its target of bringing 13% more offenders to justice, and showed an impressive 18% improvement from April-November 2004.

An effective "Certificate of Readiness" procedure has been introduced in both the Crown Court and the magistrates' courts together with the appointment of case progression officers.

The number of warrants for failure to appear issued by the courts is declining, indicating some success in tackling the problem of non-attendance by defendants. The number of warrants awaiting execution has also fallen but

inspectors considered that both the number outstanding (2,893 at the end of 2004/05) and the average time taken to execute warrants (140 days) needed to improve significantly.

Also important is the improved public confidence in the criminal justice system in Merseyside. From a 40.3% confidence rating in September 2004, the Area is on target to meet its target of 44.1% by March 2006 if current progress is maintained.

Inspectors did find some areas for improvement in relation to the operation of the Board itself, notably a need to clarify its own structure, and in particular of its relationship to the Board Support Team and other sub-groups. By acting on this recommendation, Merseyside LCJB will be better placed to ensure that improvement through co-operation can continue to be achieved.

The inspection team also recommended some clarification in the position of newly set-up Local Criminal Justice Delivery Boards (LCJDBs).

The Chief Inspectors also recommended that the Board publish its aims for 2005-06 in order to increase awareness of their work.

Stephen Wooler, Chief Inspector of the CPS, said:

“The Merseyside Criminal Justice Board has probably travelled further than most, albeit from a historically low level. The inspectorate welcome the improvements made. I hope that our report will prove a firm foundation for continuing improvement. There remains scope for further improvement in making sure that trials proceed on the days listed and in reducing the number of outstanding warrants through swifter execution.”

An Executive Summary of the Report is attached to this notice, also on an embargoed basis. For further information, please contact Michael Fogg, HMCPSI Communications Manager, on 020 7210 1143 or 07901 856 346.

Notes for Editors

1. The joint inspection of Merseyside Criminal Justice Area complements a range of measures initiated by the Government to develop cohesion and better co-ordinated working arrangements amongst the criminal justice agencies so that the system can operate in a more holistic manner. Public Service Agreements between HM Treasury and the relevant Departments set out the expectations that the Government has for the criminal justice system at national levels. The framework within which this system is managed nationally has been substantially revised and that is reflected by the establishment in each of the 42 criminal justice Areas of a Local Criminal Justice Board. Each Inspectorate now places even greater emphasis on the effectiveness of relationships between the organisation which they are responsible for inspecting and other criminal justice agencies and its contribution to the work of the Boards. The Boards operate on a non-statutory

basis and formally came into existence on 1 April 2003. They provide a national infrastructure for more integrated inspection and so this is a natural development.

2. The existence of a Local Criminal Justice Board makes it possible for the first time to undertake a detailed diagnostic look at how the agencies in a specific area work together to deliver justice for all members of society, ranging from the investigation and prosecution of crime, through the care of victims and witnesses, to the passing of sentence.
3. In doing so, the inspection team has identified and endeavoured to bridge some gaps in the existing arrangements for inspection of the criminal justice system.
4. The Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors' Group comprises the Chief Inspectors of the Inspectorates of the Crown Prosecution Service, Constabulary, Magistrates' Courts Service, Probation Service and Prison Service. They work in conjunction also inspectorates when their responsibilities touch on the criminal justice system. On this occasion they were assisted by the Quality Assurance Unit of Victim Support.
5. The strategic aim of the CJCIG is "to foster and contribute to the continuous improvement of the criminal justice system for all its stakeholders, through a programme of individual, co-ordinated and joint inspections and monitoring, in accordance with the Ministers' policy for a better joined-up Government" The Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors' Group is supported in its activities by the Joint Inspectorates' Secretariat.
6. The Merseyside Criminal Justice Board comprises:
 - Chief Constable: Chair MCJB
 - Assistant Chief Constable (Operations);
 - Chief Crown Prosecutor (CCP);
 - Area Director for Her Majesty's Court Service (HMCS) in Merseyside;
 - Probation Area Chief Officer; and
 - Governor of Liverpool Prison;

Additionally, the following are standing members of the Board:

- Youth Offending Team (YOT) Manager for St Helens;
 - Chief Executive of Knowsley Borough Council
 - Legal Services Commission Representative
 - Members of the Board Support Team
7. HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate combined the joint inspection of the criminal justice system in Surrey with a full inspection of CPS Surrey. The joint report will be co-ordinated with the publication of the individual report in relation to the CPS.