

# Press Notice

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Tuesday 7 August 2007



## Area Effectiveness Inspection Report on CPS Essex

*Progress made by CPS Essex, but more consistency remains to be achieved*

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HM CPSI) has today published its report on the inspection of CPS Essex (the Area).

The Area has made some important improvements since the HM CPSI overall performance assessment (OPA) in November 2005 when it was assessed as "Poor". Inspectors found that it had embarked on a comprehensive programme of change and improvement, and a clear vision has been set and communicated to staff.

However, the Area still needs to strengthen the consistency and quality of casework decision-making and, in addition, to improve its case outcomes (convictions) in the Crown Court.

The main findings were:

- CPS Essex has a good working relationship with the police and this is reflected in very positive handling of persistent young offenders, which has been consistently very good - recent performance is 58 days from arrest to sentence, well within the Government's target of 71 days.
- The conviction rate in the magistrates' courts was 84.2%, slightly better than the national average of 83.9%. In the Crown Court the conviction rate has improved to 74.5%, compared with the national average of 77.3%.

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- The quality of decision-making needed to improve and be more consistent. There was a lack of clear case 'ownership', with lawyer and caseworker shortages hampering effective case review and progression.
- Progress had been made in the statutory charging scheme (under which the CPS has taken over the responsibility from police to charge offenders in the more serious or contested cases). Some very good examples were found within the cases handled, although overall the quality of advice was variable.
- There had been good work with the Crown Court to increase the rate of effective trials.
- The proportion of cases in magistrates' courts dealt with by in-house prosecutors was low, with slow recruitment of lawyers and delays in achieving increased sessions by designated caseworkers. In contrast in-house Higher Court Advocates were appearing more frequently in the Crown Court.
- The standard of care provided to victims and witness is good, with a local survey demonstrating high level of satisfaction. However, the Area needs to improve the level of Direct Communication with Victims to explain when charges are dropped or substantially altered.
- Compliance with the duty of disclosure of unused material to the defence needs to improve to ensure fairness and that cases progress more quickly and ineffective trials are avoided.
- The Area's financial management is sound, but the budget was significantly under spent because of unfilled lawyer and caseworker posts. Staff sickness rates are high and management procedures need to improve.
- Performance management has improved, but Casework Quality Assurance needs to be undertaken more effectively.

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- Leadership and the corporacy of the management team have improved and the Area has been more active in its efforts to secure community confidence.
- The Area's decision to re-structure and to move away from co-location with the police needs to be carefully managed.
- There is no separate measure of public confidence in the CPS, but confidence in the ability of criminal justice agencies to bring offenders to justice in Essex is 40.2%, which meets the national target, but is below the national average of 42.3%.

HM Chief Inspector, Stephen Wooler CB, said:

*"It is pleasing that CPS Essex has achieved some important improvements since the last assessment in 2005. The Area needs to build on this report to improve the consistency and quality of its case decision-making and handling so as to strengthen public confidence in criminal justice in Essex."*

Full text of the Report may be obtained from the Corporate Services Group at HMCPSI (Tel: 020 7210 1197). It is also available on line at [www.hmcp.si.gov.uk](http://www.hmcp.si.gov.uk).

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

- 1 HMCPSI undertook the overall performance assessment of all 42 CPS Areas in 2005 and 14 aspects of work were assessed in each. Areas were rated as "Excellent", "Good", "Fair", or "Poor" and aspects for improvement were highlighted. CPS Essex was assessed as "Poor" and 56 aspects for improvement were identified.
- 2 HMCPSI is now conducting two types of Area inspection. A full one considers each aspect of performance within the Inspection Framework, while a risk-based inspection considers in detail only those aspects assessed as requiring scrutiny. This is based on HMCPSI's OPA and other key data. In CPS Essex, inspectors assessed eight of the 13 themes within the Framework.

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- 3 CPS Essex serves the area covered by the Essex Police Force. It had five offices at Basildon (Laindon Police Station), Chelmsford (County House), Colchester (Colchester Police Station), Harlow (Harlow Police Station), and Southend (Southend Police Station). However, it is in the process of centralising its operations at County House, where the Area Headquarters is based.
- 4 Area business is divided on geographical lines with four prosecution teams covering the north east, north west, south east, and south west of Essex.
- 5 The Area provides face-to-face charging advice at eight charging centres, although a review was underway to determine the most effective use of resources.
- 6 At the time of the inspection in January 2007 CPS Essex employed the equivalent of 153.7 full-time staff.
- 7 HMCPSP was established by the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000, and came into effect on 1 October 2000 as a statutory body. The Inspectorate had previously been a unit within CPS Headquarters. The Chief Inspector is appointed by, and reports to, the Attorney General.

An Executive Summary of the Report accompanies this Press Notice. For further information, please contact Andreas Harding, on 020 7210 1143 or 07901 856 348.

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