

Press Notice

Embargoed until 00:01 Hrs
Wednesday 4 April 2007



Area Effectiveness Report on CPS Northamptonshire.

*Real progress made by CPS Northamptonshire,
but challenges remain*

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HM CPSI) has today published its report of the inspection of CPS Northamptonshire (the Area) which took place in December 2006.

The Area has made substantial progress since the HM CPSI Overall Performance Assessment (OPA) in October 2005 when it was assessed as fair. Inspectors found that the Area had taken positive action to address key aspects of performance, although some issues remained outstanding.

The main findings were:

- The quality of decision-making in cases that go through statutory charging (i.e. the scheme whereby the CPS has assumed responsibility for the initial decision whether to charge (in all except minor cases) – something what was previously a police responsibility) is good. However, in many cases this is not matched by thorough follow up to build the strongest possible case. While some cases are handled well, there is evidence of delay and an absence of proactive case management in others.
- Overall, the level of convictions has improved in the magistrates' courts over the last two years (80.4%), but it remains below the national average (83.5%). In the Crown Court, the Area is performing better than nationally on its rates of conviction (84.6% compared to 77.3%).

Promoting Improvement in Criminal Justice

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- The Area has met its target for reducing ineffective trials (i.e. cases fixed for a contested hearing which do not proceed on the day). The rate in the magistrates' courts (12.2%) compares favourably with the national average (19.4%). In the Crown Court, the rate of 4.3% is significantly better than the national average of 12.5%.
- Historically, in contested cases in the magistrates' courts, there has been a long delay between first appearance and the date of trial. However, as a result of effective liaison with the magistrates' courts, double listing was introduced in October 2006 to reduce waiting times for trials. The full impact of the double listing of trials is not yet clear but early indications suggest that delay has been significantly reduced.
- The Area needs to improve its own case preparation and progression. Inspectors found cases where a number of pre-trial reviews or mention hearings had been fixed, with little or no evidence of any progress being made by the prosecution in the interim. Other than case progression meetings for Persistent Young Offenders (PYOs) cases, there remains no formal or structured case progression liaison with criminal justice partners in relevant magistrates' courts and Crown Court cases.
- The Area commenced full statutory charging in February 2006 and four of the six relevant key performance measures have been achieved. While outcomes have been better in Crown Court cases, performance has been mixed in relation to magistrates' courts cases. A strong 'prosecution team' approach has developed between the CPS and police, although significant operational details still need to be addressed, including effective gate keeping.
- Persistent young offenders are currently being dealt with in 101 days from arrest to sentence, which is significantly outside the Government's target of 71 days. Although there have been fluctuations in performance, the Area has consistently failed to meet the national target.
- There is evidence of commitment to improve the service to victims and witnesses in the Area, but delivery is variable in practice. The flow of information to the

Witness Care Unit (WCU) needs to improve to enable it to deliver obligations under the Victims' Code. Direct communication with victims (DCV) needs to improve in terms of volume and timeliness; in only 33.3% of relevant cases in our sample had the victim been sent a letter which complied with the requirements of the scheme.

- Planning and implementing significant change need to improve in CPS Northamptonshire. The Area has outlined at a high level what it needs to achieve within plans, but greater detail in relation to objectives and milestones is needed. A more systematic approach to the review of Area plans and risks is required, along with a more structured approach to change management.
- Financial resources are controlled carefully. The Area is attempting to make progress on the effective deployment of in-house prosecutors at both magistrates' and Crown Court. In 2005-06, Area performance in deploying designated caseworkers in the magistrates' courts was better than the national average. The Area is struggling to reduce agent usage and current rates are higher than the national average (29.3% up to December 2006 against 20.4%). Higher Court Advocate deployment continues to be low. Sickness levels are higher than the national average.
- Leadership within the Area has improved and the Area's vision and values are set out clearly in its business plan. There have been substantial improvements in the relationships with other criminal justice agencies, in particular with the police, and the CPS is now a key player within the local Criminal Justice Board.
- Public confidence in the criminal justice system in Northamptonshire is improving, but still worse than national averages.

The Chief Inspector, Stephen Wooler CB, said,

“It is pleasing that CPS Northamptonshire has made significant progress since our last assessment. Managers and staff alike have contributed to that. I am confident that the Area will build on this report to improve further. It will be particularly important to offer a more consistent level of service to victims and witnesses. ”

The full text of the report may be obtained from the Corporate Services Group at HMCPs Inspectorate (telephone 020 7210 1197) and is also available online at www.hmcp.si.gov.uk.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. HMCPSI undertook overall performance assessments (OPAs) of all CPS Areas in 2005 and fourteen aspects of CPS work were assessed in each Area. Areas were rated as **EXCELLENT, GOOD, FAIR** or **POOR** and aspects for improvement were highlighted in each Area. In 2005 CPS Northamptonshire was assessed as **FAIR** and 47 aspects for improvement were identified.
2. HMCPSI is now conducting two types of Area inspection. A full inspection considers each aspect of Area performance within the inspection framework. A risk based inspection considers in detail only those aspects assessed as requiring scrutiny. This is based on HMCPSI's Overall Performance Assessment and other key data. In Northamptonshire, inspectors assessed six of the thirteen themes within the inspection Framework.
3. CPS Northamptonshire serves the area covered by the Northamptonshire Police. It has two offices, one of which is co-located with the police in Weston Favell and the other in Northampton. The Area Headquarters is based at the Northampton office.
4. At the time of the inspection the Area business was divided on geographical lines with two combined units, each handling magistrates' courts and Crown Court work. In October 2005 the Area restructured on a geographical basis in line with the Police Basic Command Units. Each unit has a Unit Head and a Unit Business Manager. The South Unit covers Northampton, Daventry and Towcester; the North unit's covers Wellingborough, Corby and Kettering.
5. The Area provides face-to-face charging advice at two police stations at Corby and Campbell Square in Northampton.
6. At the time of the inspection in December the Area employed the equivalent of 68.6 full-time staff.
7. Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate was established by the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate 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.

An Executive Summary of the report accompanies this Press Notice.