

PRESS RELEASE

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CPS AVON AND SOMERSET

Area building on successes but still has work to do

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its Report of the inspection of CPS Avon and Somerset.

The inspection team commented favourably on the energy and commitment within CPS Avon and Somerset to carrying forward national initiatives aimed at improving criminal justice. In particular, the Area has worked hard to establish the statutory charging scheme (whereby the CPS assume responsibility from the police for the initial decision whether individuals should be charged). It has also generally improved its casework management since the last inspection.

Even so, there remains a need to improve several aspects of its casework. Key performance figures show the Area to be below average on a number of key measures, including the level of discontinuance and adverse outcomes in the Crown Court. Most problems are linked to a lack of pro-activity and rigor in the consideration given to cases. Conversely, the Area has performed well in relation to some other measures by comparison with the national average - notably in its preparation for summary trials and the handling of the prosecution's obligations of disclosure.

External working relationships and partnerships are the Area's strengths and a good deal of productive effort is put into this aspect of management. Other criminal justice agencies were complimentary of the Chief Crown Prosecutor's leadership, as Chair, of the Local Criminal Justice Board. In general terms, the CPS is perceived to make a good contribution to improving local justice.

Stephen Wooler, HM Chief Inspector of HMCPsi, said:

“There are many positive aspects of this Report for which managers and staff alike can take credit. Although we identified aspects of casework which will require improvement, there is a real commitment within the Area to press forward initiatives aimed at improving the criminal justice system. I hope that the Area will be able to build on this Report and bring up the standard of all aspects of its performance to match those which we have identified as being particularly good.”

Other main findings of the inspectorate include:

- * In partnership with other criminal justice agencies, the Area has done well in reducing the period from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders, and in reducing the rate of ineffective trials in the magistrates’ courts. There has also been the innovative step of jointly employing a Case Progression Officer who works across the agencies.
- * An overall sound approach to the handling of sensitive cases, with an improvement in the handling of child abuse cases since the last inspection, although there were instances of domestic violence and racially aggravated offences cases lacking firm grip and direction.
- * There was generally sound handling of street crime cases with pro-active and timely action being taken.
- * There has been little training, and awareness is very low, regarding asset recovery under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, although this is now being addressed through an Area “Champion”.
- * Good work is being undertaken by an appointed Area specialist to promulgate the implementation of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs).

- * Monitoring and application of custody time limit regulations is a cause for concern with inadequate management of systems leading to some failures in the current year.
- * Inaccuracy of performance indicators has persisted, with large fluctuations in areas such as summary motoring and warrants, together with backlogs of finalisations.
- * The standard of advocacy is satisfactory and significant progress has been reported in witness care, although the operation of the Direct Communication with Victims scheme still needs improving.
- * In performance management some good work has been undertaken in respect of the Casework Quality Assurance scheme, but more effective use of performance information is still required, as well as a need to have a framework for systematic identification and implementation of improvements in both casework and administrative processes.
- * The Area has a strong focus on equality and diversity issues and has demonstrated commitment to family-friendly policies, but further work is required in identifying staff training and developmental needs, as well as appropriate deployment levels in units.
- * Improved communication and consultation with staff (and across the units) is needed, particularly over key policies and strategies that affect them, such as how the charging scheme is to be implemented. This is important where the latest Staff Survey shows lower than average morale and motivation.

The Executive Summary of the Report is attached.

Notes to Editors

1. In November 2002 HMCPSI commenced its second programme of Area inspections of the 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 either be full or intermediate depending on the circumstances.

2. CPS Avon and Somerset services the area covered by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary.
3. At the time of the inspection, it employed the equivalent of 166.1 full-time staff.
4. In the year to June 2004, CPS Avon and Somerset handled 33,890 cases in the magistrates' courts, 3,667 in the Crown Court, and gave pre-charge advice to the police in 7,429.
5. The Area was the subject of an inspection in May 2002 and the Report was published that October.
6. Before visiting the Area for 10 days between 31 August - 13 September 2004, the team of inspectors examined a total of 187 cases. They interviewed CPS staff at all levels and also spoke to representatives of other criminal justice agencies. Observations were made of advocates - including CPS lawyers, agents and counsel - at magistrates' courts and in the Crown Court. The team was assisted during the on-site phase by a lay inspector who looked at the handling of complaints and the treatment of victims and witnesses.
7. The charging scheme referred to above is a national CPS scheme to provide pre-charge advice to the police. The Criminal Justice Act 2003 took forward the recommendations of Lord Justice Auld in his Review of the Criminal Courts, that the CPS will determine the decision to charge offenders in the more serious cases. Shadow charging arrangements are in place in CPS Areas; the statutory scheme will have a phased roll-out, firstly across priority Areas and subsequently all 42.
8. Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate was established as a statutory body by the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000, which came into effect on 1 October 2000. The Inspectorate had previously been a unit within CPS Headquarters. The Chief Inspector is appointed by, and reports to, the Attorney General.
9. For further information, please contact Pamela Yoofoo at HMCPSI (tel: 020 7210 1173; e-mail: pamela.yoofoo@cps.gsi.gov.uk) or Michael Fogg (tel: 0202 7210 1143; e-mail: michael.fogg@cps.gsi.gov.uk).