

**Press Notice**

**Embargoed to 00:01 Tuesday 21 July 2015**

**Much hard work lies in store for CPS South East**

CPS South East were today given several recommendations to improve their performance by Her Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate after a wide ranging inspection of their work.

CPS South East has endured a difficult period in recent years during which it has slipped from one of the higher performing Areas of the CPS to the lowest point in terms of its magistrates’ court casework and budget overspend. Encouragingly, the overall governance of the Area in terms of effective leadership, strategic planning and management of risk was found to be fair.

**“Element of drift”**

A hiatus between outgoing and incoming chief crown prosecutors (CCP) not only delayed essential re-structuring but led to uncertainty amongst staff and external stakeholders. Put against a background of staffing reductions, budgetary pressure and increasing demands of criminal justice projects such as digitisation, it is not surprising that staff morale had been at a low level. However, by October last year, the Civil Service Staff Survey did show a 10% increase in levels of staff engagement.

**“Casework quality still poor”**

CPS South East’s casework quality has been poor for some time and bringing about sustained improvement has been recognised by senior management as a long term project. HMCPSI recommends that the Area applies relentless commitment to making better quality decisions more efficiently. The report also found that the delivery of charging decisions and advice by the Area was not impressive. Inspectors reported that the system was overloaded and bureaucratic so that the quality of decisions was not as good as the level achieved by CPS Direct. Backlogs in some Area cases had led to a decision to use self-employed counsel to provide pre charge decisions and advice which incurred additional costs in terms of fees.

HMCPSI Chief Inspector Kevin McGinty said:

“This review took place against a significant background of change for CPS South East with leadership change, budget overspends and a downward spiral in casework quality.

“The report acknowledges that the Area has done a lot to improve strategic relationships with some of its key stakeholders in the region. Particularly, several Crown Court judges and also local benches of magistrates reported that communications were good and the CCP was recognised as an effective contributor to local criminal justice partnerships.

“A sound financial position and improving casework quality are essential to the Area’s progress; unless these two aspects are dealt with during this business year, governance and leadership will be undermined.”

Key findings in the report include:

* Over the last three years CPS South East has lost its former position as one of the higher performing Areas of the CPS to a low point during the last two quarters of 2013-14 when its performance deteriorated to such an extent that it found itself near the bottom of the ranking tables published by CPS headquarters.
* There has been some improvement in performance over the ensuing twelve months. However, this inspection has found that the Area’s casework in terms of outcomes and decision-making remains poor as does its financial management and value for money.
* A lack of robust financial stringency in accounting procedures that had created uncertainty surrounding expenditure. The finance plan published in February 2015 aimed to cut spending on salaries by £1.3 million if specific staff changes were implemented. It is imperative that further measures are devised to curb future spending
* Encouragingly, the overall governance of the Area in terms of effective leadership, strategic planning and management of risk was fair
* The extremely challenging situation that faced the incoming CCP at the beginning of 2014 has been given full weight by inspectors; we recognise that in assessing overall governance as fair, we are giving credit for a sustained effort to unite disparate local units into a more efficient and resilient Area which shares a common ethos and culture

The Area needs a more business-like approach to the delivery of real change in systems and processes in order to see real improvements. That, plus a more collaborative style of engagement with all three police forces would bring benefits to the CPS, but achieving change requires commitment with all regional partners in a volatile landscape.

**Ends**

The findings of this inspection have confirmed to a large extent the preliminary views formed by inspectors during their early visits to CPS South East in the summer of 2014.

The Area’s leaders and managers have had to cope with a culture of poor performance, a lack of engagement historically with stakeholders, increasing levels of budget overspend and a challenging criminal justice landscape both locally and nationally. Staff morale had fallen to a low point.

It was clear to inspectors that the CCP was confronted with significant challenges as soon as she was appointed at the start of 2014. For example, the Area’s estate had to be rationalised, reductions in staff numbers had to be achieved and a more inclusive corporate style of leadership was required to change the Area’s culture from separate local units to one South East Area with consistent practices and common aims.

The full report is on the website: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk>