

PRESS RELEASE

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HM CPSI overall performance assessment of CPS Avon and Somerset

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HM CPSI) has today published the overall performance assessment (OPA) of CPS Avon and Somerset (the Area).

The OPA process provides a benchmark for each CPS Area's performance in 13 key aspects of work, each of which is assessed as being 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Fair' or 'Poor'. The Area is then assessed on its overall performance in the light of these markings.

The overall performance assessment of CPS Avon and Somerset was Fair.

The table below provides a breakdown of the assessed level of performance against the 13 aspects and provides a comparison with the 2005 exercise:

Critical aspects	Assessment level		
	OPA 2005	OPA 2007	Direction of travel
Pre-charge decision-making	Good	Fair	Declined
Ensuring successful outcomes in the magistrates' courts	Good	Fair	Declined
Ensuring successful outcomes in the Crown Court	Good	Fair	Declined
The service to victims and witnesses	Fair	Good	Improved
Leadership	Fair	Fair	Improved¹
Overall critical assessment level		FAIR	
Progressing cases at court	Good	Fair	Declined
Sensitive cases and hate crime	Good	Good	Stable
Disclosure	Good	Fair	Declined
Custody time limits	Poor	Poor	Stable
Delivering change	Fair	Fair	Stable
Managing resources	Poor	Good	Improved
Managing performance to improve	Fair	Fair	Stable
Securing community confidence	Good	Good	Improved¹
OVERALL ASSESSMENT	Fair	FAIR	

¹ Although the assessment for this aspect remains unchanged there has been significant improvement within the range of performance covered by the band.

Some aspects have been categorised as critical; this is due to the significant impact that they have on the overall performance of a CPS Area and the service it delivers to the public.

CPS Avon and Somerset has made some progress since the last OPA. Performance has improved in four aspects - including two critical ones - but declined in five, and has remained stable in the other four. It has been keen to take an early part in national initiatives aimed at improving the effectiveness of the criminal justice system, but the effort and commitment of managers and staff has not yet been reflected in outcomes and the Area has not achieved its full potential.

The Area has been at the forefront of carrying forward the CPS's advocacy strategy in developing and increasing the use of in-house Higher Court Advocates in Crown Court trials. However, it should have placed a greater emphasis on planning and engagement with the Bar and the judiciary and now needs to develop effective monitoring and review of the quality of advocates.

Inspectors found casework to be a mixed picture of some good outcomes and performance, and some less successful results. The overall conviction rates in both the magistrates' courts and the Crown Court have increased since the last OPA, although they remain below the national average. The operation of the charging scheme, under which the CPS provides advice to police and takes the decision to charge in the more serious and contested cases, has been improved, however some weaknesses remain and there is a higher than average rate of such cases being discontinued in both the magistrates' courts and the Crown Court.

Sensitive cases are handled well, and the successful outcomes rate for hate crimes is increasing and was above the national average for 2006-07.

Performance in relation to the duties of disclosure of unused material to the defence needs to be more secure, particularly in the Crown Court.

The progress of cases in the courts is not as good as the national picture, and the proportion of ineffective trials (ie contested cases which do not proceed on the day fixed for trial) in the Crown Court needs to improve. However, the proportion of effective trials in both the magistrates' and Crown Court in 2006-07 was better than nationally. Performance in processing cases involving persistent young offenders has declined and the Area needs to continue its work with the other criminal justice agencies to achieve consistently the target of 71 days from arrest to sentence.

The Area as a whole has engaged with a wide range of community groups, and has been able to take advantage of specialist training as a result. The effectiveness of the engagement needs to be assessed in relation to key groups.

The service to victims and witnesses has improved in relation to the care of, and provision of information to, victims and witnesses and the No Witness No Justice initiative is working well in the Area.

Stephen Wooler CB, HM Chief Inspector, said:

"Managers and staff in CPS Avon and Somerset have shown great effort and commitment in their involvement in national initiatives aimed at improving the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. They have also increased the use of in-house Higher Court Advocates in the Crown Court. This hard work is not yet reflected in case outcomes, with the result that their overall performance remains Fair. It has made good progress in the care of, and provision of information to, victims and witnesses."

The Inspectorate is visiting all 42 CPS Areas over a six month period in order to provide a benchmark from which future work can be informed. A summative report will be published in early 2008 which will set out on a comparative basis the assessments for all the Areas. The outcomes of these assessments will be used to determine where best to focus Inspectorate resources in order to promote improvement within the CPS and the criminal justice system as a whole. It is also hoped that the Areas, and CPS Headquarters, will use this information to address issues at local and national level where this is necessary.

This Press Release should be read in conjunction with the Report itself (which contains an integral summary) and is available on our website at www.hmcpsi.gov.uk.

For further information, please contact Andreas Harding, HMCPSI Communications Manager, on 020 7210 1143 or 07901 856 346.

Notes to Editors

HMCPSI was established as an independent statutory body on 1 October 2000 by the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000. The Chief Inspector is appointed by, and reports to, the Attorney General.

The OPA report is based on judgements that have been made by HMCPSI using a combination of absolute and comparative assessments of performance. These came from national data, CPS self-assessment, HMCPSI findings and by measurement under the criteria and indicators of good performance set out in the OPA framework. The exercise will include visits to all 42 CPS Areas over a six month period, between June–December 2007. Each Area is rated ‘Excellent’, ‘Good’, ‘Fair’ or ‘Poor’.

The Inspectorate uses an assessment model which is designed to give pre-eminence to the ratings for ‘critical’ aspects of work as drivers for the final overall performance level. Assessments for the critical aspects are overlaid by ratings in relation to the other defining ones, in order to arrive at the OPA. This assessment model is included in the framework and is available to all Areas.

This exercise is not a full inspection and differs from traditional inspection activity. While it is designed to set out comprehensively the positive aspects of performance and those requiring improvement, it intentionally avoids being a detailed analysis of the processes underpinning performance. However, it is designed to provide a benchmark from which future work can be informed.

CPS Avon and Somerset serves the area covered by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary. Its main office is based at Bristol. In the year ended March 2007 it employed 153.8 full-time equivalent staff, and handled 27,795 cases before the magistrates’ courts and 2,757 in the Crown Court. Advice was given to the police in 4,268 cases which did not result in proceedings.

This Press Release and the Report in relation to CPS Avon and Somerset are part of a block of ten reports published today. HMCPSI will publish two further tranches of reports covering the remaining 20 Areas.