

***HM CROWN PROSECUTION SERVICE
INSPECTORATE***

PRESS RELEASE

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CPS CHESHIRE

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its report of the inspection of CPS Cheshire. The inspectors found that staff in the Area to be committed and dedicated, providing an efficient and effective service to the local community. CPS advocates are highly regarded and most aspects of performance are sound. However, greater quality is required in aspects of casework handling, notably compliance with the prosecutions duty in relation to the disclosure of unused material; there is also an urgent need to improve its administration of cases involving custody time limits. The inspectors found that there are good working relationships with other criminal justice agencies enabling them to work jointly towards improvements in the criminal justice system as a whole: there is a need for inter-agency focus on dealing expeditiously with cases involving persistent young offenders. Early progress against the Government's target of 71 days has not been maintained. The average period from arrest to disposal increased in the third quarter of 2000 to 139 days. The Area has established links with community groups and is proactive in promoting equality issues.

Stephen Wooler, HM Chief Inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service, said:

“It is to the credit of CPS Cheshire that the inspectors found such a sound performance against the background of such extensive organisational change within the CPS and in the criminal justice system as a whole. There were

some significant weaknesses but these must be viewed in this overall context. I am confident that, if the recommendations and suggestions in this report are acted on effectively and properly followed up, CPS Cheshire will be well placed to deliver an even stronger performance.”

The inspection was carried out during a period of extensive change in the Area. Initiatives to reduce delays in the criminal justice system were being introduced to implement the recommendations in the Review of Delays in the Criminal Justice System (The Narey Report). The Area was also in a transitional stage of reorganisation into functional units to take forward the recommendations of Glidewell. This programme of internal restructuring has provided the Area managers with considerable challenges, however they need to focus on a greater cohesion of the Branches to create a unified Area identity.

The inspectors found that the Area gives a high proportion of advice to the police pre-charge. This reflects the well established, close and professional relationship that exists with the police. It is of good quality. The Area, however needs to record in more detail informal advice given to police.

The standard of review of cases was found to be good and generally on time. Cases proceed on charges appropriate to the evidence and in accordance with charging standards. Despite the efforts that are made by the police and CPS to identify and reassure vulnerable or reluctant witnesses, many cases are still dropped at court because victims or witnesses retract their evidence or refuse or fail to appear at court.

Specific findings by the Inspectorate include:

- * There needs to be closer working with other agencies to meet government targets on dealing with persistent young offenders
- * Action needs to be taken in conjunction with the police to ensure that prosecutors comply with their statutory responsibilities on disclosure of unused material

- * Reports analysing reasons for failed cases are very detailed but wider promulgation to ensure that all lawyers and caseworkers learn lessons from such cases should be put in place.
- * The quality of file endorsements needs to be improved considerably.
- * An urgent review of custody time limit procedures should be undertaken to ensure that dates are calculated and recorded correctly.
- * The need to work with other agencies to improve the effectiveness of pre-trial reviews. Too many cases listed for trial at the magistrates' courts do not proceed on the day. This wastes resources and causes inconvenience to victims and witnesses.
- * Improvements to be made in the return of forms to the police commenting on the quality of the files submitted.

Responding to the report Barry Hughes, Chief Crown Prosecutor, said:

“I am very pleased that Her Majesty’s Inspectors have recognised the efficient and effective prosecution service that CPS Cheshire provides to the local community. I am indebted to my staff for producing such good performance in often difficult times. There are, of course, areas for attention and we are well underway with the programme that will bring about the necessary improvements, together with further developments that will enhance our service to the public.”

A copy of the Executive Summary of the report is attached.

Notes to Editors:

1. This is the latest report of Her Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate in the cycle of inspections based on the 42 Area structure adopted by the CPS on April 1 1999. The CPS is a national service, but operates on a

decentralised basis with each Area led by a Chief Crown Prosecutor who enjoys substantial autonomy.

2. CPS Cheshire as an Area comprises two Branches. The Chester Branch covers magistrates' courts at Chester (Chester and Ellesmere Port and Neston Petty Sessional Divisions), Crewe and Congleton (South Cheshire) and Northwich and Winsford (Vale Royal). The Warrington and Macclesfield Branch covers magistrates' courts at Runcorn (Halton), Macclesfield and Warrington.
3. CPS Cheshire employs the equivalent of 82.8 full time staff.
4. In the year ending 30 September 2000, the Area handled approximately 21,861 defendants in the magistrates' courts and advice was given to the police before charge in a further 1,361 cases. In the Crown Court 2,381 defendants cases were handled during the same period. The Area has a slightly lower percentage of motoring offences (34.2%) than the national average of 37.1%. Other summary offences (13%) are significantly lower than the national figure of 18.2%. Either way and indictable offences account for 46.2% of the Area's caseload compared to the national average of 40.2%.
5. Before visiting the area the team of inspectors examined a total of 306 cases drawn from both Branches. The team visited the area for a total of three weeks during October and November 2000. The inspectors interviewed staff of all levels from each of the two Branches. The team also spoke to representatives of other criminal justice agencies in the Area. Observations were made on 24 advocates at magistrates and crown courts, these included CPS lawyers, agents and counsel. The team was also assisted during the on-site phases by two lay inspectors who looked at the public interest side of casework decisions, the handling of complaints and the treatment of victims and witnesses.
6. Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate was established by the Crown Prosecution 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.
7. For further information, please contact either the Enquiry Point at HMCPSI (tel: 020 7210 1197) or Andy Winstanley at CPS Cheshire (tel: 01925 425300).