

PRESS RELEASE

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CPS DORSET

Prosecutions in Dorset

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its report of the inspection of CPS Dorset.

The quality of decision-making is good. The key performance results place Dorset amongst the highest performing of CPS Areas overall. Since the last HMCPSI report the Area has concentrated on improving its service and performance in the Crown Court, which is now of a consistently high standard. Further work is now needed to bring the work in the local magistrates' courts up to the same level.

Sensitive cases, ie. those involving allegations of child abuse, racially aggravated crime, domestic violence, rape and fatal road traffic accidents are handled very well. CPS Dorset has introduced the recent national scheme for the CPS to explain their decisions to victims of crime directly in an exemplary manner and the quality of letters was excellent.

CPS Dorset is making a significant positive contribution to the local criminal justice system. It has taken the lead in some of the initiatives designed to secure improvements in public confidence and is committed to ensuring access to justice for all sectors of the community.

There is scope for extending coverage by the Area's Higher Court Advocates (HCAs: CPS lawyers with special training authorised to conduct cases in the Crown Court) to more types

of case. The Area relies too heavily on agents (self-employed barristers or solicitors) to conduct its cases in the magistrates' courts. Their files are not always properly prepared within the CPS with the result that sometimes good initial decisions are not followed through to successful outcomes. Measures to improve file ownership in the magistrates' court would address these issues.

Stephen Wooler, HM Chief Inspector of HMCPSI, said:

“The report identifies many positive achievements on the part of CPS Dorset. It is to the credit of managers and staff alike that they have continued to build on past achievements and successfully address the recommendations of our previous report at a time when changes in the CPS nationally and the wider criminal justice system have created additional pressures for all.”

Specific findings by the Inspectorate include:

- * the quality of casework decisions was generally high. On all significant measures the Area was performing well or very well, often substantially above the national average;
- * quality of advice was good. This should provide a sound basis for the new national scheme whereby the CPS takes responsibility for deciding on appropriate charges;
- * high agent usage, weak file ownership and a lack of effective pre-trial checks in the magistrates' court unit (MCU) need to be tackled as priorities;
- * by contrast the Area demonstrates strong case ownership and control in the Crown Court Unit (CCU), as shown in its work on sensitive cases and in its instructions to counsel;
- * quality of service delivery is good in the Crown Court, but could be improved if the Area's Higher Court Advocates were deployed more frequently in preliminary hearings;
- * agents are doing too high a proportion of work in the magistrates' courts, including almost all trials. CPS lawyers should be conducting more of these;

- * implementation of the initiative for Direct Communication with Victims has been a particular success in Dorset. The systems for informing the Witness Service in the magistrates' court about vulnerable witnesses need tightening up;
- * the Area is proactive in sharing performance information with other criminal justice agencies. It needs to focus on the information it gathers for its own purposes;
- * there is generally good morale in the Area and people are managed sensitively and appropriately. In the MCU more could be done to ensure that all staff are contributing equally and fully;
- * the Area has good financial management systems, however it is currently receiving funding for handling a large number of minor offences to which it is not entitled. A deficit will arise when this practise ceases however, this can be minimised by finalising cases more quickly and ensuring all advices to the police are properly recorded;
- * there are very positive relationships between all criminal justice agencies. The Area is well respected for its significant role in raising the profile of criminal justice issues within the community. The Area is alert to the needs of minority communities and is keen to ensure homophobic and other hate crime is dealt with properly;
- * the Area has put a great deal of effort into planning major initiatives such a co-location with the police, charging and the new Compass computer system. To some extent however this has come at the expense of "business as usual," particularly in the magistrates' courts.

Responding to the report, Chief Crown Prosecutor, John Revell, said:

“The Inspectorate looked very thoroughly at our work. I am very pleased that they felt able to praise the decisions we make on cases, the way we communicate with victims, and the contributions we make to the Criminal Justice System in Dorset. It is particularly pleasing that they have recognised the tremendous efforts of my staff in

times of so much change. We recognise there remain areas for improvement and the report is helping us as we tackle them.”

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 reorganised 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. Following a risk assessment, the inspection of CPS Dorset was an intermediate rather than a full inspection.
3. CPS Dorset has an office in Bournemouth which covers nine magistrates’ courts and two Crown Court centres.
4. CPS Dorset employs the equivalent of 52.3 full time staff.
5. In the year to March 2003 the Area handled 16,333 defendants in the magistrates’ courts and 1,059 defendants in the Crown Court. In addition, pre-charge advice was given to the police in 329 cases.
6. Before visiting the Area, the team of inspectors examined a total of 97 cases. The team visited the Area for one week in July 2003 and inspectors interviewed staff at all levels. The team also spoke to representatives of other criminal justice agencies. Observations were made of advocates at magistrates’ courts and Crown Court, including CPS lawyers, agents and counsel. 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. 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 the CPS Headquarters. The Chief Inspector is appointed by and reports to the Attorney General.
8. For further information, please contact either Heather Minshull at HMCPSI (tel: 020 7210 1165; e-mail: Heather.Minshull@cps.gsi.gov.uk) or Toby Earncliffe at CPS Dorset (tel: 01202 498705; e-mail: Toby.Earncliffe@cps.gsi.gov.uk).