

HM CPSI overall performance assessment of CPS Essex

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HM CPSI) has today published the overall performance assessment (OPA) of CPS Essex (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 Essex 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	Poor	Fair	Improved
Ensuring successful outcomes in the magistrates' courts	Good	Fair	Declined
Ensuring successful outcomes in the Crown Court	Fair	Fair	Stable
The service to victims and witnesses	Good	Good	Stable
Leadership	Fair	Fair	Improved¹
Overall critical assessment level		FAIR	
Progressing cases at court	Fair	Fair	Stable
Sensitive cases and hate crime	Fair	Fair	Stable
Disclosure	Fair	Fair	Stable
Custody time limits	Poor	Fair	Improved
Delivering change	Fair	Good	Improved
Managing resources	Poor	Fair	Improved
Managing performance to improve	Fair	Fair	Improved¹
Securing community confidence	Poor	Fair	Improved
OVERALL ASSESSMENT	Poor	FAIR	

¹ Although the assessment for this aspect remains unchanged there has been a 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.

Overall, performance has improved from the low base described in the last OPA. In particular, there has been a recent increase in the proportion of cases ending in conviction, which is largely due to the improved arrangements for provision of pre-charge advice to the police (whereby the CPS has assumed responsibility for the initial decision whether to charge in the more serious or contested cases). These have enabled prosecutors to work more effectively with police officers at the pre-charge stage, which improves the quality of decision-making. It also ensures that the handling of cases is planned properly from the outset. Consequently, cases are less likely to be dropped by the prosecution, or stopped mid-trial.

Even so, there remains a need for improved post-charge case preparation and review, especially in relation to magistrates' courts work. Whilst the proportion of cases that are dropped by the prosecution has improved marginally since the last OPA, there has been an increase in the proportion of discharged committals (cases which should go to the Crown Court but fail because the prosecution was not ready and the court refused an adjournment, or no application was made in anticipation of refusal).

The proportion of Crown Court cases with successful outcomes is also improving but the proportions of cases ending in conviction, as well as those that are dropped by the prosecution, are still not as satisfactory as the national average.

Delay is less of a problem than it was in Essex and the proportion of trials that are ready to start on the allocated day (effective trials) is better than the national averages in both the Crown Court and magistrates' courts. Overall this tends to improve the experience of the witness at court and assists the Area's demonstrated commitment to improving witness care generally.

Compliance with the duties of disclosure of unused material to the defence is still variable.

Stephen Wooler CB, HM Chief Inspector, said:

"I am pleased to have found significant progress in CPS Essex since the 2005 OPA. The quality of decision-making has strengthened and the proportion of cases ending in conviction has increased as a result. The CPS is working closely with the police and courts to provide a more effective criminal justice system in Essex. Although there is still room for improvement; particularly in relation to post-charge case preparation and review systems."

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.hmcpai.gov.uk.

Notes to Editors

HMCPST 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 HMCPST using a combination of absolute and comparative assessments of performance. These came from national data, CPS self-assessment, HMCPST 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 Essex serves the area covered by the Essex Constabulary. Its main office is based at Chelmsford. In the year ended March 2007 the Area employed 128.5 full-time equivalent staff and handled 22,965 cases before the magistrates' courts and 3,372 in the Crown Court. Advice was also given to the police in 7,312 cases which did not result in proceedings.

This Press Release and the Report in relation to CPS Essex are part of a block of nine reports published today. HMCPST has already published two tranches relating to 22 Areas, and will publish one further tranche of reports covering the remaining Areas.