

***HM CROWN PROSECUTION SERVICE
INSPECTORATE***

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CPS ESSEX

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its report of its inspection of CPS Essex. The inspectors found that casework decisions were generally sound. Inspectors commended the Area on the very successful implementation of the Narey initiatives to reduce delays in the criminal justice system, and on its commitment to improve the performance in the Crown Court.

Stephen Wooler, Chief Inspector of the CPS, said:

“CPS Essex has achieved a sound performance in its first year of operation under the new structure. The progress achieved against a background of extensive change, both within the CPS and the criminal justice system, is creditable. It has played a very positive and effective part in successfully implementing initiatives to reduce delays in the criminal justice system locally. There has been a strong drive to improve performance in the Crown Court and provided the matters identified as requiring improvement are addressed, CPS Essex is well placed to continue providing the public with a sound and effective prosecution service”.

The inspectors found that the Area’s overall performance in respect of casework and decision making is good. In particular, staff have played a very positive part in implementing initiatives to reduce delays in the criminal justice system in Essex. This is noteworthy in the magistrates’ courts, and the time taken to deal with persistent

young offenders from arrest to sentence has fallen to 87 days in the first quarter of 2000, which is better than the national average. Further efforts are planned to achieve the Governments' target of 71 days.

The clear identity of CPS Essex has been warmly welcomed by other criminal justice agencies. The Area has played a full and effective role in joint initiatives to improve the criminal justice system in Essex.

The drive to carry forward the Glidewell principles that CPS lawyers should concentrate on more serious cases and those in the Crown Court is already strongly under way. The projected improvements can already be seen in better file management and more robust decision making.

Inspectors commended these efforts and a number of other matters in CPS Essex, but found others which needed attention, some urgently.

During this transitional and demanding phase the Area senior managers need to display a clear commitment to CPS operations in casework in the magistrates' court. The casework support systems in the magistrates' court require checking, unification and reinforcement to overcome problems in the progress of cases and in their preparation for trial. Inspectors considered it a matter of priority to do this to reduce the adverse impact on others and to ensure that the new criminal justice units start from a position of strength.

Again during this difficult phase it is especially important to maintain open two-way communication between managers and staff. The Area Management Team is already using a variety of methods of communication to ensure information gets to and is taken in by staff. Staff are the Area's key resource: some may not be allocated their first preferences for positions or jobs, and there are other uncertainties, so it is vital that the value of every individual's efforts and skills are made clear.

The communication, consultation and negotiation with other criminal justice agencies at strategic and working levels needs to be continued in order to find mutually acceptable solutions and practices.

The Area has a positive attitude to part-time staff. A slightly higher percentage of staff belong to ethnic minorities than the population of the county. The Area needs to carry forward its action plan on diversity and racial equality and to reach out to local community groups to improve relationships and the Area's standing with members of ethnic minorities in the community.

There have been weaknesses in the Area's undertaking of its duties of disclosure of unused material and it is an issue which has been tackled urgently, jointly with the police, through the production of a new training package and joint training.

The Area has made considerable efforts to improve the level of service and support to victims and witnesses. External consultees commented upon this and examples of caring attitude and manner were both related to inspectors and observed at court. The Area commitment should eradicate isolated instances of failure to achieve these high standards.

Overall the standard of advocacy is satisfactory in both the magistrates' court and the Crown Court. Inspectors observed some advocacy of a particularly good standard. The presentation of trials will be enhanced by the higher standards of preparation which the inspectors have proposed.

Complaints are investigated properly, and generally responded to openly and in a timely fashion.

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

“We are pleased the Inspectorate has recognised the hard work of staff and in particular the efforts made to speed-up the criminal justice system.

“We are now on track to meet the Government's target for reducing the time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders.

“We have already put in hand measures to address areas where the Inspectorate had indicated we need to tighten procedures.”

Notes to the Editors

1. This is the seventh report of the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate in the new cycle of inspections based on the 42 Area structure adopted by the CPS on 1 April 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 Essex has its offices in Chelmsford. On 15 June 2000, the Area employed the equivalent of 100.4 full time staff (the CCP, the Area Business Manager, the Branch Crown Prosecutor, and the equivalent of 34.8 prosecutors, 53.4 caseworkers and 19.2 administrative staff).
3. In the year ending 31 March 2000, the Area dealt with cases involving 28,662 defendants in the magistrates' courts and 2,936 defendants in the Crown Court. It provided advice to the police before charge in respect of another 574 defendants.
4. Before visiting the Area, the team of inspectors examined a total of 342 cases of various types. The team visited the Area for a total of two weeks during June and July 2000. It interviewed staff of all levels, as well as criminal law practitioners and local representatives of other criminal justice agencies in the Area. Inspectors observed advocates, including CPS lawyers, designated caseworkers and agents in the magistrates' courts, and counsel prosecuting on behalf of the CPS in the Crown Court.
5. The CPS Inspectorate was set up in 1996. The Inspectorate has recently become independent from the CPS. The Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000 came into force on 1 October. The inspection process examines all aspects of Area performance focusing on the casework decision-making and casework handling process along with management and operational issues.
6. For further information, please contact either the Enquiry Point at HMCPS Inspectorate (tel: 020 7210 1197) or Maurice Branch at CPS Essex (tel: 01245 455918).