

Press Notice

Embargoed until 00:01 Hrs
Tuesday 14 August 2007



Area Effectiveness Report on CPS Hertfordshire

Prosecutors need to build on progress

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HM CPSI) has today published its report on the inspection of CPS Hertfordshire (the Area).

The Area has made some important improvements since the HM CPSI overall performance assessment (OPA) in November 2005 when it was assessed as "Fair". Inspectors found that there had been significant improvement in the way the Area undertakes its duty of disclosure of unused material to the defence and performance management systems had been improved to provide clear comparative performance reports on each unit.

There has been some improvement in case outcomes (convictions), but more remains to be done, particularly in the Crown Court. The Area also needs to work with its partners in the criminal justice system in Hertfordshire to reduce delays between charge and trial of cases in both the magistrates' courts and the Crown Court.

The main findings were:

- Some progress has been made in the statutory charging scheme (under which the CPS has taken over the responsibility from police to charge offenders in the more serious or contested cases), but there needs to be more consistent decision-making and effective work with the police if the benefits are to be realised.
- More consistent decision-making and sounder case preparation is necessary in magistrates' courts' cases in order to improve conviction rates and readiness for trial.

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- There are significant trial backlogs in Hertfordshire and the rate of ineffective trials, at 24.7% compared to 19.6% nationally, contributes to this.
- The time taken to deal with persistent young offenders from arrest to sentence had deteriorated markedly, although for February-April 2007 had improved to 68 days, within the Government's target of 71 days.
- The quality of review and decision-making in the Crown Court is generally good, but further efforts need to be made to identify the causes of the low conviction rate. Lack of court capacity causes delay and means that case are transferred outside the county.
- A number of Higher Court Advocates within CPS Hertfordshire are undertaking Crown Court work exclusively and prosecuting trials of serious cases.
- Most sensitive cases and hate crimes are handled appropriately and outcomes are improving, albeit conviction rates are below the national average.
- The service to victims and witnesses was rated "Good" at the time of the OPA and since then the Area has improved its Direct Communication with Victims scheme, whereby the CPS writes to victims explaining why a charge has been dropped or substantially altered.
- Budgets are centrally managed and in 2006-07 the Area sought value for money, and increased its in-house coverage of magistrates' courts and Crown Court work.
- The Area has a clear sense of what it wants to achieve, although communication within it could be improved. The morale among staff was generally high, with a high level of commitment. Care needs to be taken to assess and compare workloads and balance resources between units.

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- Public confidence in the ability of the criminal justice agencies to bring offenders to justice in Hertfordshire measured 43.6% in the British crime survey compared to 42.3% nationally.
- There is a need for senior managers to engage constructively with their criminal justice partners to overcome long standing issues relating to the prosecution of offenders in a timely fashion through the courts.

HM Chief Inspector, Stephen Wooler CB, said:

“It is pleasing that CPS Hertfordshire has achieved some important improvements since the last assessment in 2005. The Area needs to work with its criminal justice partners and build on this report to improve its case outcomes and the speed of delivery of justice in Hertfordshire.”

Full text of the report may be obtained from the Corporate Services Group at HMCPS Inspectorate (Tel: 020 7210 1197). It is also available on line at www.hmcp.si.gov.uk.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

- 1 HMCPSI undertook the overall performance assessment (OPA) of all 42 CPS Areas in 2005 and 14 aspects of work were assessed in each. Areas were rated as “Excellent”, “Good”, “Fair” or “Poor” and aspects for improvement were highlighted. CPS Hertfordshire was assessed as “Fair” and 31 aspects for improvement were identified.
- 2 HMCPSI is now conducting two types of Area inspection. A full one considers each aspect of performance within the Inspection Framework, while a risk-based inspection considers in detail only those aspects assessed as requiring scrutiny. This is based on the OPA and other key data. In CPS Hertfordshire, inspectors assessed eight of the 13 themes within the Framework.
- 3 CPS Hertfordshire serves the area covered by the Hertfordshire Constabulary. It has three offices at St Albans, Hertford and Watford. Staff are co-located with police at Hertford and Watford. The Area Headquarters (Secretariat) is based at the St Albans office.
- 4 Area business is divided on functional lines between magistrates’ courts and Crown Court work. Criminal Justice Units (CJUs) are responsible for the conduct of all cases dealt with in the magistrates’ courts and a Trials Unit (TU) handles cases dealt with in the Crown Court.

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- 5 The Area provides face-to-face charging advice at four police charging centres on a full-time basis and telephone advice to two other police stations.
- 6 At the time of the inspection in February 2007, the Area employed the equivalent of 109.3 full-time staff.
- 7 HMCPIS was established by the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000, and came into effect on 1 October 2000 as a statutory body. The Inspectorate had previously been a unit within CPS Headquarters. The Chief Inspector is appointed by, and reports to, the Attorney General.

An Executive Summary of the Report accompanies this Press Notice. For further information, please contact Andreas Harding, on 020 7210 1143 or 07901 856 348.

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