

HM CPSI overall performance assessment of CPS Northumbria

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

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.

CPS Northumbria's overall assessment has moved from 'Good' to 'Fair'. Although it has improved performance in one aspect since the last OPA in 2005 and maintained performance in eight, there is a need for improvement in four. Those requiring strengthening include the service to victims and witnesses. The Area understands where changes are needed and has embarked on a programme to ensure the clarity of management structures and mechanisms necessary to achieve the desired improvements.

The Area performs well in terms of casework outcomes and has been consistently above national performance, although there has been a gradual fall-off over a period of time. Conviction rates in the Crown Court and magistrates' courts still remain better than national averages and Crown Court cases are generally handled well. However, the management and preparation of magistrates' courts casework is not as strong and cases tend to drift through the system impacting on timeliness and case preparation.

The handling of sensitive cases and hate crime is sound and Northumbria bettered the national average and target as regards the proportion of hate crimes that result in convictions. The work undertaken to ensure sensitive handling of rape allegations is impressive and has been supported by the Chief Crown Prosecutor, who also leads in this topic at national level.

Statutory charging (under which the CPS has assumed responsibility from the police for the initial decision whether to charge in all except minor cases) has been implemented and the Area is achieving four of the six expected benefits. However, it is failing to meet national discontinuance rate targets in the magistrates' and the Crown Court, with performance declining against an improving national trend.

Success in terms of joint victim and witness care has been slower in coming. Police staffing difficulties and the inconsistency of performance between the seven Witness Care Units have prevented the Area from meeting the listed 14 obligations and it is unclear how many are being met. However, a recent agreement to centralise all the units in the Newcastle offices should have significant impact on performance.

Stephen Wooler CB, HM Chief Inspector, said:

"It is reassuring to see that CPS Northumbria has continued to deliver successful prosecutions even though underlying weaknesses have resulted in a lower overall assessment than the last OPA in 2005. However, the Area needs to ensure that the second phase of restructuring is undertaken in a manner that leaves them well placed to address these issues and enable it to deliver the all-round service it aspires to."

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.

The report is now available to journalists from the embargoed press copies page on the Inspectorate's website (www.hmcp.si.gov.uk/press/press.shtml) and can be accessed using these details:

USERNAME: MEDIA
PASSWORD: pic5#Lon

For further information, please contact Andreas Harding, HMCPSI Communications Manager, on 020 7210 1143 or 07901 856 346.

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 Northumbria serves the area covered by the Northumbria Police. Its main office is based at Newcastle. In the year ended March 2007 the Area employed 241.6 full-time equivalent staff and handled 41,022 cases before the magistrates' courts and 3,579 in the Crown Court. Advice was also given to the police in 7,240 cases which did not result in proceedings.

This Press Release and the Report in relation to CPS Northumbria are part of a series of reports. HMCPST will publish a further tranche covering the remaining Areas in March 2008.