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PRESS RELEASE

INSPECTION REPORT RECOMMENDS WAY FORWARD FOR PROSECUTION SERVICE

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) have today (8 August) published the first inspection report on the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS).

Kit Chivers, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland and Stephen Wooler, Chief Inspector of Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate explained the inspection had assessed the PPS against its stated aim of being a fair, independent and effective prosecution service.

The main finding of the inspection report was that the PPS takes independent casework decisions, free from undue influence, which overall are of good quality. The report also made a number of recommendations to further enhance the service currently provided.

The report proposed that Government needs to make sure that the PPS is a properly accountable body in the context of devolution and that it should therefore become a Department in its own right. This would also assist the PPS with operational and management issues, and ensure areas such as financial management and the recruitment and retention of staff were more effective.

"Inspectors found the PPS to be independent in its decision-making, but felt it could do more publicly to reassure the community of this," said Kit Chivers, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice.

"During the course of this inspection, CJI and HMCPSI Inspectors found there was a commitment to providing an enhanced service for victims and witnesses within the PPS, although the operational effectiveness of the Community Liaison Teams needed to be strengthened," said Mr Chivers.

Inspectors have recommended that in future, better explanations are given to victims and criminal justice partners when decisions are taken not to prosecute or to withdraw cases. Increased transparency in the decision-making of the PPS will enhance public confidence in it.

Mr Chivers continued: "There is a need for the Prosecution Service to develop better working relationships with its partners within the criminal justice system. In particular, the quality of its casework and independence need to be balanced by recognising that a more collaborative approach with other criminal justice agencies does not compromise that independence.

The report has also highlighted the difficulties posed by the time it takes for cases to progress through the PPS.

“These holdups are compounded further by unnecessary adjournments of court hearings, leading to undue delay in the fixing of trials,” said Stephen Wooler, Chief Inspector of Her Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, adding that the processes which underpinned decision making within the PPS needed to be simplified.

Inspectors recognised that the roll-out of the PPS to most of Northern Ireland has been achieved albeit with some setbacks and urged the Service to complete this process as soon as possible with the opening of offices covering the Derry/Londonderry and Newry areas.

“The Public Prosecution Service is an organisation which is still very much under development,” said Mr Wooler.

“Although firm foundations have been laid, it will need to be responsive to continuing change in the criminal justice system, wider political developments and other social change.

“I hope that the recommendations we have made will contribute substantially to the PPS being seen not only as fair and independent but also as an open and transparent organisation in which all the people of Northern Ireland can have confidence,” stated the Chief Inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service.

In conclusion Mr Chivers and Mr Wooler said: “The Service now has an opportunity to assume a central role in the criminal justice system and establish itself as an influential force in ensuring that it matches the progress of Northern Ireland as a whole.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

- The Inspection was carried out by HMCPSI under the delegated authority of the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland. It was carried out by nine Inspectors including the Chief Inspector of CJI and the Chief Inspector and Deputy Chief Inspector of HMCPSI.
- Fieldwork was carried out between February and March 2007. Over 300 case files were examined as part of the inspection.
- The inspection report looks at issues including the structure of the PPS; its status and standing; independence; openness and transparency; the quality of casework in the magistrate’s Court and Crown Court and how the PPS deals with sensitive, specialist and hate crime cases.
- It also examined the service provided by the PPS to victims and witnesses, the human and financial resources of the organisation and its relationships with other criminal justice agencies.
- The Public Prosecution Service was established as a result of recommendations contained in the 2002 Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland. The legislative framework to set up the PPS was provided by the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002.
- The PPS has responsibility for prosecution all criminal cases in Northern Ireland since June 2005 with the exception of regulatory offences such as TV licence and Vehicle Excise Duty evasion.
- The PPS is split into four different regions: - Belfast; Northern, Western & Southern and Eastern. At the time of the inspection it employed 550 staff.
- The PPS was preceded by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution which was set up in 1972.