



30 June 2009

PRESS RELEASE

Inspectorates assess progress of Public Prosecution Service two years on

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate have today (30 June) published the findings of their follow-up inspection of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS).

The joint inspection examined progress made by the PPS against the recommendations and issues raised by Inspectors in the initial 2007 inspection of the PPS.

"In the past two years the PPS has been fully rolled out across Northern Ireland and handles all prosecutions from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and other investigative bodies," said Dr Michael Maguire, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland and Stephen Wooler, Chief Inspector of Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate.

"Inspectors found that overall core prosecutorial decision making remained sound and the vast majority of decisions made by the PPS were correct," said Mr Wooler.

"A total of 93% of the cases examined in the follow-up inspection complied with the evidential and public interest tests contained in the Code of Public Prosecutors," he added.

The PPS was also found to have made substantial progress against a number of recommendations which related directly to its handling of casework.

Mr Wooler continued: "A significant effort has been made to increase the use of in-house prosecutors in the magistrates' court and to reduce the use of counsel. This has led to considerable savings being made in the level of counsel fees paid.

"Inspectors also found evidence that the quality of instructions given to counsel had improved, and a much greater awareness existed among prosecutors surrounding the requirements of the PPS policy on domestic violence," said Mr Wooler.

The follow-up inspection however revealed that the level of progress made in relation to the ways in which the PPS communicates with victims and their representatives could have been greater.

"The need for the PPS to improve its communication with victims and their representatives - especially when decisions were taken not to prosecute or withdraw cases - was one of the key findings of the 2007 inspection," said Dr Michael Maguire.

“Inspectors found that while some improvements had been made, resistance to providing detailed reasons for, and explanations of, decisions to victims and their representatives existed among some prosecutors.”

Dr Maguire continued: “Where reasons were given, Inspectors found greater effort could have been made by the PPS to ensure a victim’s understanding of the decisions was improved.

“This could have been achieved through the use of personalised letters of explanation rather than standard letters which were often confusing for victims and their representatives.

“These are issues in which clear direction and support from senior management will be essential in order to drive forward a change in approach,” stated Northern Ireland’s Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice.

The Chief Inspectors indicated further work was needed to build upon the progress made to date by the PPS to make the organisation more efficient.

The follow-up inspection found evidence of improvement in how cases were managed to ensure delays in decision making was reduced. Developments had also occurred in relation to the timeliness of decision making by the PPS, with performance against timeliness targets at 74% at the end of December 2008 compared with 62% in 2007-08.

The Chief Inspectors acknowledged the organisation is moving forward and significant progress is achievable in the next year. However, they indicated more remains to be done in relation to governance and management issues to ensure there are no significant risks to the organisation following the devolution of policing and justice matters.

External communication both in relation to individual decisions and community liaison also requires further development.

In conclusion Dr Maguire and Mr Wooler stated: “The PPS sits at the heart of the criminal justice system. A key role for the organisation must be to influence change and contribute to the modernisation of the justice system.

“In order to do this, it must ensure it is able to operate effectively to act as a catalyst for improvement in the overall quality and timeliness of the service the justice system provides to the public,” concluded the Chief Inspectors.

Copies of the follow-up inspection can be downloaded from the CJI website – www.cjini.org/actionplanreviews-inspectionfollow-upreviews