

***CROWN PROSECUTION SERVICE  
INSPECTORATE***

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**CPS NORTHUMBRIA**

The Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has today published its report of its inspection of CPS Northumbria. The inspectors found that casework was generally well managed though they commented that some decisions to prosecute appeared to be made on the basis of insufficient information. Inspectors commended the Area on the way it dealt with youth cases but made recommendations about the way cases are prepared for court and performance monitored.

Stephen Wooler, Chief Inspector of the CPS, said:

“CPS Northumbria 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. Its response to the Government’s targets in relation to youth defendants is especially welcome. Provided the matters identified as requiring improvement are addressed, CPS Northumbria is well placed to continue providing the public with a sound and effective prosecution service.”

The inspectors found that Area staff were experienced and dedicated and worked well to ensure that casework was dealt with efficiently. The Area performed well in achieving most of its targets and, in most aspects, exceeded the national averages. Although morale has been affected by changes to the Area and Branch structure, staff continue to enjoy the respect of other criminal justice agencies locally. A recent

national survey showed a high level of stress within the CPS, although the position in Northumbria was more encouraging than the national picture.

The inspectors found that casework was generally handled well. Cases proceed on the appropriate charges and prosecutors make correct decisions on bail and mode of trial. Decisions were not always properly recorded on files, however. Some files showed a lack of robustness in the approach to review and a failure to address issues thoroughly and expeditiously. Some cases proceeding under the new Narey arrangements were handled on the basis of police files which did not have sufficient material for the prosecutor to make a fully informed decision. Inspectors were also concerned that a few decisions did not show the appropriate degree of independence and there was sometimes a reluctance to discontinue cases if the police wished to go ahead. Files did not always contain evidence that decisions on disclosure of unused material had been properly considered. The standard of instructions to counsel varied between Branches in the Area and, overall, gave rise to the need for improvement. Pressure of work sometimes meant that CPS advocates were not able to prepare their cases adequately.

Specific findings by the Inspectorate included:

- There was universal praise for the way in which youth cases were dealt with. The Area has made great efforts, in conjunction with other agencies, to achieve the Government's target of dealing with persistent young offenders within 71 days from their arrest to sentence. Although the Area average for 1999 was 86 days (and this has now fallen to 77 days), this was well below the national average of 108 days and earned Northumbria fourth place overall in England and Wales. This was a considerable achievement for an Area with as significant a caseload as Northumbria.
- Area staff have an awareness of equality issues and recent Area initiatives reflect the CCP's commitment in this respect. The report comments, however, that not all staff have seen a nationally issued video on Equality and Diversity which is intended for all staff and swift action needs to be taken to remedy this. Although

the Area employs few staff from ethnic minorities, the numbers reflect the ethnic make-up of the local population. A recent recruitment exercise was advertised in the ethnic press, although the number of applications received was disappointing.

- There were some significant inaccuracies in the recording of Area performance figures which would have an adverse effect on the funding of the Area's casework.
- Area staff deal well with victims and witnesses, especially in cases of particular sensitivity, although overall, there needs to be a more consistent approach.
- Cases are generally well presented in the Magistrates' courts by Area prosecutors, lay presenters and agents, and by the Area's Higher Court Advocates (HCAs) and counsel in the Crown Court. However, the Area needs to work with the courts to ensure that listing arrangements facilitate the most efficient use of lay presenters and HCAs.
- Complaints are investigated thoroughly and responses were appropriate and prompt.
- There are delays in linking letters to appropriate files and consequent delays in responding to some correspondence. In some cases, two or three reminders are received before a reply is sent.
- Senior Area staff play a major role in the local criminal justice system. The Area has well established links, and enjoys good relations, with all other agencies

Responding to the report, the Chief Crown Prosecutor, Nicola Reasbeck, said:

“We are pleased that this report recognises the progress we have made in the last year, particularly in relation to youth cases. We are determined to maintain the high quality of our casework and to take action to improve our performance wherever necessary.”

## Notes to Editors

1. This is the fifth report of 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 Northumbria is among the largest of the CPS Areas. It has three Branches. Tyneside Branch covers courts at Blaydon, Gateshead, Newcastle upon Tyne and the Youth Court at Gosforth. Northumberland Branch covers courts at Alnwick, Bedlington, Berwick upon Tweed, Hexham and North Shields. Wearside Branch covers courts at Houghton le Spring, South Shields and Sunderland. On 3 April 2000, the Area employed 186.6 staff (the CCP, the ABM and the equivalent of 68.3 full-time prosecutors, 43.1 caseworkers and 73.2 administrative staff). The CCP is also responsible for the Business Centre, which is located in Area Headquarters, and which deals with certain administration matters for the Northumbria, Cleveland, Cumbria and Durham Areas.
3. In the year ending 31 March 2000, the Area dealt with cases involving 53,878 defendants in the magistrates' courts and 4,194 defendants in the Crown Court. It provided advice to the police before charge in respect of another 1,620 defendants.
4. Before visiting the Area, the team of inspectors examined a total of 529 cases drawn from all three Branches. The team visited the Area for a total of three weeks during April and May 2000. It interviewed staff from the Area Secretariat and the regional Business centre as well as staff of all levels from the three Branches. The team also spoke to local representatives of other criminal justice agencies in the Area and observed 27 advocates, including CPS lawyers, DCWs and agents, in the magistrates' courts and nine counsel prosecuting on behalf of CPS in the Crown Court. The team was assisted, during the on-site phase by a lay inspector who looked specifically at the public interest element of casework decisions, the handling of complaints and the treatment of victims and witnesses.
5. The CPS Inspectorate was set up in 1996. The Inspectorate will shortly become independent from the CPS (The Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000 has recently received Royal Assent but is not yet in force). 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 Jan Wilson at CPS Inspectorate (tel: 01904 545488) or Brenda Flint at CPS Northumbria (tel: 0191 260 4232).