

## **When things go wrong: a thematic review of complaints handling by the Crown Prosecution Service**

Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPsi) has today published "When things go wrong" a thematic review of the handling of complaints made to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) about its work.

The report calls for a more open approach to dealing with complaints but goes on to welcome the programme of action being developed by the CPS to tackle the deficiencies.

### **Overall findings**

Inspectors found that the CPS procedures satisfied only four out of eight basic principles of an effective complaints system when measured against the Cabinet Office Best Practice. In addition the way that it operates in practice means that compliance with the principles is variable and not assured. There is a need for something of a cultural shift in the CPS's approach to complaints handling, supported by further training of staff to reinforce the principles of best practice. This has been recognised by the CPS and its Chief Executive has committed the Service to a programme of action designed to produce rapid improvement.

### **Specific findings**

- The complaints procedure is insufficiently accessible for members of the public.
- The thoroughness of investigation and quality of responses to complainants varied considerably. Some 6% of responses in the file sample were found to be excellent, however, 31% were considered only to be adequate and 18% poor.
- Inspectors were pleased by the avoidance of unnecessary or overly lengthy legal explanations, which were rarely found in responses. There also appeared to be a good recognition that jargon should be avoided and most were written in plain English.
- The arrangements for enabling complainants to escalate the complaint if not satisfied with the response were not generally spelt out – that occurred in only 19% of cases.
- Other weaknesses include: a lack of adequate remedies available; little evidence of complaints being analysed at national or local level; no system of independent review; governance direction and control are weak; some complaints were being over or under counted and timeliness may be inaccurate.

Stephen Wooler, HM Chief Inspector of the CPS, commented:

*"One of the essential attributes of good organisations, whether in the public or private sector, is an effective system for handling complaints sensitively, fairly and as quickly as possible. It is even more important in an organisation such as the Crown Prosecution Service whose business is by its nature contentious.*

*The CPS complaints policy needs revision and substantial updating to meet the principles of best practice. This was in hand at the time of our review. There is also a need for a cultural shift to ensure a less defensive approach to the handling of complaints. The positive response of the CPS is pleasing and I endorse its programme of activity which should ensure substantial improvement.”*

This press release should be read in conjunction with the report itself and the executive summary (which incorporates the CPS programme of action for improvement at annex A).

### **Notes to editors**

HMCPSP is an independent statutory body, established on 1 October 2000 when the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Act 2000 came into effect. Its statutory remit has since been extended to include the Revenue and Customs Prosecution Office.

The Chief Inspector is appointed by, and reports to, the Attorney General. HMCPSP has offices in London and York.

HMCPSP also undertakes work on a delegated basis at the request of the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice for Northern Ireland in accordance with the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2001 and non-statutory inspection of other prosecuting authorities, for example the Army Prosecuting Authority.

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