

Inspection of the Special Crime Division of CPS Headquarters

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) has today published its report on the inspection of the Special Crime Division (SCD) of Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Headquarters. The division deals with complex, serious and sensitive cases including corporate or medical manslaughter, deaths in custody, police misconduct, election offences and allegations involving high profile people, and other specific proceedings such as extradition.

The inspection found that the overall quality of decision-making is good, cases are generally handled well after charge, and case presentation at court is to a high standard. The service provided to victims, the families of victims and witnesses is commendable.

The division has developed good relationships with external criminal justice partners, including judicial authorities in foreign jurisdictions. It is well regarded within the CPS and is taking a more proactive approach to the two-way sharing of good practice with CPS areas.

Other findings include:

- Case 'ownership' is strong with clear accountability and effective supervision of casework quality, although SCD does not yet undertake significant amounts of its own advocacy in the Crown Court.
- Specialists are fully accessible by both police investigators and prosecutors and provide sound advice (albeit this is often not recorded) and a co-ordinating role.
- Cases are virtually always ready for trial on the appointed day; nevertheless performance management requires improvement to address some timeliness issues and to enable managers to compare levels of performance with other similar prosecuting authorities, as well as to share and learn lessons.
- The quality of the formal record setting out the decision whether to prosecute and the reasoning behind it was very good, in some cases excellent.
- Victims and victims' families are well served, with detailed explanations for decisions being given and good information provided about case progress.
- The substantial peaks and troughs of the division's casework makes resource and staff planning difficult. The process requires some refinement, including succession planning, to ensure that the high levels of specialism and expertise are maintained.
- Staff are very committed and take pride in the quality of their casework. The leadership is respected internally and externally.
- Good working relationships have been developed with the new complex casework units (which serve groups of CPS areas outside London) as well as with partners in the criminal justice system in this country and abroad.
- The electronic case management system adapted for use by SCD is considered not to meet fully its needs but some staff are not using it and so limiting the achievable benefits.

Inspectors identified five strengths and found the division well placed to address the 13 recommendations and seven aspects for improvement also made and so strengthen its overall performance.

Stephen Wooler CB, HM Chief Inspector of the CPS, said:

"I am pleased to be able to provide such a positive report in relation to a unit which is responsible for such an important and difficult range of casework. Staff and managers have worked well together to achieve this level of performance. It will be reassuring to the public."

This press release should be read in conjunction with the report itself and the executive summary which is integral to it and also available separately.

Notes to editors

HMCPSP 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.

This inspection included detailed scrutiny of finalised case files and some current cases were observed at court.

SCD was set up in 2005 as one of three separate divisions (Special Crime, Organised Crime and Counter Terrorism) within Central Casework, which replaced the Casework Directorate. There is a Head of Division for each of the three, who report to the Director of Public Prosecutions. The divisions provide centres of excellence and deal with those complex, serious and sensitive cases that for experiential or resource reasons are better dealt with by CPS Headquarters rather than by individual areas.

Cases as referred to SCD directly by investigators or by CPS areas under referral guidelines. A large number are referred at a very early stage, well before any question of charging arises. In the last year they have included the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes and the 'cash for honours' investigation.