



PRESS RELEASE

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Avon & Somerset Criminal Justice Area - Working Together to Strengthen Criminal Justice

The Chief Inspectors of the Criminal Justice Inspectorates have today published their joint report on the Avon and Somerset criminal justice area.

Inspectors found that Avon and Somerset Criminal Justice Board (ASCJB) had established an ethos of working in partnership to improve the operation of the criminal justice system. Senior officers of the agencies involved showed real commitment to taking forward the work of the Board. Good inter-agency co-operation between the members of the ASCJB at the strategic level was also replicated at the operational level.

Avon and Somerset has been successful in delivering all Public Service Agreement targets set for the Board.

- Performance against the public confidence in the criminal justice system target had increased at the time of the inspection standing at 46% (in the third quarter of 2005-06) against a target of 42% and the national performance of 43%.
- Avon and Somerset met and exceeded the 2005-06 offences brought to justice target (33,922 offences brought to justice, against the target of 30,623) as well as passing the required sanction detection rate (24.4% compared to the target of 19.3%).

- The ineffective trial rate in the magistrates' courts was well within target (16.4% compared to 19.5% target); and for the Crown Court performance was better than target (16.1% compared to 16.5%).

Inspectors also found strong commitment across all agencies and at all levels to enhance the quality of the support for and treatment of victims and witnesses. Victim Support representation at the Avon and Somerset Criminal Justice Board and in operational groups showed a willingness to learn from the user perspective.

Inspectors also identified a number of aspects where improvement was needed. Although there is a sound basis for driving cross-cutting criminal justice business at Board level, there are some aspects of the criminal justice system which are less effective. These include the statutory charging initiative; the implementation and delivery of the service provided by the Witness Care Units; and pre-trial case management. Other aspects of case management should be strengthened.

Inspectors found that the operation of the pre-charge decision-making scheme¹ requires improvement. Action needs to be taken to ensure that there is a clear understanding between the police and the CPS in Avon and Somerset about the strategic intent of the prosecution team and the scheme. This is evidenced by the fact that performance results have deteriorated for the majority of the cases going through the scheme; the discontinuance rate for pre-charge decision cases in the magistrates' courts has increased from 11% to 15.3% over the course of the 2005-06 year.

Although Avon and Somerset were meeting their high level targets for the handling of ineffective trials, and this was supported by good awareness by the magistracy and court staff of the performance, the processes supporting pre-trial case progression are not as effective as those supporting the trial outcomes. Case directions set out at early hearings are often not followed and there is a culture of using court hearings to

¹ Under the scheme, the CPS has assumed responsibility for the decision whether to prosecute in relation to all except minor cases. Hitherto that has been a police responsibility.

manage cases rather than the supporting operational processes. This often leads to more hearings than necessary.

The service offered to victims and witnesses by the ASCJB has been extended by the creation of Witness Care Units within the Area. Inspectors found that although this service did provide additional support, some further work and management was required to ensure that the expected benefits of the units were being delivered.

Stephen Wooler CB, Chief Inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, said:

“The Avon and Somerset Criminal Justice Board has a well-established partnership approach to taking forward joint initiatives aimed at strengthening the criminal justice system. This has enabled it to demonstrate sound outcomes and performance – especially against the key targets set by Government. However, there remains scope for improvement in the operation of the pre-charge decision-making scheme and in pre-trial case progression processes. I am confident that the Board will build on this report to improve performance further.”

An Executive Summary of the Report is attached to this notice, also on an embargoed basis. For further information, please contact Heather Minshull on Tel: 020 7210 1143 email: Heather.Minshull@cps.gsi.gov.uk.

Notes for Editors

1. The inspection of Avon and Somerset was the last of a programme of six joint inspections undertaken by the criminal justice inspectorates in the 2005-06 year.
2. Joint inspection complements a range of measures initiated by the Government to develop cohesion and better co-ordinated working arrangements amongst criminal justice agencies to ensure that systems operates in a holistic manner.
3. Public Service Agreements (PSA) between HM Treasury and the relevant organisations sets out the expectations that the Government has for the criminal justice agencies at a local and national level. Inspection against PSA targets enables the criminal justice inspectorates to assess the effectiveness of relationships between the organisations responsible for delivering criminal justice.
4. The establishment of Local Criminal Justice Boards on a non-statutory basis from 1 April 2003 made it possible for the first time to undertake a detailed diagnostic look at how agencies work together to deliver justice. The framework for inspection addresses issues of corporate governance arrangements and the strategies and policies in place to ensure that there are effective inter-agency arrangements in place from the point of charge through to the passing of sentence.
5. The inspection is carried out under the auspices of the Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors' Group. The group comprises the Chief Inspectors of the Inspectorates of Constabulary, the Crown Prosecution Service, Court Administration, Probation and Prisons. On this occasion the inspection was also assisted by Victim Support's Quality and Standards Department. HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate was the lead inspectorate for the Avon and Somerset inspection.
6. The Avon and Somerset Criminal Justice Board comprises:
 - Chief Crown Prosecutor - Chair;
 - Chief Constable and/or Assistant Chief Constable with criminal justice portfolio;
 - Area Director for Her Majesty's Court Service (HMCS) in Avon and Somerset;
 - Probation Area Chief Officer;
 - Governor of Bristol Prison;
 - Youth Offending Team (YOT) manager for Bristol

The Chief Executives of Victim Support (Avonvale) and (Somerset) are also standing members of the Board and attend alternate meetings.

7. The contact for Avon and Somerset Criminal Justice Board is:

Office of the Avon and Somerset Criminal Justice Board, Tel: 0117 952 9690.

8. The websites of the partners on this inspection are as follows:

HMI Constabulary www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmic

HMCPsi www.hmcpsi.gov.uk

HMI Court Administration <http://www.hmica.gov.uk/>

HMI Prisons www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprisons

HMI Probation www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprobation

Victim support www.victimsupport.org.uk