

Crown, County and Family Court Annual Report
April 2006 to March 2007

Foreword by the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor

This is the seventh annual report on the crown court and county courts and the second year incorporating the work of the Family Courts. It provides an overview of performance and information about local service delivery at each court centre from a judicial and administrative perspective.

I am pleased to continue with previous practice and provide a foreword and publish these reports with Lord Justice Leveson and Sir Mark Potter.

It is hard to believe that Her Majesty's Courts Service has only been in operation for two years. The success of the organisation was and continues to be down to the hard work, commitment and determination of staff both at the front line and in the centre, significantly assisted by the close working relationship that the judiciary have with staff. I have seen this in my visits around the country and I continue to be impressed by the dedication, pride and co-operation between all those involved in delivering court services.

During 2006 – 07 HMCS met the majority of their Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets and exceeded those in some areas, such as reducing Ineffective Trials. In relation to this, the target was that there to be no more than 14.2% (crown) and 19.4% (magistrates) ineffective trials (trials that did not proceed the day they were listed for hearing). Yet despite changes and tight financial constraints within courts, the annual average number of ineffective trials were below this at 11.5% (crown) and 18.9% (magistrates).

Following the publication of their five-year business strategy in February 2006, HMCS launched a major change programme to transform their business and help them to meet strategic goals and Government priorities.

From 1 April 2007, HMCS started operating in 25 areas rather than the 42 they began with when they were created in April 2005. This consolidation, a fundamental part of the change programme, has enabled the new areas to streamline operations and reduce management overheads without compromising service. The achievement of PSA targets is testimony to this.

To encourage service improvements at the individual court level, HMCS have worked closely with court managers to clarify their role. They have been given real ownership, responsibility and accountability for managing their courts – empowering them to make changes to the way the court operates to deliver a better service to the public.

The year saw the publication of *'Delivering Simple, Speedy, Summary Justice'* – a blueprint for a new way of working in magistrates' courts. HMCS tested the programme in four areas and is seeing real success. The Programme proposed a number of measures, concentrating on pre-court preparation, effective first hearings and real case progression between first hearing and trial. HMCS tested these new measures in West Cumbria, Coventry, Camberwell and Thames (both in London). Across the board, they led to magistrates being able to make decisions faster and so allow court staff to progress cases quicker. The impact can be illustrated by:

- a large reduction in the time taken between first hearing and trial;
- a halving of the average time from charge to first hearing;
- a 70% reduction in interim hearings between first hearing and trial;
- a 30% increase in guilty pleas at first hearing; and
- 59% of those pleading guilty now being sentenced at first hearing.

The credit for this success does not just lie with the courts: it's an approach that demands better information sharing across the criminal justice system and strong direction of Local Criminal Justice Boards. But with success rates like these, partners are as committed to the programme as HMCS are – the

approach will be introduced in more courts across England and Wales throughout 2007-08.

HMCS has successfully piloted two community justice projects. As well as setting up these specific projects, we announced our intention to embed the underlying principles behind community justice in all magistrates' courts'. This has meant communities have seen many of their specific concerns - both about individual offenders and about types of crime - being dealt with in innovative ways. Working across the justice system, in particular with social services and the National Offender Management Service, we aim to replicate this problem solving approach in 11 new areas.

HMCS is working towards establishing a unified family service, which brings together the work of the family proceedings courts and family business in county courts. In Barnet and Birmingham, we created a family courts centre, where all types of family case can be heard at one location, regardless of whether it is a family proceedings court or a county court matter. In Ipswich we brought together the administration for the family proceedings court and county courts. The success of these pilots has encouraged local initiatives across England and Wales. HMCS will continue to support these, monitoring progress and overcoming obstacles to delivering a unified family service.

Mediation provides an alternative that allows parties to discuss disputes in a less formal environment, to resolve differences and most importantly to agree a settlement. It is an alternative that more and more people are choosing. That is why following the success of a series of pilot schemes providing free court based mediation services in small claims cases. HMCS is rolling out the scheme across England and Wales. As testimony to the success of the scheme, the judiciary in Manchester are now referring more than 75% of all small claims cases to the mediator. In the calendar year after the pilot, 121 small claims mediations were conducted with 86% settled on the day.

All of these successes and credit for them lies with HMCS staff, working closely with the judiciary and other partners across the justice system. I can

only praise the way everyone has responded positively to new policies, processes and practices. HMCS has a challenging agenda of change ahead to transform the way justice is delivered. I look forward to reporting on how they are progressing in next year's report.