

**Crown, County and Family Court Annual Report  
April 2005 to March 2006**

**Foreword by the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs and Lord Chancellor**

This is the sixth annual report on the Crown Court and County Courts. This year for the first time we are 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 joint judicial and administrative perspective.

There has been a change in my role this year, as from 3 April 2006 I ceased to be head of the judiciary in England and Wales. That role has been taken over by the Lord Chief Justice. However, I retain a unique relationship with the judiciary and I'm delighted to continue to publish these reports with Lord Justice Thomas and Sir Mark Potter.

Last year was the first year of Her Majesty's Courts Service running as an agency. The resounding success of this transition was largely due to the hard work and commitment of the staff both in the field and at the centre, which was greatly assisted by the close working relationship that the judiciary continues to have with the staff.

Not only did we meet the majority of our Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets but exceeded those in some areas, such as reducing Ineffective Trials. The PSA target for 2005/06 for there to be no more than 17% Ineffective trials (trials that did not proceed the day that they were listed for hearing) yet despite the changes within the courts, the annual average number of ineffective trials was well below this at 12%.

This year has also seen the installation of a computer system (XHIBIT) in the Crown court. XHIBIT displays real time hearing information, on screens throughout court buildings and the public can access through HMCS internet. It is a testament to court staff that regardless of the necessary disruption to install this system they continued to meet targets throughout the year.

To support the Government's commitment to improving the CJS experience for Victims and Witnesses, over £3m was invested in improving accommodation facilities in the courts to make waiting areas more comfortable and secure. In October 2005 we introduced Witness Champions in all areas throughout England and Wales, with the sole purpose of promoting the well-being of victims and witnesses, sharing good practice across areas, and engaging with other CJS agencies to plan and monitor local service provision.

We remain committed to improving the experience of jurors, because their role in the CJS is so important. This year we have invested a further £1m to improve the environment in juror's areas. For example, several courts have installed large screen and plasma TV's to keep jurors entertained whilst waiting, and lockers so that they can store valuables whilst in court rooms.

In the County Courts, the number of claims issued has increased by 8% to 954,319. Housing and recovery of land claims continue to rise, up by 15% to 269,431 and the majority of Areas reported a significant increase in the number of personal bankruptcy petitions issued.

Alternative Dispute Resolution continues to be a success in those courts that have implemented the mediation scheme. The Master of the Rolls in April launched a central HMCS 'toolkit' to help courts set up local mediation services. This should lead to a significant increase in mediation activity next year.

In response to concerns from the judiciary last year that national statistics did not accurately reflect the volume of work in the courts, settlement figures for this year are now those used to measure PSA 5 performance on settlements.

This year shows an improvement of 2.3% in the percentage of cases in all tracks being heard within the target time. This is mainly due to an improvement in the more complex multi-track cases, an increase of 2.2% to 77.7% of cases being heard within 50 weeks.

Greater liaison between the county courts and magistrates' courts has been a benefit to both, particularly where courts have been co-located resulting in flexibility in the utilisation of courtrooms and better accommodation facilities.

Unified Administration has been especially advantageous for the Family Proceedings Courts, particularly those which are co-located and on the LINK system as they have seen noticeable improvements in efficiency.

It is encouraging to see that a positive approach has been taken by the courts and CAF/CASS to the Private Law Programme, commenced by the President of the Family Division in July 2004 and on which guidance was issued in January 2005." Several successful schemes are in place to encourage in-court conciliation. A review of the programme over the next year will provide a greater analysis of the successes.

Active judicial case management of Public Law cases is proving to be effective in helping to keep more of these within the 40 week target and enabling closer monitoring and management of the long standing cases.

A commitment to reducing delay has been demonstrated in many Areas by inter-agency conferences through Local Family Justice Councils. This has enabled local issues linked to delay to be discussed and outcomes improved for children through effective partnership working.

All courts continue to be connected to their local communities through active involvement in various outreach projects, including educational establishments of all levels and religious community groups, which is particularly encouraging.

Without the hard work and commitment of all the staff, we would not have had such a successful year. I am extremely grateful to all staff in the courts who remain dedicated to providing a high quality service. We have a challenging agenda of change ahead to transform the way that we deliver justice. I look forward to reporting on how they are progressing in next year's report.



Charlie Falconer