

COUNTY COURT ANNUAL REPORT

APRIL 2002 – MARCH 2003

South Eastern Circuit

His Honour Judge Paul Collins: London Group

Next year the form should ask for details of Court Users meetings held within the year. It should also ask about the arrangements for meetings between the judiciary and the administration. The number of complaints made against each court and the amount of compensation paid out against such complaints should also be recorded. The number of staff at each level leaving during the course of the year should also be noted. The present version is targeted too closely at Court Service business statistics, which are only part of the story of the functioning of courts.

Waiting times should also be included since these are now a key performance indicator. The present forms simply require downloading of business statistics held centrally and are not designed to reflect a real attempt by a court to account for itself in a wider sense.

During the first two weeks of July 2003 I visited all the London county courts (15 including Central London.) While I do not know the precise figures I imagine that they are the county courts for about 15% of the population of England & Wales. CLCJC alone tries about 10% of all multi-track cases heard. Last year's comment still holds good: 'the chronic problems of poor, unmodernised courts, too few experienced staff, substandard working conditions for staff, unintegrated and limited IT systems, absurd paper overload, and lack of sufficient dedicated support for CJ and DJ, mean that disaster is always just around the corner.' Perhaps 'crisis' rather than 'disaster' would be a more sober judgment.

Of all 15 courts, only Barnet, and in a different way, the Mayor's & City of London Court, are adequate for delivering justice in C21. Central London, the flagship court, has excellent courtrooms and hearing rooms, save for a wildly erratic heating system; facilities for the public are adequate. But the staff work under conditions, which are unacceptable in a modern age. The turnover of over 30% of staff in the last year cannot be unrelated. All other courts are deficient to a greater or lesser extent. In some courts (e.g. Romford) the presence of a CJ is necessary. But a one CJ court is an inefficient and unproductive listing unit. However, at Romford there is no space for a second CJ. This has a knock-on effect at Bow, where the CJs are under pressure. In many courts, built for an earlier age, the character and physical layout and capacity of the buildings ceased long ago to be appropriate for a justice system aspiring to modernity.

The first plan, to close most of these courts and replace them by a small number of modern civil justice centres, failed on financial grounds. The second, to strip out non-essential court support staff and have their functions performed at a remote back-office location has run into the sand because of the lack of success of the Walsall pilot. Not surprisingly, the Court Service has not been eager to spend on the courts while these plans were in the air. Decades of underinvestment and neglect have been compounded accordingly. Buildings are shabby and fittings are ancient. Facilities for court users and staff are sparse (Brentford does not even have water coolers for the general office and the public area.) There are, of course, exceptions to this grim picture and courts are not inadequate in every respect. The public access at Woolwich

is bright and welcoming; part of the general office at Edmonton has air-conditioning. But Shoreditch (due for closure at the end of 2005 unless an extension of time can be managed) is like a Victorian prison and Willesden is like a run-down social security office. (This court has probably the worse staffing problems in London. Nobody who has visited it will be surprised.)

The emphasis I have placed on the county court estate this year is for the record, since I am not so naïve as to suppose that adequate funds will be made available to remedy the glaring defects that exist. But the emphasis is necessary, since the condition of the estate is symptomatic of a culture where civil justice is not driven by the same imperatives as other parts of the system, and the extraordinary success of court managers in keeping a leaky ship afloat for another year must give rise to an expectation, perhaps too optimistic, that they will be able to continue to do so. Holding the whole enterprise together with sticking-plaster is not a strategy for improving the delivery of civil justice.

Although much effort is being devoted to planning a new IT infrastructure for the civil courts, the limitations of what currently exists is acutely noticeable in the London Group. On any one day about 30 CJs and 50 DJs sit in the London county courts. Matching large ebbs and flows of civil and family cases to this large number of judges so as to use them to maximum effectiveness is an obvious aspiration. But a programme for centralised listing of all cases of, say, half a day and over, would depend on suitable software. Without it, our listing capability across the group, while continually being worked on and improved, will always be limited. The listing review which I mentioned last year was unable to make any radical recommendations but has identified a number of useful steps that may improve the efficiency of listing across the Group. A full time Group Diary Manager acts as long-term planner, troubleshooter, focus point for booking part time judges and oiler of the mechanism for networking cases across London. This new job has been generally welcomed by managers and judges but is very hard to do well without supporting IT.

About staffing, I said last year: ‘The grim message that the problem of staff retention is the main and not unexpected reason for chronic weakness and repeated crises in London shouts out from the pages of these reports. The lack of continuity, particularly at middle management (EO) level, means that the daily work of the courts generates complaints, delays, and inadequate service to judges and the public.’

This year, the situation is worse. The Group recently had 14 span 4 (EO) vacancies. Only 6 of these were filled in the recent recruitment round. Accordingly, court managers have had no choice but to place on temporary promotion those who are not ready for it, including some who were not successful in their applications for promotion. Willesden has lost its court manager on promotion; the acting manager is moving out on promotion to the PRFD. The Romford Court Manager is coming in to cover at Willesden, leaving Romford short. The Lambeth Court Manager has moved to the Court Funds Office, to be replaced by the manager from Shoreditch, who will be replaced in turn on a temporary basis by the Customer Services manager at CLCJC, who can hardly be spared. Every court has sustained substantial staff turnover in the last 12 months, up to 50%. A disproportionate amount of time has had to be spent by

experienced staff in training newcomers, to the detriment of the ordinary work of the courts. There is no reason to suppose that there will be any positive change next year.

Linda Lennon has successfully taken on the role of Group Manager. It is clear from my discussions with staff and judges that she has their confidence; she is supportive and generous with praise. But she has recently agreed to take managerial responsibility for the ailing Court Funds Office as well. This is far from ideal and is another instance of managerial staff being thinly spread at all levels in the group.

Disturbingly, a picture is emerging across the group of staff being off work, sometimes on a long term basis, because of stress-related illness. In the 12 months to the end of June 2003 the Group lost 7,202 staff hours through sickness; 1832 were recorded as attributable to stress. The administration will be keen to identify the reasons for these figures, but if it should prove that they are work related there will be cause for concern. There may be some small signs that judges in the group may not be immune to the pressures building up.

Security is always of concern. The group has its share of litigants who take up a disproportionate amount to the staff's time. But in the last year CLCJC, Ilford and Edmonton have all been the subject of anonymous attacks and many courts have their stories of litigants who intimidate and threaten junior staff. A group policy for dealing with these people and protecting staff while ensuring that their access to justice is maintained, is desirable. There is also current financial pressure on the provision of security staff, which is under consideration.

I repeat last year's observations that the figures in each court's return should not form a rigid basis for planning – although much work has been devoted to improving their accuracy there is still room for further improvement; also that since so much of the work of some courts is private family, the civil returns alone are not a full indicator of the court's performance. Her Honour Judge Valerie Pearlman has been appointed Designated Family Judge in response to my last report. There will no doubt be an impact of this appointment on some aspects of the despatch of civil business, but it is to be anticipated that we shall work together harmoniously. The experiment of transferring some public law cases from the PRFD for management and trial at Barnet is shortly to begin and extending it elsewhere may be a matter for consideration by the President in due course. An increase in overall sitting days on the Group would be a pre-condition for taking on substantial new work. It has yet to be ascertained what effect the extension of contested S8 Children Act jurisdiction to most DJs is having on the despatch of civil business.

The figures show London work generally within target so far as waiting times are concerned, with some major exceptions, and also so far as turnover of business is concerned. Compensation paid out for administrative errors has fallen. Courts in the Group have developed a much stronger team sense under Linda Lennon's effective leadership so that assistance is readily given by one court to another. Most courts have adapted to the staff turnover problems by training staff to be multi-skilled and abolishing the old county court work section structure. These are significant successes, for which credit must go to the dedicated and determined court managers in the Group, for whom no praise can be too high, and the Group Manager. But they are

not an end in themselves. Their achievement brings courts up to the starting line from which improvements in the quality of work and support for the judiciary can be made. There is no Court Service measurement for this, which should be its real aim.

Last year I reported that morale on the Group was high, despite the problems. It is not possible to be so sanguine this year. I anticipate further losses of the best staff, either to promotion or to the outside world and further difficulties in recruitment and retention.

Important decisions have to be made without delay about the future of Shoreditch and the relocation of West London to the Magistrates' Court building. Staff and judges at these courts (and at Clerkenwell where Shoreditch will presumably be integrated if necessary) are becoming unsurprisingly edgy about planning and decisions being left so late that solutions are rushed and ill thought out and executed. It should be recorded that there has been a significant and welcome improvement in the performance of bailiffs across the group.

His Honour Judge Hull QC: Thames Valley Group

Epsom - We are fortunate in our staff, who are efficient, friendly and well organised. Surrey is now a relatively small part of the Group and the efforts of the Circuit Judges who sit at Kingston and Guildford are principally directed to family work, though they all try civil cases as well. Civil cases on the Multi-track are not transferred to trial centres but, so far as possible, are tried in the courts where they begin. Because I do no family work, Multi-track and Fast-track civil cases are frequently transferred by the Central Listing Office for trial, to Epsom not only from the Surrey courts but also from Reading, Oxford, Slough, Wandsworth etc. The file and bundles often arrive on the morning of the Trial, so that I cannot read the papers in time to manage the cases (if management is required) but otherwise the system works well, and the District Judge here (and elsewhere in the Group) tell me they are very satisfied with the work of the Central Listing Office.

Guildford - Of the Circuit Judges, Judge Cook and Judge Parry have recently retired. District Judge Enzer, whose "productivity" probably exceeded that of any of the other District Judges has also retired. The burden of family work appears to be increasing, and the reduction in the number of Multi-track trials may partly be caused by this.

The District Judges are working great efforts to grapple with difficulties, and I should particularly mention the introduction of a court based ADR scheme, for which District Judge Williams has been primarily responsible, with assistance in particular from District Judge Darbyshire. Guildford sees a great variety of disputes, many of them suitable for ADR.

My impression, which I think is supported by the figures, is that Guildford is a considerable "exporter" of Multi-track trials, in part at any rate caused by the burden of family work and the shortage of Circuit Judges.

Kingston-upon-Thames - This Court is fortunate in its manager and staff: my impression is that morale and efficiency are continuing to improve. It is also

fortunate in its District Judges. The two Circuit Judges, although they try civil cases, are primarily concerned with family work, and my impression is that this is increasingly burdensome and difficult; of course there are many occasions when it has to take priority over other civil work. There are continual rumours that Kingston is to become “part of outer London”; whether or not this occurs, a proper trial centre clearly needed for this and other county courts outside London, if the Woolf Reforms are to have full effect. The Central Listing Office cannot provide a complete alternative to a trial centre.

Reigate - This is a small court with a lot of work, which it carries out efficiently. It is clearly much needed – Reigate and Redhill and their environs are increasingly populous, with a number of social problems. It is a pity that only one District Judge sits, and no Circuit Judge. All Reigate work requiring a Circuit Judge attention, particularly appeals, comes to me at Epsom. I have a high opinion of the District Judge, who is decisive and energetic. There was a suggestion for closing this court a few years ago, which led to considerable protests and has, I hope, been, abandoned altogether.

Staines - Staines is essentially tributary to Kingston as Reigate is to Epsom. It is a pity that more use is not made of this attractive and modern court, which has a better library than the other Surrey courts and three good court rooms. Apart from deputies, the court is manned I believe by almost entirely by the Kingston judges. It is a pity that the “resident District Judge” has not been replaced, and I should also like to see a “resident Circuit Judge”. Like the other courts for which I have responsibility, this court is too small to be an efficient trial centre, and we have a special arrangement under which there are no trial centres, Multi-tracks are tried if possible in their court of origin, and are transferred for trial if necessary by the Central Listing Office which we share with the Oxford Group.

His Honour Judge Coningsby: Kent Group

Croydon - I believe this Court is operating satisfactorily. There is a dedicated staff and good managers. The District Judges have a heavy workload and one has recently gone off sick for 6 weeks. We must make sure that the workload for key members of staff and District Judges does not put them under too much pressure. This means that we cannot manage if there is any further cutting back of sitting days.

Bromley - Much of the above applies to Bromley. Former difficulties are now much improved. Jim Malone’s work at Bromley has been of great value. The reduction in waiting times for small claims from 18.6 weeks to 11 weeks is pleasing. The performance indicators have all improved.

Tunbridge Wells - This Court is working well.

His Honour Judge Kennedy: Sussex Group

There are interesting variations in the Issue, Allocations and Disposal figures for all Courts, which confirm how local conditions and practices vary, also being affected by judicial absences (illness) etc. I read paperwork/disposal returns monthly and discuss

any problems individually with Chief Clerks and try (delicately) to encourage DJ itineraries to permit more consistency of Case Management. Not easy. Multi-Track referrals and local disposal (where possible) seems in balance. I still see all such Brighton issues (without Caseman transfers, unless I retain them) which allows me to isolate and case manage types of claim that need CJ management abilities. Brighton Mediation Pilot is – after 18 months - slowly generating more custom. Our listing times are still, I believe, enviable particularly M/T. All signs of a modest provincial unit that keeps the law accessible locally, I hope it works reasonably well. Generally, I hear if it does not. An enviable state, I do realise, I will therefore not mend it, relying on our Government to do that.

His Honour Judge Charles Harris QC: Oxford Group

Reading – Last year this court was the cause of some anxiety. Happily it appears that there have been considerable improvements since then. Relations between the staff and the District Judges are a lot better, with the latter reporting greater efficiency and better atmosphere under manager Lynn Storey. The general ‘feel’ of the court is certainly more satisfactory, though the building itself remains a pretty unimpressive one. The District Judges report a shortage of Circuit Judge availability, made worst by the heavy pressures of family work., but they are content with the mix of what they find themselves doing. A little more DJ availability is also desirable.

The removal of group wide listing responsibilities from the Reading listing office has helped the group as a whole, and made matters easier for the listing staff here to cope with their remaining responsibilities. I have not had any recent examples of unsuitable late transfers, and liaison with Oxford is good. Listing still seems to have some difficulty in knowing what cases are actually about.

There is a real problem concerning security at this court. I have been told of an incident in which a litigant got before a DJ when carrying a loaded revolver. This was not made manifest in court but was discovered on him shortly after he had left. There is no equipment to help the one security man at the entrance to the building, and I understand that he is not always able to be present. The DJs report real anxieties about committals in their rooms. It is rare for a courtroom to be made available to them for this purpose. There was one, but it was taken (and is little used) for ‘training’. It is desirable that this room be restored to court use.

Slough – I have no comments to make about this court, which does not appear to have any substantial problems.

Oxford – People here have performed remarkably in coping with continuous difficulties in training and replacing staff. It is a virtually permanent strain, and it is really unfair to expect them to remain on top of demanding work while so often training someone else. Despite these difficulties, the court continues to run well, and the return to independent listing has been most beneficial.

Some physical alterations to the judicial quarters (putatively in aid of disabled judges) have produced permanent inconvenience to the unhandicapped, and we await with

considerable trepidation the installation of computers in courtrooms and chambers. The Court Service is threatening to take away from the latter perfectly pleasant and satisfactory furniture and replace it with curved desks said to be 'health and safety compatible'. The judiciary is perfectly content with its present furniture and does not want it replaced. Much money would be wasted, about which the Court Service seems perfectly content.

The Oxford/Thames Valley group as a whole remains a very large one, both geographically and in terms of judicial manpower. It is also diverse. For example, Milton Keynes and Newbury have little in common with each other, still less with Uxbridge or Slough. The (excellent) group management remains shared. It is not a natural unit, however, the component parts are I believe working pretty well.

Uxbridge – There is still a need for more circuit judge days here, a matter which I mentioned last year. 17 days is simply not enough to provide a proper service. It remains unclear whether this court is to remain in the Oxford group or rejoin the London grouping.

Aylesbury – There is no cause for concern here. Work has increased and liaison with Milton Keynes is working satisfactorily.

Milton Keynes – The court here is working well now that it is at full judicial complement and regained control of its own listing.

Banbury – A tiny court in a unsuitable premises, it fills an important local need and is very well run. Substantial staffing difficulties have been valiantly dealt with.

Newbury – This modest court continues to be very well run, with excellent productivity.

His Honour Judge Michael Yelton: East Anglia, Beds and Herts Group

Basildon - This court is unusual in that it has a great deal of interlocutory and small claims work, but acts as a feeder for fast and multi-track work sent to Southend. Because of the proximity of the two courts, that has never been a matter of complaint and seems indeed to work well, particularly with the interchange of DJs between the two courts. There is a great deal of work for the Bailiffs, which may reflect the local areas. It appears that in general all is well on the civil side at Basildon.

Ipswich - All appears to be well at Ipswich and I hope that the new system of trying fast track cases there works to the advantage of all concerned. My own experience is that fast track cases nearly always settle and are far less of a burden than it is imagined that they will be. In addition they can occupy the time of the Circuit Judge if care cases collapse. I was interested in the adoption of a back office system and its subsequent abandonment, which may have lessons for other places.

Colchester - There are significant changes ahead for Colchester with the retirement of Judge Brandt after many years as the regular Judge at the court. I feel it is important to establish as much continuity as possible in the CJ work and I expect to sit at Colchester myself about 6 weeks a year with effect from next April. The box work at

Colchester is handled with exemplary efficiency, but the new arrangements will require additional assistance from another DJ as soon as possible.

Chelmsford - All appears to be well at Chelmsford and I was pleased to see on my recent visit that the new chambers for a DJ are almost complete. It was agreed at that meeting that Fast Track cases should continue to be sent to Colchester because of the lack of accommodation at Chelmsford for hearings: this is attributable to the very high volume of care work. I look forward to working with the new DFJ when he or she is appointed.

His Honour Judge Fanworth: East Anglia, Beds and Herts Group

Hertford/Hitchin/Bedford/St. Albans - There is a common theme in relation to problems arising from staff changes - as at the larger courts in the Group. It is disappointing to hear that there will be further delays in the court's modernisation programme - so the pressure on retaining trained and experienced staff continues. I will be visiting Hertford, Hitchin, Bedford and St. Albans court in the near future as none now have any Circuit Judge sittings.

Having sat at Hertford some years ago, I recall the inadequacies of the judicial chambers - and hope that the shortcomings will be dealt with soon. The court at Hertford is to be congratulated on its Charter Mark. I also recall security issues at Bedford in the past. I would hope that 5:00pm closing does not become inflexible as finishing a case by sitting a little later often saves considerable sums in costs for the parties. I am conscious of the continuing efforts of staff to meet the workload - both civil and family - this is much appreciated by the judiciary at all levels. In particular, I commend the initiatives in listing arrangements and with sharing workloads.

Luton - Through the year the pressure of the court being both a busy Care Centre as well as the Civil Trial Centre has presented a challenge to both Judiciary and Court Service. I have been very impressed with the staff response which has been unflinching in providing cheerful assistance. Emphasis on training has been a positive factor in getting through the work. Listing arrangements have worked well - and there has been a good response to the listing meetings. Everyone concerned deserves credit for the reduction in hearing times for small claims, which should set the standard for the Group. The Court Manager and her team are to be congratulated on their efforts throughout the past year.

Watford - From sitting at Watford I am aware of the problems with staff turnover in what is a busy court - which carries a high, care workload. However it has proved possible to continue providing the Circuit Judges with civil work, which affords a break from Care / Family lists. I note the reduction in Small Claims hearing times, but would hope further reductions can be obtained in the coming year. There has been useful work in listing arrangements with Luton and other courts, which has assisted everyone.

His Honour Judge O'Brien: East Anglia, Beds and Herts Group

Peterborough - This has been another excellent year in terms of productivity, performance and effectiveness and all the staff are to be congratulated on this. The reduction in claims issued is not as great as the norm. I am slightly mystified by a considerable reduction in small claims hearings, which is against the trend in other courts in my group. However it is good to see that this court also shows an excellent increase (68%) in cases settled. The concern last year about the transfer of fast track cases from so large a population centre to Cambridge is now being addressed and I trust that most fast track cases will be tried locally in Peterborough in the coming year.

Norwich - Difficult to compare statistics for this year with previous year as many cases not allocated in the previous year are now allocated to track. Claims issued show a straight increase of 0.3% against a general reduction of 5%. Shows public confidence in this court. Both Productivity and Performance were up on last year's good figures and significantly better than average. This despite the unfortunate increases in absence due to sickness.

I am still concerned at the absence of any statistics for appeals from DJ to CJ. This is an important part of my work. My impression is that the decrease in appeals noted last year has changed to an increase. I cannot explain the increase. I suspect the small number of successful appeals has remained about the same.

Fast track trials from feeder courts have continued to be tried in Norwich save for very exceptional circumstances but this has changed subsequently. This court is functioning well thanks to the efforts of both staff and judiciary and the co-operation between them.

Harlow - It is always a pleasure to visit this Court. I am unsurprised by the excellent productivity and performance statistics and the low sick absence rate. The Charter Mark Award is richly deserved. I am slightly concerned about the considerable statistical inconsistency in the number of claims issued. The Court's own records show 3325 - a 12% increase - compared with the Circuit's figure of 2865 - a 5% increase. I shall assume that the local record is the more reliable. On either figure the increase against the norm reflects public confidence in this Court. Small Claims hearings have increased considerably from 192 to 282. Despite this the waiting time from allocation to hearing has improved marginally.

The apparently vast increase in settlements must be partly the result of under reporting in the previous year but is still very encouraging and no doubt reflects efficient case management. I note that there were 13 days of DJ sitting time allocated but not used. This could prove a useful judicial resource as Fast Track cases begin to be case managed and tried at this Court in the coming year.

Kings Lynn - I am sorry that I have still not found an occasion to visit this well run court. I have discussed the statistics and overall situation with the Court Manager. We have identified no particular problem. Although no Fast Track cases were tried here in this year, I have now arranged that they should be in future, so avoiding a 40-mile trip to the Civil Trial Centre at Norwich.

The Court Manager has explained the 15% increase in claims issued. The 7-week average for allocation to hearing of Small Claims is very satisfactory. Absence through sickness continues to be astonishingly low (0.6%). This is achieved by a happy and efficient staff who are to be congratulated on excellent results and the award of the Charter Mark.

Huntingdon - This is a small efficient Court exemplifying "small is beautiful". The 6.4% increase in claims issued indicates public confidence. This has caused a considerable increase in cases allocated to Small Claims-33%, from 157 to 209-and a very considerable increase in Small Claims hearings-85% from 60 to 111. This may require the allocation of further DJ sitting time, although it is much to the credit of both staff and judiciary that this considerable increase in claims heard has only caused the waiting time to increase marginally from 6.8 to 7 weeks.

The number of cases settled is quite low. The increase of 233% is only an increase from 3 to 10. The overall picture of 209 claims allocated, 111 heard and only 10 settlements is out of line with the increased settlement rate in other Courts. I hope there is scope for improvement here and will discuss the matter with DJ Blomfield. I congratulate the staff on a good year's work coping with an increasing caseload.

Bury St. Edmunds - Although I have not found an occasion to visit this court this year, I continue to receive good feedback from the Cambridge District Judges who provide most of the sittings. There has been a further (3.7%) increase in the claims issued this year. This is against a norm of 5% decrease. I assume that this is an indication of consumer confidence in this well run court. The 12% increase in hearings of small claims appears to have resulted in a slight increase in time from allocation to hearing up to 8.2 weeks.

I should like to make some progress in the coming year to the local hearing of fast track trials in this court. Of itself this should be accommodated without any significant increase of District Judge sitting time but taken together with the increased number of small claims being heard may require some slight increase in days allotted for District Judges. I have identified no particular problem and congratulate the staff on a good year's work.

Cambridge - Although I maintain a cynicism about statistics and particular anxiety about the form in which these statistics are kept, they do reveal a very remarkable change in the pattern of civil justice at Cambridge in this reporting year. Claims issued (4,681) were marginally down (1.8. %) but this is less than the norm of 5%. Allocations to track (1039) were down 9% against a norm, which I can only guess was marginally up. Given the increased pressure to allocate to track rather than leave e.g. assessment of damages as unallocated, our result is rather surprising.

The really dramatic change is seen in the comparative figures for trials and settlements. Allowing for the error in last year's multi-track trials figure (98 not 26), the number of trials has dropped by a massive 39% from 671 to 410 while the number of settlements has increased by a gigantic 187% from 239 to 685. In result the number

of cases disposed of by settlement or trial rose by 20% from 910 to 1,095. The increase was, of course, entirely achieved by the settlement rate.

What are the reasons for this? Our court manager kindly attributes it to effective case management by the judiciary. I hope and believe that this is a major factor. It plainly cannot be the whole story. I suspect that the judiciary's failure to restrain the cost of litigation adequately and some economic downturn forcing litigants to be more realistic about costs has also played a part.

The above does explain how we managed to run civil justice in Cambridge with greatly reduced judicial sitting: C.Js down 18% from 234 to 188 days and D.Js down 17.5% from 663 to 547 days.

Our helpful staff are to be congratulated on increases in productivity and performance both of which are above the norm. Bearing in mind the pressures, under which they work the reduction in sick absence, now well below the norm, is another indication of how well they are functioning. Co-operation between judiciary and staff is a particular feature of this court.

Although some of my anxieties expressed last year about the statistics have been allayed – no wrong figures this year; disposals without allocation should no longer happen; judicial sitting days are those on which a judge was engaged predominantly in civil work – I am still concerned that there are no statistics from appeals from D.J to C.J – an important part of my work and perhaps some guide to quality and the settlements figure is not broken down between the 3 tracks. Finally, in conjunction with court managers, I am tackling the problem of local trial of fast track cases and hope to report progress next year.

Midland Circuit

His Honour Judge Brunning: East Midlands Group

The contribution made by the courts in the group continues to be of great importance. Derby is a busy centre and under the leadership of a dynamic Court Manager has considerably improved the quality of its work and its speed of response. It is quite clear to me from feedback at Court User meetings at Derby that the profession is very satisfied with the speed and standard of the office performance. Listing is in capable hands, and under the overall guidance of the Diary Manager Derby takes its full share of the civil hearing workload on this group.

Mansfield is an indispensable adjunct to the efficient dispatch of business. It is a busy well-run court and provides essential courtroom space for Civil as well as Family work. Nottingham would not be able to cope with its own workload if Mansfield were unavailable.

Burton on Trent has the best courtroom on the group. It would be good to be able to use it for Fast and Multi-track trials, but difficulties with accommodation for District Judges makes this very problematical. Burton's capable staff provides valuable

assistance to other courts in dealing with the burdens of paperwork which civil business generates, when workloads elsewhere become too heavy from time to time.

Buxton, this outpost in the North, works steadily and reliably, and provides important local facilities for the North West of Derbyshire. Chesterfield likewise continues to support the work of the group and its facilities and hardworking staff contribute significantly to overall efficiency.

Those who work at Nottingham continue to maintain the high standards, which make it an efficient court, which provides excellent service to the public and legal profession. It continues however, to be a puzzle why nothing is done to improve the inadequate facilities that are unworthy of such a busy and important centre. Despite the allocation of additional DJ days the district bench still has to cope with a workload significantly higher than that elsewhere. Accommodation is insufficient and substandard, with waiting areas cramped and shabby. There is not so far, accommodation for the extra DJ.

The Circuit Judges work at opposite ends of a very large building, attempting to cope with workloads which are onerous. If one judge wishes to speak personally to the other a walk of 250 yards is required. More judicial time is required to ensure that the heavier cases, of which there are many, can start on time rather than after a lengthy delay whilst other work is done. Despite its importance and ability to attract work, Nottingham continues to be neglected by the Administration.

Tribute must be paid to the staff who have worked splendidly to support the judicial team. The staff labour on in poorly lit warehouse conditions, maintaining morale and working with great efficiency. We all hope that we may one day be provided with facilities worthy of an important centre.

His Honour Judge Richard Inglis: East Midlands Group

This is a report for Lincoln County Court and its 5 feeder courts, Boston, Skegness, Grantham, Newark and Worksop. The decline in civil work coming to trial has been offset by the need to develop techniques of effective case management. That means a substantial increase in telephone hearings and also a significant development in the use of video link facilities. The Group has enjoyed a period of being staffed by a full complement of District Judges. That advantage has combined with a low staff turnover to enable good teamwork to deliver a high standard of service

Full District Judge staffing, and the geographical isolation of Lincolnshire have combined to reduce the need to rely upon part time judges. Recorders, in particular, are of little use unless they can sit in private family law cases as well as in the civil work of the County Court. I believe that this may be true in other parts of the country. If Courts like Lincoln County Court are to play their proper part in giving experience to Recorders, then training needs to be better managed so that those who become ticketed in one of the jurisdictions quickly have the opportunity to train in the other.

The tension between providing for the despatch of civil business and meeting the needs of increasing family work, especially public law work, has so far been ably

managed by the Diary Manager, and the subject of co-operation between me and the Designated Family Judge. If there were to be an upturn in civil work, particularly if sitting days are to be reduced, real problems could arise. The fate of the small courts in the medium term is still uncertain. The staff in those courts work cheerfully and with dedication despite the uncertainty hanging over them. I should like to express my thanks to all the staff at Lincoln and its feeder courts for all their hard work in the last year.

His Honour Judge Hugh Mayor QC: East Midlands Group

I continue to be concerned about the significant differences, which exist between Leicester and Northampton. Possibly these will reduce now that more DJs sit in both centres. In Leicester almost twice as many claims were issued as in Northampton (10560 against 5403) and the ratio of issues to allocations is not significantly different (18% against 20%). The number of trials on the three tracks taken together was 858 in Leicester and 356 in Northampton and the same numbers settled or were withdrawn in the two centres. Yet the number of Judge days of all ranks sat was 850 against 735.

Further, the imbalance between the two centres in terms of allocations continues to exist. Allocations to the fast and multi-tracks in Leicester amount to a little over half of SCT allocations. In Northampton, they amount to almost one and a half times the SCT allocations. It is not easy to see why these significant differences in judicial workload and productivity and in allocations (and therefore in costs among other things) should exist. Perhaps a comparison between both of these centres and others nearby (Nottingham and Oxford) and centres of similar size further away would be useful. Moreover differences such as between Leicester and Northampton may be occurring all over the jurisdiction, which would indicate that the CPR has not achieved uniformity of practice.

I am slightly alarmed by the number of DDJ days sat in Leicester and the number of Recorder and Deputy CJ days sat at Northampton. DDJs vary but are never as efficient as DJs and often fail to help adequately with paperwork. Similarly with Recorders and Deputy CJs, with the added considerations that they rarely have all the necessary 'tickets' and that there is pressure from more CJs to sit in the Leicester County Court than can be accommodated. Why can't they sit in Northampton?

Judges and staff on this group work hard and efficiently and it may be unfair to pick anyone out for special mention but the job of the Diary Manager is both essential and difficult and Gurdev Notay has performed it extremely well during the absence, on maternity leave, of Christine Goodey. Shortly Justine Blackwell takes over as Acting Diary Manager and I have every confidence that she will be as successful.

Importantly, relations between judiciary and staff are good. The more I see of the conduct of civil litigation post the procedural reforms, the more I believe that close co-operation between the two is essential to efficiency. Judges should be seen often in the office; and staff should be encouraged to feel that Judges are approachable. On this group this appears to work well.

His Honour Judge Rubery: Staffs/West Mercia Group

Over the last 12 months there has been a significant amount of ill health amongst the judiciary with District Judge Weston and his subsequent retirement, my own period of ill health that prevented me sitting at some of the courts on the Group as frequently as I would have liked and finally with District Judge Stevens currently absent following treatment for cancer. Unfortunately Judge Stevens is unlikely to be back at work until November this has impacted on the judiciary at Stoke on Trent who are positively tackling the additional workload as well as taking on additional work to assist in Family work.

District Judge Chapman has now settled in and provided the much needed continuity for Stoke and Tamworth courts and a replacement for District Judge Weston has now been appointed i.e. District Judge Rogers. From my own personal view, a reduction in the number of TBA judges and ratio of recorders to full time judiciary would improve listing/sittings by providing more continuity. Further problems can arise if it is not known if the recorder has also the necessary ticket.

The listing on my Group was carried out well by the Diary Manager, Amanda Lowndes who, by liaising with listing officers, counsel, solicitors and judges made best use of available time and met all the deadlines. Alex Ferrari, the Court Manager at Stoke on Trent Combined Court retired on the 1 May 2003 and I pay tribute to all that Alex did during her 8 years at Stoke. She will be a hard act to follow but I have every confidence in her successor, Sue Hooper whose positive approach I am sure will continue to take the court through the forthcoming changes and challenges that face us all. To conclude it will help if the ergonomics of the Unified Administration are resolved as soon as possible as the uncertainty impacts heavily on court morale.

His Honour Judge Geddes: Staffs/West Mercia Group

Performance at each court appears to be satisfactory. Please extend my thanks to all staff.

His Honour Judge Olivier-Jones: West Mids/Warwickshire Group

The year has seen some notable achievements including the promotion of the Group Manager, Donna Ponsonby, to Acting Circuit Administrator, the awarding of Charter Mark accreditation to four more County Courts, and the successful management and 'proving' (at least in principle) of the objectives of the Walsall Business and Hearing Centre Pilot Scheme. In addition the Group now has a new Acting Diary Manager, Neil Law, who is on temporary promotion from Birmingham. The former Diary Manager, Andrea Lloyd, also achieved temporary promotion to Officer Manager at Walsall County Court. On a personal note, I wish to commend both for their efforts, and for keeping me closely informed on a day-to-day basis with a view to securing the best possible use of the judicial and accommodation resources available. In singling out these individuals I would not wish it to be thought that I am anything other than very grateful for the continuing and unreserved support of all Court Managers and the

staff at each court, particularly those who undertake duties, such as clerking, over-and-above those which are included in their formal job descriptions.

The statistics provided by Court Managers reveal that during the period covered by this Report, the Circuit and District Judges on the Group managed 3,631 cases altogether after allocation, with 2,133 cases being disposed of by way of hearings. Of these, just over 1,700 were hearings of Small Claims, 294 were dealt with on the Fast Track and 135 were Multi-Track trials lasting between one and six days (with a majority being in the 1-2 day range).

However, some of the statistics that have been provided, whilst accurately showing planned profiles, do not reveal reality 'at the coal face'. For example, both Stourbridge and Nuneaton County Courts' figures suggest that a Circuit Judge never sat at those Courts during the year. This is far from the reality. Stourbridge County Court Staff have done sterling work in handling a number of civil jury trials for which the courtroom at Stourbridge is well suited. Training of staff at Stourbridge for this particular type of litigation, coupled with the experience they have gained in actually handling the cases (46 days during the year viz. over nine working weeks), has resulted in a valuable body of developing expertise.

Nuneaton County Court has, as in the previous year, been used to accommodate trials and other hearings, which cannot be accommodated in Coventry (or elsewhere!). This imposes a significant burden on the small staff at Nuneaton – but, I should add, not one which they are either unwilling or unable (at present) to handle. For reasons that are well known, there have been hardly any civil hearings by Circuit Judges/Recorders in Coventry despite its status as a Trial Centre. The position remains as intolerable as it was last year. Coventry County Court and District Registry cases are being tried wherever they can be accommodated, and only very occasionally in Coventry itself (at the Magistrates' Court building – itself less than satisfactory for the purpose). The obvious adverse effects of this state of affairs is that, as Designated Civil Judge, I can have very little direct contact with the District Judges in Coventry, and litigants are required to travel far and wide to have their cases heard with consequent increases in costs and delay.

On 6th November Lord Justice May visited both Walsall and Nuneaton County Court. His report of that visit highlighted the unacceptability of the arrangements for civil justice on the Group and the structural unsoundness. Notwithstanding the effective non-existence of a Trial Centre at Coventry, court staff across all of the courts on the Group have worked extremely hard to minimise the unavoidable disruption caused by this serious resource problem. Particular credit goes to the Listing Officers and to the Diary Managers. Also, and again notwithstanding the lack of a proper civil trial courtroom in Coventry, it must not be forgotten that the court staff and District Judges there, are responsible for undertaking an enormous workload. Altogether Coventry sat 772 civil District Judge days between April 2002 and March 2003. Coventry County Court achieved a well-deserved Charter Mark during the year, reflecting the efforts of staff and managers.

During the course of the year, a number of District Judges have been conducting Fast Track Trials at Feeder Courts (as well as at Walsall and Coventry). I have encouraged

this as it provides District Judges with valuable experience of conducting trials, and allows for the occasional release of a Multi-Track case. I am particularly relieved to know that Rugby County Court, which is one of the feeder courts where fast track trials are conducted, is not only surviving, but taking on extra burdens and continuing to utilise the valuable asset of the nearby Magistrates' Court. Rugby was one of the courts, which gained the Charter Mark accreditation, due to the determined efforts of staff under sound and dedicated management. I draw particular attention to the comments of the Court Manager, Liz Windridge, in her Annual Report, where she points out that:

"The court continues to sit at the Magistrates' Court and is a great success with many representatives expressing the views that it is a more formal atmosphere and now feels like a court."

In these times of modernisation and unification, it is, I believe, important to remember that the public expect, and have a right to expect, that their disputes will be resolved with that degree of formality which is a mark of the 'due administration of justice'. The Trial Centre at Walsall really has seen a very busy year with daily challenges consequent upon the Business Centre Pilot. Never has Walsall seen so many distinguished visitors including Lords Justices, High Court Judges, Circuit Judges and politicians! The reason they came was to see the Business Centre in action. The project has served to underline the enormous value of the Judiciary working closely with court management and staff to ensure a seamless operation. Particular credit must go to District Judge Gailey, whose involvement from 'day-one' justified his promotion to the Project Board team (and to the daunting prospect of addressing all of the DCJs at their annual conference in May!).

Notwithstanding some of the practical limitations which the Business Centre Pilot has revealed, all, essentially, frustrating 'IT limitations' (such as inadequate band width for the servers), the principle underlying the pilot has been proved. Unfortunately unless and until the Civil Court Modernisation Programme is properly resourced financially, the obvious advantages of e-diaries, e-accounting, e-scanning and the Electronic File, will remain out of reach, and civil justice will not move into the fast lane where it deserves to be for the benefit of the communities served by County Courts. I cannot leave the 'Walsall Pilot' without mentioning the magnificent way in which staff at Walsall have responded to the serious disruption of their workplace, both physically and in terms of staffing movements. Again, clear and effective management leadership has proved to be the key to the success of the pilot in terms of its human resourcing.

No Group is complete without its 'Feeder Courts'. As I have said on many occasions they provide an essential service to local communities, not least in the effective enforcement of judgments through local bailiffs. Although regularly visited by District Judges, Circuit Judges rarely sit in feeder court locations. Dudley County Court provides an exception (as, of course, for the reasons set out above, do Nuneaton and Stourbridge). In the course of the year I made a particular visit to Warwick County Court (even though I was trying a criminal case in the Shire Hall!). I was impressed with the obvious knowledge and experience of staff. I was also very grateful for the highlighting of both general and particular issues relating to enforcement processes, as

a result of which I was able to provide some guidance to all courts on the Group where otherwise the issues may not have been identified.

Although Stratford-upon-Avon County Court is one of the smaller feeder courts, it is noteworthy that under Jane George's management, the workload is increasing but performance is still maintained. There is remarkable performance on KPI3 and bailiff process returns. The statistics for Wolverhampton County Court are proof of the vitality of this Feeder Court. During the year there were over 230 small claims hearings dealt with in Wolverhampton in addition to regular case-management and family work, even with a reduction of 37.6% in allocations to the small claims track as a direct result of the huge increase in claims settled or withdrawn before trial, and a relatively high proportion of inexperienced staff. Jacqui Grosvenor's comments are particularly noteworthy, and demonstrate the acute difficulties of balancing scarce resources. Whilst the demands of the Crown Court are very important, the allocation of resources to civil and family work must not suffer in consequence. This is recognised in the Annual Report, and is a familiar problem for Jane Barton who has recently moved from her role as Court Manager at Coventry to Wolverhampton Combined Court Centre. In the not too distant future I would certainly like to see the re-establishment of a County Court courtroom for the trial of civil cases in Wolverhampton.

In the last year I have instituted a system of monthly statistical reporting, directly to me by the Diary Manager, on the disposal of fast track and multi-track claims by trial or settlement. This has revealed a steady increase in the number of cases allocated to these tracks but not finally tried or settled. Part of this increase is accounted for by the fact that 'disposal hearings', which were formerly not allocated, must now be allocated if hearings are likely to last for more than 30 minutes. At the beginning of April 2002 there were 923 cases which had been allocated and listed for trial or were awaiting listing for trial on these tracks. By April 2003 this number had risen to 1,242, of which 53% were multi-track claims. Provided that settlement rates remain, as they have been, these claims can be dealt with by careful use of existing resources. If settlement rates fall (and there is some indication of this in fast track cases) then trial windows will not be met. In the coming year I intend to focus attention on ADR in multi-track claims with a view to maintaining, or increasing, the settlement rates particularly in areas such as land and boundary disputes which tend to command a disproportionate use of court and judicial resources.

I am grateful to each of the Court Managers who have provided reports for their individual courts. In this compendium report I have attempted to highlight themes common to them all, and select particular matters that mark their individuality.

His Honour Judge Alistair G MacDuff: West Mids/Warwickshire Group

Last October, I was able to begin my report with the following words: "For the first time since I was appointed DCJ (Spring 2000), there is a real feeling of optimism – that the enormous problems of administering a large civil court centre are being overcome. Certainly I personally look forward to the future with more optimism and high expectation than I would have thought possible six or months ago."

At that time, Malcolm Bennett was relatively new to the post of court manager, and we were only just beginning to reap the rewards of the changes, which he had instigated. I noted that the essential work of the court was being done more efficiently and speedily than at any time since the inception of the Civil Procedure Rules and that there had been massive improvements in all areas of work.

Since then, we have had to endure ever greater reductions in staffing levels, and yet, as the statistics show, we are now performing much more efficiently than I had hoped or expected. Moreover, this improved performance has not been done at the expense of work quality. On the contrary, quality of work has improved in parallel with improved measured performance.

In my last report, I highlighted the areas where improvements had occurred. These included: Keeping the work up to date, and not building big backlogs; Quality of orders; DJ listing; File preparation. I was able to note that we were not constantly on the receiving end of moans both from within (judges complaining to me about inefficiencies) and from without (moans at Court Users' meetings), and that the improvement had been achieved by careful management and the concentration of limited resources in the correct parts of the system. Much unnecessary work had been cut out so that productive work was being done at the expense of peripheral window dressing.

This has been a continuing trend, and the optimism, which I expressed nine months ago, has been shown to be well founded. This is due almost entirely to the excellent management of the Court Manager and other senior managers. It almost beggars belief that we have lost 26 staff during the last 12 months, whilst, at the same time, improving measurable performance, and the quality of the work, as well as seeing an improvement in staff morale. In the main, this has been achieved by streamlining many of our processes, finding simpler more efficient (and time saving) ways of achieving certain tasks, and cutting out many inessential tasks and so-called "initiatives" (that which I called "peripheral window dressing") which did not form part of the core work of the court. It goes without saying (though I will say it) that it has also been achieved with the help of a team of dedicated judges; in particular we have a magnificent team of hard working District Judges who are ever helpful in working long hours, and are available to assist staff with all sorts of problems.

The message which I have to impart this year is, however, very different. I believe that we have exhausted (or nearly so) that which can be achieved by the above "streamlining processes". We have cut back to the bone. There are few, if any, more economies to make. Thus far, our budget for next year has not been set, but the signs are not good. It is certain that we will be required to reduce staffing levels even further. Whilst reducing staff will no doubt lead to a cosmetic improvement in productivity, it is my view that real performance (waiting times, quality of work and throughput) will plummet. My worry is that within a very short space of time, we could lose all that we have gained, and will have to face the prospect of starting all over again.

My views that the future is less bright for Birmingham Civil Justice Centre are reinforced by the following:

I have the real impression that there is a determination on the part of senior managers to achieve these economies at all cost, that the sanctity of the budget and achievement of unrealistic productivity is the main (almost exclusive) driving force. We may lose, in the next few months up to three of our very best senior (span 6) managers. They will be difficult to replace. We already have a span 6 vacancy, and we were unable to fill it after a recent advertisement because of the lack of a suitable candidate. These three managers are key employees.

We have already lost a significant number of experienced staff members (mainly span three) who have been replaced by casual staff. Numbers can deceive; an experienced employee can do the job more efficiently than a newly appointed casual. Staff experience levels have gone down considerably in recent months. I believe it will be impossible to maintain the throughput figures, waiting times etc and maintain the current levels of performance with even fewer staff. Excluding bailiffs, staffing levels have reduced from 181 to 155, in the last 12 months. I also fear that the cracks are just beginning to show, and that we are beginning to experience the first signs that the quality of work is slipping. There is no hard evidence, just the impression that the odd mistake is becoming a little more frequent.

There remains the difficulty that we have too few courtrooms and have to use outlying courts to accommodate our work. This causes organisation problems, as well as listing problems. We can only send out, say, one case to a particular court. If it settles at the door, there is no other work and the judge goes home. It is impossible to overstate how much extra time and effort this causes. I believe many hundreds of hours per week are spent which, if all cases were kept within the Court Centre, would not be needed. Incidentally this time is not “counted” for BMS purposes, so we have to “carry” this work as uncounted extras within our inadequate budget.

Last year, I also said “There is, of course, the problem that it remains difficult to recruit and keep good staff. We still have a high rate of staff defection, with the result that we get new inexperienced under-trained people. We overcome this by concentrating the good experienced staff in the correct places. There is always a shortage of resources, and we rely heavily on the good will of the judiciary, particularly the District Judges; most work well beyond the call of duty.” This remains true.

And I said “I also believe that the improvement in court performance can be attributed to the excellent work of six or seven key senior managers. The loss of any one of these would be a serious blow, and would create real problems.” We may be about to lose three of them. As things stand I am full of praise for what has been achieved, and full of apprehension for the coming year.

Wales and Chester Circuit

His Honour Judge Halbert: North Wales and Chester Group

The statistics show a considerable increase in the workload for the year. Across the group there has been an increase in cases allocated for trial of just over 2-½ %.

However, this relatively modest overall increase masks a more important change. There has been a slight decrease in small claims cases from 2303 to 2201 but this is more than offset by an increase in fast track and multi track cases of about 12 ¾%. Given that fast and multi track trials take much longer to try and require substantially more pre trial time and given the constraints on resources, an increase of this magnitude represents a significant challenge for the future.

The position is also affected by the ever increasing demands for judicial time for family cases, particularly care cases. These are not directly reflected in the statistics accompanying this report but do have a significant effect on the hearing of civil cases since they demand resources which are shared with the disposal of civil cases. By way of illustration, of between 1100 and 1200 sitting days by Circuit Judges this year, over 800 were sittings in relation to family cases. Against that background, the disposal of work shows an encouraging trend. The number of cases tried in the year rose by 115, an increase of about 6% and this was achieved despite a reduction of almost 4 ½% in civil case sitting days by Circuit and District Judges.

Chester Civil Justice Centre - Chester is the regional trial centre for the whole of Cheshire and North Wales and its work reflects both its own local caseload and a large number of cases, mostly multi track trials, transferred from the 5 other courts in Cheshire and 6 in North Wales. It is a well equipped modern building containing 4 courts and three hearing rooms. There are normally two and frequently three Circuit Judges or Recorders sitting and three District Judges or Deputy District Judges. The centre also provides almost all the specialist sittings (Chancery, Commercial and Technology and Construction Courts). Sittings of the High Court are also accommodated here.

A major achievement this year for Chester Civil Justice Centre was the attainment of the Charter Mark for service to the public, a well deserved award reflecting a great deal of very good work done by all the staff under the management of Mr Clive Grant.

The statistics reflect those of the group at large but the increase in the heavier cases is considerably more marked. The total number of civil cases allocated rose from 852 to 935, an increase of almost 10%. The decrease in small claims cases allocated is more than offset by increases in fast track and multi track cases which are up by 35% and 21% respectively. These increases are substantially greater than the national average.

The number of sitting days has remained approximately constant despite the increase in workload. Against that background an average of 7.6 weeks from allocation to hearing in fast track cases, well ahead of the national average and well within targets, is pleasing. So is the increase in the number of cases heard from 422 to 466. The continuing increase in workload, particularly its concentration in fast and multi track cases, represents a substantial challenge for the future but I have every confidence that the Civil Justice Centre will continue to provide the public with an excellent facility.

Northwich - Northwich is a busy court in the town centre. There are no sittings by Circuit Judges but a District Judge sits approximately 2 days per week. The change in allocations reflects the trend elsewhere, as does the record of case disposal. Trials dealt with increased from 115 to 148 despite a decrease in sitting days from 99 to 94.

Northwich has also achieved its Charter Mark this year, which reflects good work by the staff under the management of Mrs J. Smith.

Crewe - Crewe is also a busy town centre court. It is housed in a small but modern section of the Magistrates' Court building. It has a small courtroom and a single hearing room, which is used by District and Deputy District Judges who have sat for 141 days this year on civil work. There are some Circuit Judge sittings but all this year have been allocated to family cases. There have been significant difficulties this year with staffing levels at Crewe caused largely by long term illnesses. However, intervention from Chester has been able to reduce the impact on service to the public to the extent that the Court has recently been awarded its Charter Mark, a remarkable achievement in the circumstances.

Warrington - Warrington is one of the major court centres in the area. The County Court is housed in a modern and well equipped Combined Court building which also houses the Crown Court. The County Court has one large and one small courtroom as well as two chambers rooms for district judges. The Court is a care centre and has its own Designated Family Judge who also undertakes some Circuit Judge sittings in civil cases. As in most of the courts in the group, the statistics show an increase in the civil case workload. There has been a reduction of multi track allocations from 67 to 56 but total allocations have increased from 466 to 521 an increase of almost 12%. Despite a decrease in civil sitting days from 352 to 341 the rate of case disposal has remained constant at 139 cases tried.

Macclesfield - Macclesfield is an important court centre which now has two District Judges sitting on most days. There are also some sittings by Circuit Judges. The accommodation has been somewhat unsatisfactory in that the courtrooms are in a different building some distance from the court office in Silk House. However it is expected that early in 2004 two new hearing rooms will be provided at Silk House which will provide all the facilities required in one building.

Even with the old facilities a high standard of service to the public has been maintained and this was reflected in the grant of the Charter Mark. This reflects a great deal of effort by all the staff under the leadership of the Court Manager, Mr. John Moss. The statistics show a very significant increase in workload. Allocations have increased in all three tracks. Total allocations are up from 444 to 537, an increase of 21%. Against that background it is encouraging that trials heard increased from 259 to 280 despite a slight decrease in the number of civil sitting days from 322 to 319.

Runcorn - Runcorn is a relatively small court housed in a building at one end of the Runcorn Shopping City and shared with the Magistrates' Court. There is one courtroom and one District Judge's room. There are no sittings by Circuit Judges but there is a resident District Judge.

The statistics at Runcorn reflect the overall pattern. There has been a 21% reduction in small claim allocations but fast and multi track allocations have increased 41% and 78% respectively with the result that the total number of allocations remains unchanged. The increase in multi track and fast track cases represents a considerable increase in the workload. Disposal rates have however increased dramatically. The

total number of trials has more than doubled from 23 to 57 while the number of sitting days has risen only about 25% from 84 to 103.

Wrexham - Wrexham is by far the largest centre of population in East North Wales. The Court occupies a suite on the second floor of a large office building close to the town centre and adjacent to the Police Station and the Magistrates' Court. The facilities are adequate rather than ideal. There is a small courtroom and a District Judge's hearing room. There are two District Judges who sit regularly and some sittings by Circuit Judges.

The workload is considerable. There have been slight reductions in small claims and multi track allocations almost offset by an increase in fast track allocations resulting in a very slight decrease in overall allocations from 371 to 366. A significant achievement for Wrexham Court was the award, in June 2002, of the Charter Mark for excellence in public service, a well deserved award reflecting a great deal of hard work by the staff under the leadership of the Court Manager, Mrs. Ann Green.

Mold - Mold is a small court housed on the top floor of the Crown Court building on the Shire Hall complex about a mile from the town centre. The Magistrates' Courts also use the building. There are no sittings by Circuit Judges in civil cases at Mold but there are regular sittings by District Judges.

Against the overall trend there is a reduction in overall allocations from 273 to 223 but the disposal rates are very good showing an increase in cases tried from 135 to 161 while sitting days have increased only minimally from 127 to 128. A significant achievement for Mold Court was the award, in March 2003, of the Charter Mark for excellence in public service, a well deserved award reflecting a great deal of hard work by the staff under the leadership of the Court Manager, Mrs Jackie Rogers.

Welshpool and Newtown - This is a very small court and office with a very small staff but it provides a vital service to the residents of the northern part of Mid Wales. The present building is close to the town centre of Welshpool and has one small courtroom and a district judge's hearing room. There are regular sittings by District Judges and some Circuit Judge sittings. There are proposals in the longer term to close the present building and replace it with a new Combined Court Centre at Newtown.

For such a small staff the workload is considerable. Allocations overall have remained roughly constant at 84 (87 last year) though allocations to the multi track have more than doubled. A significant achievement for Welshpool this year was the achievement of the Charter Mark which reflects a great deal of effort by the staff and in particular the Court Manager, Mrs. Liz McCarthy.

Rhyl - Rhyl is an extremely busy town centre court with one courtroom and one District Judge's hearing room. Rhyl is also a Regional Care Centre with a Designated Family Judge. Its workload of care cases is so heavy that it has a significant impact on civil cases. The care cases from Rhyl occupy almost the whole sitting time of the Designated Family Judge and when the Diary Manager took post, a decision was taken that in order to facilitate the hearing of the care work, a large amount of civil

work which would normally be dealt with locally would be transferred to Chester for hearing. As a result the statistics for civil work cannot meaningfully be considered in isolation.

A significant achievement for Rhyl County Court was the award, in March 2003, of the Charter Mark for excellence in public service, a well deserved award reflecting a great deal of hard work by the staff under the leadership of the Court Manager, Mrs Sue Forsythe.

Conway - This is a small Court and office but a busy one. Although it is called the Conwy Court its premises are in fact in Colwyn Bay, close to the town centre. There are no sittings by Circuit Judges but regular sittings by District and Deputy District Judges. The number of allocations this year has reduced considerably on all three tracks though this is thought to reflect settlements before allocation rather than a reduction in the overall caseload. Disposals are entirely small claims cases but these have more than doubled while sitting days have increased only slightly from 108 to 110.

A significant achievement for Conwy Court was the award, in October 2002, of the Charter Mark for excellence in public service, a well deserved award reflecting a great deal of hard work by the staff under the leadership of the Court Manager, Mrs Sue Woodward.

Caernafon - Caernarfon is a modern building a few hundred yards from the town centre. It has one courtroom and one District Judge's hearing room. It is also a Regional Care Centre with a Designated Family Judge. The statistics reflect the overall trend. There has been a considerable increase in allocations from 140 to 179. The number of trials has remained more or less constant (71 last year, 69 this year).

Llangefni - Llangefni is a busy Court housed opposite the Council offices and close to the town centre. It has one courtroom and a District Judge's room. The office houses the Welsh Language Unit and all the Circuit Judge listings for Llangefni, Caernarfon and Conwy are organised here. The Court building is also used for care cases from the care centre at Caernarfon.

The statistics are affected by the increase in family work. This reflects in a significant reduction in civil sitting days by 19 ½ % from 159 to 128 while the number of trials decreased by much the same percentage from 67 to 53. As elsewhere the number of allocations shows a significant increase from 108 to 124. Llangefni Court has also achieved the award of the Charter Mark this year which is an excellent and well deserved award reflecting a great deal of effort by the staff and the Court Manager, Mrs Llinos Roberts.

His Honour Judge Graham Jones: South and West Wales Group

I am very grateful to the Court Managers for their Reports. The picture overall is very satisfactory. There is little opportunity to acknowledge publicly all the hard work put in by the staff throughout the Group and I would like to take this opportunity to do so. The performance of the bailiff teams in a number of courts is particularly noteworthy.

A number of courts have achieved or retained the Charter Mark. Others are well on the way to securing it. Over the Group as a whole the volume of civil work has been maintained; Swansea has continued to see the increase in business which was noted last year. At the same time, business performance has continued at a high level, with improvements in some courts made in 2001/2002 being carried further forward this year. I congratulate all concerned.

From my personal perspective, this year has seen the completion of the organisation of the delivery of civil justice in my Group in the way which seems to me to be best suited for its delivery. There is now a single cohesive group of civil and family courts serving the whole of the southern half of Wales. Civil justice delivery can be planned, judicial resources deployed and where necessary work moved across the Group strategically. At each of the two Trial Centres, the Court Manager also acts as lead court manager for courts feeding in to that Trial Centre, so that within the Group there is also organisation and control at appropriate more local level. Small claims and fast track cases are almost always heard at the court where they are commenced, though the diary managers are able to move them, if necessary, to ensure that they get on for hearing. Multi track cases are generally managed and heard at the Trial Centres, though there is the flexibility for them to be managed and heard at feeder courts where appropriate. Use of this flexibility is made particularly in relation to cases at Aberystwyth and Haverfordwest where distances to the Trial Centre at Swansea are considerable. Circuit judges are sent to these courts only to deal with particular cases as needed. (There is a need, however, for a circuit judge to visit Aberystwyth at regular intervals, say every three to four months to deal with adoptions and such other work of a regular nature as requires a circuit judge.) I collaborate closely with the Chancery and Mercantile Judges in relation to their specialist work across the whole of the Group. All three of us deal with Technology and Construction cases. I am also responsible for the general list of Queen's Bench cases throughout the Group.

I am in regular (in some instances daily) contact with the Group Manager, the lead court managers, the diary managers and listing officers. There is very close liaison with the administration. In addition, each year a one day conference is held attended by all judges hearing civil and family cases and all court managers and other key members of staff across the Group. This has proved to be highly beneficial.

In addition to courts within the Group, the Court of Appeal now sits regularly at the Cardiff Civil Justice Centre to hear civil and family appeals. The Employment Appeal Tribunal also sits there. Proceedings in the Administrative Court can be commenced at the Cardiff Civil Justice Centre and the Court sits at Cardiff and elsewhere as required. The result is that civil and family work of all types, except patent and revenue cases, can now be heard at every level of court (save only the House of Lords) in Wales.

I am gravely concerned that the implementation of unified administration on the basis of the local criminal justice areas will set at nought all that has been achieved for civil and family justice. This is by far the most important matter for concerned comment in my report this year. Steps must be taken to ensure that a model designed purely for criminal business is not applied so as to destroy the organisation that has been created for civil and family work.

The other matters to which I draw attention are judicial resources, statistics, the continuing accommodation difficulties and staff turnover.

There is very considerable pressure from public law family work-care cases. Family work is not directly my concern. However, it impinges directly on civil work in that some judges who hear family cases also deal with civil work. Civil work must not suffer as a result of the entirely proper demands of family work. Judicial resources adequate to deal with both family and civil work must be provided.

Part of the key to such provision is accurate and reliable statistics. Considerable effort has been made, particularly at Cardiff, to improve them. However, across the Group as a whole there are still serious shortcomings in this area. I do not imagine that staff error can be entirely excluded. But principally at fault are the bases and systems for collection and recording.

In relation to accommodation, Blackwood County Court continues to be housed in what is generally acknowledged to be the worst court accommodation in England and Wales. The split site at Newport continues and will continue to cause problems. Cardiff has at last obtained much needed extra space with the departure of the Immigration Appellate Authority but there are no resources to carry out needed conversion work. Plans are in hand to improve the accommodation for the Aberdare County Court. Carmarthen, however, continues to be housed in inadequate and unsuitable premises, not least of the problems there being the lack of escape routes for the District Judges. Substantial works have just been started to ameliorate the wholly inadequate accommodation at Swansea. It must be remembered, however, that only amelioration will result. The building will still remain inadequate to house the Civil Justice Centre of the second city in Wales and the area it serves. The opportunity to vacate the premises must not be lost. The steps to secure another site should be put in hand.

I devote a separate paragraph to Haverfordwest because it presents a very considerable accommodation success story and at the same time an object lesson in the potential pitfalls of co-location of civil and criminal courts. Conversion work to part of a building carried out for the Court Service has produced a most attractive modern and convenient county court with excellent facilities for judiciary, staff and court users. The remainder of the building is about to be opened for use by the magistrates with sittings from time to time of the Crown Court. I understand that the Court Service was not involved in the conversion of that part and the nature of the conversion is not at present known to me. The two parts have separate entrances, waiting areas and other accommodation, but it is possible for there to be internal access between them. It would clearly be appropriate for the county court accommodation to be used, subject to the needs of the county court, for family magistrates court work. The users for those purposes could use the accommodation in the same way as county court users do, that is use the separate entrance and other separate facilities. But if the county court accommodation is used for magistrate's court criminal work what is a much appreciated and valued local facility will quickly be trashed. Furthermore, persons coming to the District Judge chambers and to the county court office in daily use will have to run the gauntlet of those waiting to appear before the magistrates. Local

solicitors who do both civil and criminal work and other court users feel strongly about this and I agree with them. If there is any such proposal it must be referred to the Group Manager and myself. There is at present a national committee sitting to consider the arrangements where there is co-location. One of the strong proposals put before this committee, of which I am a member, is that there must be appropriate separation of uses.

Finally, staff turnover continues to be a significant problem. At Cardiff two thirds of the Span 3 Administrative Officers in post on 1 April 2003 had less than 3 years experience in civil/family work. In Swansea there have been particular staffing problems. Inexperience and shortages impose considerable extra pressures on offices where there is already a heavy workload.

Western Circuit

His Honour Judge Sean Overend: West Group

General comments - As the last County Court Report was prepared as recently as October 2002, there is little to add by way of general comment.

Litigants in person - One point is worth repeating, however, and that is the need to control “pre-vexatious” litigants. As was reported to the May 2003 DCJ national conference, considerable staff and court time is wasted dealing with the unreasonable requests/applications of determined, but indigent - and therefore fee-exempt - litigants in person. There is universal experience of certain unbridled litigants in person, who take advantage of their impecunious status to bring proceedings that would never have been brought had they had to pay for them, and who thereafter embark on a voyage of appeal after appeal, claiming transcript after transcript at public expense and generally wasting the time of all concerned. In some cases fruitless actions are commenced against numerous defendants, who are then put to substantial expense if the abuse is not picked up at the issue stage.

A case can be made for devolving power onto the shoulders of the local DCJ in order to supplement the constraints of Grepe v Loam orders and Ebert v Venvil orders (the former being limited to applications in an existing case, and the latter to High Court judges). A recent paper prepared by the Law Officers for the Senior Judiciary¹ fails to appreciate the limitations of the existing cases, and wholly ignores the role of the Designated Civil Judge.

Volume of business

Issues	Devon and Cornwall	Western Circuit	National
1999/2000	37329	164816	1414013

¹ David Brummell, Legal Secretary to the Law Officers, dated 2/7/03

2000/2001	39478 (+5.76%)	174549 (+5.91%)	1457608 (+3.08%)
2001/2002	36566 (-7.38%)	173255 (-0.74%)	1392940 (-1.49%)
2002/2003	32566 (-10.94%)	155001 (-10.5%)	1338978 (-3.8%)

It shows for the second consecutive year the Devon and Cornwall Group's process issue has decreased substantially. It is in line with the fall in Western Circuit as a whole, but this last year issue has fallen at a rate nearly three times as much as the national trend.

Although it is of little comfort, the rate of fall in Devon and Cornwall is lower than that of the East Group of the Western Circuit (13.3%) - although higher than the West Group as a whole (7.9%). Devon and Cornwall now has the smallest annual issue of any Group. The courts where the greatest drops have taken place are Penzance (-21%) and Plymouth (-17.9%). The best performers are Exeter (-3.9%) and Truro (-4.9%).

Multi-track - The amount of MT cases that were entered on the Central Listing Office (CLO) computer in the financial year has however increased, compared with last year, but has not yet caught up with the volumes of the year before that.

2002-2003	1537
2001-2002	1128
2000-2001	1751

Fast Track - Fast track cases are generally disposed of by District Judges on the Devon and Cornwall Group. There has been no increase in the numbers of fast track cases, which remain down on the volumes of two years ago.

2002-2003	1275
2001-2002	1251
2000-2001	1795

Mediation schemes at Exeter - Exeter runs two mediation schemes. The Small claims scheme has been in existence for over a year and has produced some encouraging results. The FT/MT scheme was launched by Baroness Scotland in March of this year; it is too early to make any assessment of its success.

Small claims scheme - 35% of the 624 Exeter cases allocated to the Small Claims track in the year to June 2003 were referred to the Exeter Small Claims mediation scheme by the District Judges. Selection of referred cases was on the basis of suitability, as perceived by the judge².

² An early decision was taken to exclude Road Traffic cases and also cases where a party lived a long way from Exeter. It now seems that that decision should be reviewed, in the light of the demonstrated success of the scheme.

The cases are then listed at half hourly intervals. The parties start by seeing the district judge with the mediator. They then adjourn to a nearby room with the mediator to explore settlement.

The Small Claims mediators are all volunteer members of the Devon and Exeter Law Society (DELS). About 40 solicitors have participated in the scheme as mediators. 95% of all the cases referred the Small Claims mediation scheme proceeded to a successful conclusion. Credit must be given to the skills of the DELS mediators, who have given their time and expertise to the Small Claims Mediation scheme entirely free of charge. DELS hope that funding will now be forthcoming from the funding arm of the former LCD to enable these mediations to continue.

Using the terminology of the LCD Public Service Agreement targets, Exeter accordingly successfully “diverts” about one third of its Small Claims to resolution by mediation, rather than by a court proceeding. DELS have agreed to extend their mediation scheme to Barnstaple and Torquay. Plymouth and Truro - which are outside the catchment area of DELS - have yet to adopt a similar Small Claims scheme, but interest is being expressed by some local solicitors and judges.

FT/MT Scheme - On 10th March Baroness Scotland launched Exeter’s court-based FT/MT mediation scheme. It envisages a three hour “time-limited” mediation, conducted by independent mediators on the court premises. The fees of the mediator are shared by the parties (£450/650 depending on the track).

All parties to FT and MT cases are invited to take part in mediation as soon as the case is defended. A detailed brochure is sent out to the parties, together with an invitation to mediate. The mediation judge monitors the return of the invitations by the parties and “encourages” the parties through case management to opt in to the scheme. The parties are required to state why mediation is not thought appropriate; solicitors are required to confirm that they have discussed mediation with their clients. We have held one mediation since the scheme started, which was successful. Two more cases have mediation dates booked in the near future and in three further cases the parties have agreed to mediate but no date has yet been fixed.

Since the launch of the scheme, there have been some 173 cases which have attracted invitations to mediate, so the six cases to date where mediation has been agreed represents a small proportion of the whole. It is still very early days, however. The University of Exeter is monitoring the progress of the project and has already obtained 45 questionnaire responses from 100 local firms of solicitors as well as carrying out a number of interviews. The general thrust of the answers is that the local Exeter firms are on-side, but the degree of interest in and enthusiasm for mediation falls off the further the solicitors are from Exeter. This analysis is by and large borne out by the locations of the firms that represent the parties in the cases where mediation has been agreed - they are mostly local, although they do include firms from Cornwall, Liverpool and Central London.

Disposals/Determinations - Since raising the issue of disposals in the last report there has been a change in PD26 Rule 12 - which has broadly confirmed the practice that we had been adopting in Devon and Cornwall, namely in requiring most disposals

(now called determinations) to be tracked. These determinations - almost all of which are dealt with by a District Judge - are now given trial windows by Central Listing.

Appeals - Appeals continue to run at markedly increased levels. In the 9 month period October 2002 to June 2003, 133 appeals were lodged. There are currently 43 outstanding, of which 33 are listed for hearing, the balance awaiting the production of transcripts. The last 9 month breakdown of the sources of appeals is approximately as follows - from full-time District Judges - 83 appeals; from part-time District Judges - 31; from CJs - 10 appeals. There have also been nine housing appeals and a misplaced appeal from a customs fine.

Appeal success rates run at the rate of less than 20%. Only one housing appeal has been fought to a conclusion³. The appeal procedure is still abused by certain misguided litigants in person (invariably fees exempt), who file notices of appeal with inadequate reasons/documentation, or whose “applications” need to be identified and re-classified as appeals. The paper refusal of permission generally results in an oral re-hearing and we are considering always directing an oral hearing as a result. CPR PD 52 para 5.14 continues to be used regularly, in order to save transcript costs. It permits the court to require the solicitor/counsel who attended an appealed hearing involving a LIP, to provide notes of the judgment to the court and to the LIP, free of charge.

Settlement rates - It has not been possible to obtain accurate figures for settlement rates. The estimates provided by the Diary Manager do however indicate that 95% of all cases settle before trial, with about a third settling before the trial date is fixed.

Variable direction paragraphs - The advent of the electronic directions template devised by DJ Geoff Edwards and his colleagues has meant that the search for “uniform” variable paragraphs has come to an end for the time being. Full-time DJs in Devon and Cornwall have been invited to try out the electronic template and to report back at their next meeting with the DCJ⁴. Part-time Deputy District judges are to be provided with the hard copy “mirror-image” directions prepared by the DCJs and circulated at the national meeting of DCJs in May 2003.

Central Listing Office - The Diary Manager reports:

“The Central Listing Office is now a permanent feature in Devon & Cornwall. A parallel system is in operation for allocating and tracking both Civil & Family matters.

The Central Listing Office consists of five members of staff who work closely on a day-to-day basis, dedicated to provide correct impartial procedural assistance. The

³ The housing authority lost and was ordered to pay indemnity costs.

⁴ Preliminary results indicate that the full-time District judges fall into two quite clear camps - those who have been converted to the electronic template and those who prefer to stick by their own tick-box forms. The latter say that the tick box forms are quicker.

result is that the callers to the Office receive the same message, regardless of the identity of the staff member they speak to. Matters of issue are discussed on a team basis as and when they arise, ensuring everyone has a clear understanding of procedure and amendments to protocol.

There are now four PCs in the office, which have successfully been networked together. As a result all CLO staff members are able to view information at the same time and assist with queries. Three PCs have Outlook e-mail access; the remaining machine has Felix, which provides the staff of CLO with a ready means of communicating with the judiciary.

All the judiciary have commented that they have enjoyed being able to contact one venue, where all the staff can accommodate any requests made for dates to be given.” I can add that I concur with the Diary Manager’s report. On many occasions I have been able to contact CLO on a second line, during a telephone CMC, and obtain instant trial dates for the parties.

Individual Courts - In the light of the extensive commentary above, I make relatively few comments about the individual courts. I adopt the comments made by each of the Court Managers.

Exeter - The news is that Exeter is on the move! The new court building has progressed from drawings to a partly completed structure, with a completion date of November 2004. The Mediation schemes have been described elsewhere and are contributing to a substantial reduction in the number of small claims hearings. It is to be hoped that the FT/MT scheme will have a similar result. Exeter has coped well, despite the long term sickness of one district judge and the serious illness of another. The court manager is also welcomed back after a long spell of sickness. The Court Manager and her team is to be congratulated on achieving Mark status for Exeter.

Plymouth - The Court Manager and his team is also to be congratulated on achieving Charter Mark status for Plymouth. While arrears in deskwork and order production have been worrying in the past, the steps taken to improve the situation have been very effective. The eventual transfer of an experienced District Judge from Exeter has made a significant contribution to the improvement in Plymouth’s all round performance. There are now video-link facilities at Plymouth, which may be used in future civil cases.

Truro - The court manager and his team are to be congratulated on achieving Charter Mark status. Truro has had numerous staff sickness problems and it has been in arrears with its order production, due in part to having had to assist Bodmin and Penzance in the past. Financial constraints have also limited the amount of overtime that is available to help address the backlogs. Recent overtime has however brought them back to normal. The court manager has commented that there have been significant increases in FT and MT trials - but I understand from the Diary Manager that those figures are likely to be inaccurately overstated, due to problems with Caseman or with data inputting.

Torquay - This is a model court with a charismatic Court Manager, with whom I worked closely while setting up the Exeter FT/MT scheme - he was then deputising in Exeter. He hopes to implement a Small Claims Mediation scheme.

Barnstaple - This is another small court that has inspired leadership and excellent results. They, too, have recently started a Small Claims mediation scheme with the co-operation of DELS.

Penzance - Once again, Penzance have been assisting other courts - both Truro and Bodmin. It is a valuable outlier court, providing a service to the remote community of the extreme South-West.

Bodmin - This tiny court has to provide all-embracing facilities with the minimum of staff. Those that remain after the loss of two of the four staff are hard-pressed to cope and need all the assistance they can get. My first-hand experience of Bodmin court and its team leads me to comment that the Court Service can be proud of the dedication of its staff.

His Honour Judge Bursell: West Group

The group has performed remarkably well over the reporting period. The Key Performance Indicator (KPI 2), measuring the percentage of Small Claims, Fast and multi track trials heard within the target set of 65%, was well achieved at Bath (92.9%), Bristol (90.8%), Yeovil (78.8%) and Weston Super Mare (90.5%). The other courts in the group achieved well above the national average of 58% with Cheltenham achieving 70.5%, Gloucester 64.5% and Taunton 71.6%.

At Cheltenham Small Claims hearings increased by 12.5%, which had a knock on effect on waiting times. At Gloucester there was a reduction in Circuit Judges days but very few cases were sent to other courts for hearing. However, the retirement of the Resident Judge at Gloucester has meant that Civil Appeals cannot presently be dealt with, as previously, at Gloucester. Most applications and hearings are for the time being directed to Bristol, which can build in delays and cause inconvenience to parties in person. This also applies to the court at Cheltenham. I am currently addressing this with a view to rectifying the situation by the end 2004. At Taunton it has been a difficult year due to a flood in the building in April last year. This led to the general office being taken out of use for three months with staff having to work in other locations within the building and at nearby courts. Notwithstanding this the disruption to hearings was minimal.

Under KPI 3, the percentage value of enforcement warrants recovered, all courts on the group exceeded the target set of 76 pence in the pound. Not all the courts on the group achieved the supporting indicator of having 94% of the work dealt with within 5 days but the majority did and there were good reasons for others not doing so such as the flood at Taunton County Court. Although Bristol met all the targets set the accommodation, on a split site, where the Circuit Judges have to sit at the Guildhall some distance from the general office, leaves a lot to be desired. Indeed the state of the Guildhall is deplorable and a combine building would greatly benefit staff and judiciary alike. The results achieved overall are exceptionally good and reflect the

continued teamwork between the judiciary and staff and great credit must go to all involved. However, special praise must go to all the staff who work unstintingly in the face of staff shortages.

Finally I must mention that Charter Mark was achieved at all courts in the Group which demonstrates the commitment to customer service and the hard work put in by all concerned to achieve such an award.

His Honour Judge Anthony Thompson QC: East Group

The overall picture, which emerges from the Court Managers' Reports, is that the staff in the Court on this Group are coping well with the burdens imposed upon them. As the majority of the Court Staff are female this does result in justified absence for maternity leave which places an additional burden on resources and on the remaining staff who are left to cover for their absent colleagues or to train new or temporary staff brought in as replacements. Given the hard work and dedication of almost all the staff it seems churlish to complain, but unless additional resources are made available there will be a continuing problem with issuing orders promptly after they are made. With the co-operation of helpful local practitioners this is not a problem when they know of and abide by orders made despite not receiving copies of them. The problem arises with devious litigants and those anxious to play the system who take advantage to disregard orders not served.

Many Courts are understaffed (not just due to maternity leave) and resources must be made available to attract and retain staff. It is wholly unreasonable to expect high performance on a shoestring budget. Overall there exists a very happy and co-operative relationship between the Judiciary and the Court Staff.

It is important to point out that this Group is the Eastern Section of the Western Circuit, i.e.- Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and the Isle of Wight. At the head of the Annual Reports there are listed numbers of Circuit Judges and District Judges in Circuit. These figures are misleading as they relate to the Western Circuit as a whole; only about half of them sit on the Eastern Group. Turning to the figures there are difficulties in making meaningful comparisons with the previous year, as for example, Disposal Hearings since December 2002 have been allocated to tracks.

Where we can make a useful comparison is in relation to cases settled or withdrawn before trial. Here we can show a significant rise of 19.47% for the Group as a whole over the previous year's figures which itself showed a significant increase on the year before that. This compares very favourable with the national figure of 0.1%.

As the District Judges who have reported have been at pains to point out this is due to the effective case management conducted on this Group, and very few of these settlements will have been at the door of the Court. Our system of case management is popular with Claimant's and Defendants' solicitors alike, and where cases are capable of settlement the settlement will normally be achieved at or around the time of the Case Management Conference conducted by the District Judge about 11 weeks before trial.

North Eastern Circuit

His Honour Judge Bentley QC: Humberside and South Yorkshire Group

In last year's report, I drew attention to the problem of understaffing. During 2002/03 the position has got worse. As one of my senior District Judges puts it: the position has become even more acute this year, with a number of highly experienced staff leaving and not being replaced. It is only due to the hard work of the remaining staff that the court can function at all. On the civil side there remains the feeling that civil work is "the poor relation" and not allocated a fair share of resources.

The problem is not confined to Sheffield: Doncaster and Rotherham have experienced similar problems. One consequence of the staffing difficulties is that performance has deteriorated. I am aware that county courts in other areas are in a similar position but that really is scant consolation. Overall the results achieved at all four South Yorkshire county courts reflect great credit on the staff.

The settlement rate pre-trial is up at all courts save Doncaster and the trial centres have seen an increase in the number of fast track and multi track trials listed. At all courts an increasing amount of the time of the District Judges is spent dealing with issues as to costs which effects the ability to list other work within target.

His Honour Judge Heppel QC: Humberside and South Yorkshire Group

Grimsby - A successful year for a hard working and cheerful staff. I am pleased (not to say surprised) at the care with which work is transferred in from other centres. An increase number of Family/Care sitting days has been allocated to the N E Circuit. This is likely to require extra sitting weeks in this Court.

Kingston upon Hull - The reduction in work in the SCT is difficult to explain. This apart, there had been a significant increase in all areas. Additions to staffing levels are needed if effectiveness is to be restored to the required level. However, staff is to be congratulated on its productivity and performance levels.

His Honour Judge Grenfell: North West Yorkshire Group

Leeds continues to process to disposal a considerable volume of work. There has been an efficient use of judge time and accommodation. I particularly welcome the considerable assistance given by the specialist judges and also by judges allocated to Care and Crime. This flexibility enables efficient listing and disposal of trials – none has been lost during the year – a reflection on the continued high level of efficiency in the Diary Manager's section under the able leadership of Fiona Barrett.

I remain concerned at what I see as an ongoing problem at York. In addition to being the 2nd trial centre for the Leeds Group of courts, it is also a Care Centre (unlike Coverdale House at Leeds, which is run by an independent Care Section). I am disturbed that civil work is consistently listed at York to back Family work. Mixed listing is contrary to best practice for a trial centre, although often unavoidable at a feeder court. The result is that many fast track trials have to be transferred to Leeds at the last minute – an inconvenience to the parties. This is not a criticism of staff, who have plainly worked very hard to achieve all they have done at the County Court in a difficult year. However, it is a concern that needs to be addressed.

Across the Group, all other courts have shown a significant increase in fast track allocations and trials and some increase in multi-track allocations and trials in most – any decrease in multi-track allocations, for example, at Harrogate are statistically insignificant. I note a significant increase in circuit judge sitting at Pontefract (3 days more than York), which has enabled this court to get through a significant amount of trial work. An eye needs to be kept on civil recorder sittings – they are the judges of tomorrow and are keen to get experience.

A pleasing overall statistic is the significant decrease in pre-trial settlement, which anecdotally accords with my own experience of more effective trials. This reflects consistent and effective case management. Overall, small claims, both in allocation and trials, are shown to be down. I agree with Tony Lyons that this probably reflects a greater use of the Bulk Issue Centre and Money Claims on Line.

At Scarborough I was delighted that District Judge Elliott was able to return to work, although saddened that he is to retire next month. His achievements at Scarborough will be a difficult act to follow. There do not appear to be any major accommodation problems across the Group. Wakefield continues to foster its good relations with HM Prison for hearings that can take place either at the prison or by telephone. We look forward to the day when all prisons have video links, which can only make considerable overall financial savings compared with the relatively minor financial outlay.

The video conferencing facilities at Leeds continue to be use to good effect, although until other trial centres across the country can be so equipped the real financial savings cannot be achieved. I am pleased to see that Scarborough sits regularly at Whitby and Bridlington. It is vital, because of the geography of these coastal towns that this should continue. Perhaps it may be worth extending sittings to towns such as Malton and Pocklington, if there were the demand.

On the ICT front, we await the cabling at Leeds Combined Court. For CPR to be really effective and more financially efficient, better ICT remains essential. Many District Judges are now using the Civil Directions Template to good effect. This template has now been made available to all the judiciary. I am currently ‘alpha testing’ the DCJ version.

The staffing situation has been alleviated to a certain extent, although there is certainly a need for the staffing levels to be kept higher with the emphasis on encouraging good staff to remain. I am pleased that Leeds’ staffing requirements have

been recognised. I am pleased to note the apparent lack of work related stress absences. There continue to be all too many changes at senior management level, but with extra work on an individual basis the changes have been made as smoothly as possible. I should like to pay particular tribute to the work of the recently retired Group Manager, Martin Norris, with whom I have worked personally since the introduction of CPR; and also to Tony Lyons, whose all too short a spell as County Court Manager, has been a great support to the Court and the Profession.

The 5 day administration target has been consistently high. Where it has dipped, there have been good reasons – notably, staffing difficulties. Enforcement levels across the Group remain consistently high, with Harrogate once again showing amongst the highest in the country. The drop at Wakefield attributed to having only one bailiff illustrates the importance of keeping this element of staffing up to strength – a civil justice system has to be backed by efficient enforcement. Harrogate, Wakefield and Leeds all achieved Charter Mark status.

At Leeds we continue to hold ‘CPR surgeries’ about once a month, which are enthusiastically attended by some 20-30 practitioners. The feed back is immensely useful. During the year there was a visit from the ‘White Book’ editorial staff to whom the minutes are now sent. The User Group has recently formed a Housing sub Group under the chairmanship of District Judge Jordan. Overall the County Courts across the Group are providing an excellent civil justice service.

His Honour Judge Simon Hawkesworth QC: North West Yorkshire Group

Civil Business - The number of Circuit Judge sitting days is down at a number of courts. Also the number of settlements have increased. My impression is that generally the amount of substantial multi-track work reaching trial has fallen. Proportionately more time has been spent sitting in family work by Circuit Judges. Although the increased jurisdiction of District Judges in Family work has helped flexibility in listing it is often the case that work in areas where the jurisdictions overlap (both in family and civil work) has in fact resulted in cases being transferred from the DJ list into the CJ list rather than vice versa. As a result the number of fast track trials tried by CJs has increased in my personal experience.

The Workload - The nature of the work within the Group remains broadly similar to last year. There have been a number of GLOs relating to claims against local authorities responsible for the running of children's homes within West Yorkshire following widespread police investigations. A number of criminal trials resulted. It is unlikely however that these will come to trial since it appears that Local Authorities are in the majority of cases endeavouring to reach settlements. The problems with fraudulent claims in road traffic cases, which are backed by dubious claims handling organisations remains.

Disposal Hearings -The implementation of Practice Direction 26.12 has generally been effective in tracking substantial cases, however there has been a tendency among some District Judges to stretch the "less than 30 minutes" provision and to list without tracking. The view seems to be that where possible costs should not be increased by

adding on a FT fee (£200) or MT fee (£300) to what is generally a straightforward hearing. I am monitoring the situation.

Staffing Problems - These have been referred to extensively in the Court Managers' reports and have been a source of concern throughout the year. These problems are evident to the judiciary from a number of instances of files being mislaid or misplaced, urgent post not being dealt with in time, and Court orders not being sent out promptly when hearings at short notice are required. This had led in turn to adjournments or cases being removed from the list, wasting time which could have been allocated to other work. Court Managers have done their best throughout the year to cope with these problems, but the loss of experienced staff and delays in filling junior posts have led to some reductions in productivity and effectiveness. Considerable resources are being applied towards "customer care" and in particular assisting litigants in person, a substantial proportion of whom have particular problems as members of ethnic minorities.

Listing - The Diary Manager at Bradford plays a key role in utilising judge time effectively within the Group and this has worked well. There is close co-operation with the Leeds Group and work is also taken on occasions from Manchester.

Adjournments - Some controversy still exists within the Group as to the proper application of the rule as to charging fees on consent applications to adjourn, particularly in mortgage possession actions. The statement in Court Business of December 2002 of the position seems to conflict with the agreement reached by DCJs as to the position at the Birmingham meeting in April 2001. Although this is not strictly a matter for the judiciary it has been raised at Court User meetings and requires a unified approach within the Group and nationally.

Appeals - There is generally a low rate of applications for leave to appeal within the Group (2 or 3 a week at most). A significant proportion are from litigants in person effectively seeking a re-hearing. The number of appeals relating to case management orders is very low; the majority being in relation to expert witnesses. (The limitation of expert evidence and in particular the joint expert provision and the meeting of experts has been one of the most effective measures in the CPR in promoting settlements) A substantial number of appeals also arise in relation to applications to suspend warrants for possession. A practice has arisen on the part of some District Judges of ordering that no further applications be made save by way of appeal. It has been suggested that this may not be within the powers of a DJ and I propose to issue a direction about this following our next meeting of civil judges.

Conclusion - I have not had as much sitting time within the Group as I would ideally like to, due to my allocation to care cases at Leeds, Section 9 work and criminal sittings. I have also been absent through illness this year and I am grateful to Judge Cockroft and Judge Grenfell for covering for me in my absence. Generally I am satisfied that the disposal of civil business within the Group has been conducted efficiently and speedily and well within the national parameters.

His Honour Judge Walton: Tyne and Tees Group

The figures appear to reflect a number of national trends, notably the bias in favour of Fast Track Trials as opposed to Multi Track and the difficulty in meeting KPI2, which I understand, has been done with anyway. I have particularly asked about the KPI2 figures, which were universally down, and accept that it was an unrealistic benchmark. I would be concerned if there was a trend for cases generally to take longer to bring to a hearing but daily experience does not suggest that this is the case. Could I finally put in a plea for more time to consider the report in future – I received the figures on the day they were due for

Northern Circuit

His Honour Judge Tetlow: Greater Manchester Group

None of the courts in the Outer Manchester group are Crown or Combined Courts and therefore will not automatically qualify for the benefits of the CTMP programme. News that some extra funding is or may be available to cover some of the non-qualifying courts may mean that one or two courts in the group will have the requisite wiring installed; even if that occurs I understand the equipment required to enable information to be shared simultaneously between courts which are wired up will not be forthcoming at that stage.

Any reduction of staff in anticipation of such useful developments would be premature. The courts generally have seen a reduction in the number of staff over recent years; further reductions are in the pipeline. The formula used to calculate the appropriate numbers of staff seems to make insufficient allowance for sickness, holidays and the fact that not all tasks can be tackled smoothly. The feeling of being overstretched has caused difficulties in the past and unless care is taken will no doubt do so in the future. The formula also fails to treat staff required to man the courts as separate from the other administration; the extra cost involved in staffing the courtrooms properly would be repaid by the extra efficiency achieved in the conducting of business.

Save for Oldham there has been a reduction in the number of cases settled or withdrawn before trial. That said, there is the perception that there has been an increase in the number of cases settling at the courtroom door. There are no statistics available to verify such perception or to indicate why late settlement occurs. It has recently come to my attention that there has been a reduction in the number of solicitor firms franchised to deal with committals and hence difficulty in getting representation. That is a worrying trend and even more so if reduction is also occurring in other fields.

His Honour Judge Holman: Greater Manchester Group

Altrincham - Although no longer based in Altrincham but in Sale, the move to share accommodation with the magistrates' court has worked well; working in an improved environment has paid dividends. The achievement of Chartermark status is all the more commendable in being achieved against a background of staff reduction. Overall

there was a reduction in claims issued over the previous year; it will be interesting to see whether the noted recent increase in business will be maintained.

Bolton - Bolton County Court is a feeder court to Manchester, which is a trial centre. It also has a District Registry of the High Court, but the volume of work in that section is small. Case management of multi-track cases is, with my permission, generally, but not always, conducted by the District Judges at Bolton instead of being transferred into Manchester. This has worked well. I have also on occasions given permission for multi-track trials to be heard at Bolton, since District Judge Wilby also sits as a Recorder. The bulk of the trial work, however, consists of claims allocated to the Small Claims Track or the Fast Track.

There have been constraints affecting Fast Track trials, in that they were listed on the basis of three judges sitting "back-to-back". However there were only two District Judges' chambers and the third room used had ultimately to be taken out of use, as it was unacceptable. However, towards the end of the year, funds were made available to effect a conversion of some other accommodation into a hearing room. The conversion was not ideal, but given the limited funds available, was satisfactory. In the year 2003/4, therefore, the court will be in a position to handle trials much more effectively.

It also became clear that the volume of work being handled at Bolton was more than could reasonably be undertaken by two District Judges, with consequent adverse effect on waiting times. This has been addressed by the redeployment of another District Judge, who sat at other courts with less demand, to sit at Bolton two days a week.

The KPI 2 figure is curious and does not on the face of it fit in with the picture portrayed by the other statistics. There is a concern that disposals may not have been taken into account. It is noteworthy in this context that the KPI 2 target for April 2003 was met. The court has, however, done well given the staffing problems adverted to by the Court Manager. It took almost 12 months to fill the Executive Officer vacancy. Despite these problems, the performance was achieved without formal overtime having to be worked.

Bury - As noted by the court manager it has been a difficult year due to reduction in staff numbers and loss of experienced staff. The staff are to be congratulated for having achieved Chartermark status despite the difficulties. There has continued to be a decline in work whether gauged by issue, allocation or hearings save for an increase in possession cases (which seems to be against the trend); it may be the end of such decline is in sight.

Although the present building has some period charms, staff accommodation and the district judges rooms when used for hearings of trials leaves something to be desired. There is the prospect that the court will be rehoused in the nearby magistrates' court at some time in the future; such a move would involve an extension being added to the present magistrates' court building.

Manchester - Manchester is a busy County Court (its District Registry of the High Court is also busy) and its workload includes a significant volume of heavier cases, which a few years ago might have been tried in the High Court. Many multi-track trials are listed for 3 days or more. It also has to devote significant resources to neighbour nuisance claims as Manchester City Council pursues a very proactive policy as regards anti-social behaviour by its tenants.

There is a good working relationship between the Designated Civil Judge, the District Judges and the administration. The same also applies to relations with the legal profession and other court users. Some operational difficulties arise because (a) the courtrooms are several hundred yards away from the court offices, (b) we have 13 District Judges but only 12 chambers and (c) of the requirements for civil jury trials. These difficulties will not be resolved until Manchester is provided with its sorely needed civil justice centre.

The court performance has been very satisfactory and has been achieved in the face of significant additional demands on the time of staff e.g. in helping out other courts in the group. There is no slack in the system to allow for unforeseen tasks. The statistics are raw and some of them are considered suspect, but the explanation may lie in inaccuracies in the 2001/2 figures. The perception that there has been a reduction in trials and an increase in settlements is not borne out by the statistics, and on the face of it, given the significant increase in workload (in both allocations and trials) there is a compelling need for additional staff and judicial resources.

Oldham - The court staff have done well to manage with a reduction in staff, deal with approximately the same workload and obtain Chartermark status. It is to be hoped that further projected reduction in staff will not detract from the excellent service now being provided. Levels of work have stayed very much the same. The problem of having too few circuit judges and too many recorders sitting appears to have been resolved.

Salford - As appears from the court manager's report, this court has had staffing problems similar to those at Bury. Again as for Bury the attainment of Chartermark status shows that any difficulties are being overcome. It is to be hoped that efforts being made now will soon bear fruit.

Stockport - Despite a reduction in claims issued and allocations to the small claims track there has been an increase in the number of hearings of small claims and multi track trials with fast track trials being the same as last year. Much effort has been put in to overcome the difficulties caused by staff absences and by reduction in staff numbers; it is good to see results from such efforts are being seen. Some court sittings (family not civil) are being held in the nearby magistrates' court; such does not make for efficient administration. The need for such sittings highlights the inadequacy of the court accommodation in the present building; apart from the one courtroom the district judges' chambers are far too small for the conduct of small claims and fast track trials. The appointment of a security officer to patrol the precincts of the court has to some extent reduced the risk of unfortunate incidents occurring but does not do away with the need for proper accommodation. The magistrates' court is not large enough to absorb the whole of the county court.

Thameside - The picture as regards workload is one of a slight decline save for an increase in the number of small claims heard. The court continues to provide a very good service to the locality. That remains so despite the need to adapt and retrain and the disruption caused by the move to accommodation in the magistrates' court. Altrincham's experience has no doubt helped make the move go more smoothly than otherwise might have been the case. Although the previous building was good the new premises is at least as good and has better pedestrian access and parking. The two courtrooms allocated to the court are used by the district judges for all their work and is an improvement on the old court; storage space is less generous than before. Any remaining teething problems should soon be overcome.

His Honour Judge George: Merseyside Group

Prior to taking on the task of Acting Designated Civil Judge at the request of the Presiding Judges of the Northern Circuit I acted as Deputy to His Honour Judge Marshall Evans QC until the 30th April when he retired. It is right and a pleasure to begin this report by paying a tribute to His Honour Judge Marshall Evans QC. His unfailing courtesy and willingness to assist all the Judges in the Liverpool Group has been a great support to them. The Court Staff and all those coming into contact with him will particularly miss his courtesy and sense of justice and fair play during the period since the introduction of the CPR. Moreover his efforts and example have greatly assisted me during my period of acting as the DCJ.

At the beginning of January 2003, the Diary Manager in Liverpool (Sheila Jones) took up other responsibilities and Peter Haselden took her place. Sheila Jones was of particular support to the Judges while working as Diary Manager. Peter Haselden has taken up the role with enthusiasm and Rick Leach remained as Listing Office with some added responsibilities but the roles of other staff were altered. It took some short time for the changes to be absorbed but after an understandable "bedding in" period the initial problems (including sorting out telephone extension numbers and acquainting callers with the person within the Court Service they should contact) have been resolved. This has been particularly important in relation to directions for and listing of appeals from the other Courts. One disadvantage in Liverpool is the pressure on working areas and the availability of Court Rooms caused by the needs of the Criminal Courts (most courts in Liverpool have dock and a jury box). It is anticipated that these problems will be overcome if additional accommodation is obtained within the next two or three years (the present Chambers for District Judges being required as an addition to the jury assembly area). There are still matters to be resolved in administration. One particular problem is the use of the facility to fax documents to the Court for purposes not envisaged by the current practice direction (PD 5.3) distracts court staff from other responsibilities and more expedition is required in connection with directing letters to the correct recipient and perfecting orders but my experience is that the "targets" are generally met. The loss of experienced staff to other government departments is a constant concern.

The Court at Birkenhead is an example of how flexible use of resources assists with some of the problems. Birkenhead is a very busy Court which has retained its long standing reputation for efficient operation and early listing of cases which has existed

since prior to April 1998. The consequence is that there are many fast track trials with a high settlement rate both as regards liability and disposal hearings. Fast Track trials are heard by the District Judges in Birkenhead in their Chambers leaving on most days the two courtrooms free for Circuit Judges to hear multitrack and family cases which would otherwise be heard in Liverpool. This flexibility has resulted in an easing of the accommodation difficulties in the Queen Elizabeth II Law Courts in Liverpool. The court staff at Birkenhead deserve to be congratulated on the award of a Charter Mark for excellence in Customer Service

It is a matter of regret for me that I have been unable to visit St Helens, Southport, Wigan and Leigh before writing this report but I am nonetheless able to say that I have no concerns about them. The court staff at Leigh deserve to be congratulated on achieving an accreditation under the Charter Mark award scheme as do the court staff at Wigan on achieving accreditation under the same scheme in recognition of their commitment to customer service. I anticipate that the commitment of court staff in St Helens and Southport will ensure that further accreditations are achieved.

My overall experience is that there has not been a substantial reduction in judicial work and that flexible use of resources has ensured that for the present delays caused by the emphasis given to crime in the Queen Elizabeth II Court Building are reduced to a minimum.

His Honour Judge John Appleton: Lancashire and Cumbria Group of Courts.

The Lancashire and Cumbria Group comprises a huge geographical part of the North West of England. We have 5 civil trial centres: Preston, Carlisle, Burnley, Blackpool and Lancaster; 9 feeder courts; and, in these 14 courts some 30,000 claims were issued last year. Over the past year considerable effort has gone into rationalising the distribution of District Judge sitting days around the group to ensure trends in workflow and hearing times have been covered. This has resulted in comparable waiting times for similar types of hearing across the group and has increased the ability of individual courts to respond to particular demands within their area promptly and to the benefit of court users. This is particularly evident in the reduction of time between allocation and hearing of cases allocated to the Small Claims Track across the group as a whole.

Success to identify this year, in addition to the overall reduction in waiting times across the group, is the acknowledgement given to 8 courts of their work on Customer Service by the award of the Charter Mark. These courts are Accrington, Blackburn, Carlisle, Chorley, Kendal, Lancaster & Preston.

An area to regard as a problem is the increasing incidence of fast and multi track cases settling on the very eve of trial (very often this means between noon and 4 p.m.). Apparently, and despite the overriding objective and the early identification of issues, parties in these cases are simply not applying their minds until the last minute. I would suggest that we need to monitor these last minute settlement cases in order to find out more about them and seek to identify common features and hope to find ways and

means of enabling the parties to arrive at earlier settlements and thereby save themselves legal fees and allowing the court service to use its judicial resources more effectively.

I would particularly wish to record my thanks to the Group Diary Manager Mrs Christine Sharples for unstinting hard work in discharging her responsibilities. That she does this in such an efficient manner gives the Judges a stable and secure work environment in which we can concentrate on trying the cases that she ensures come into our lists. I also record my thanks to the Group Manager Mr Shaun McNally for his boundless enthusiasm in promoting the interests of the civil courts and the civil court users.

Court Managers Comments

South Eastern Circuit

London County Court Group

- **Brentford** - The overall workload in BMS hours has decreased but the Court has remained busy with additional family work including a very high percentage of last minute injunctions. The productivity was lower than average due to lack of systems and procedures and inexperienced staff, which meant that the % of admin work dealt with in 5 days decreased.
- **Barnet** – The court has sustained a good performance throughout the year. Productivity and effectiveness were high and this reflects the commitment that the court has made to training and development of its staff. Staffing increased over the previous year and the staff in post figure remained constant throughout the year.
- **Bow** - The figures reflect an excellent performance over the past year in almost all areas, which is pleasing as we put a lot of effort into making sure that we focussed on delivering a good service to the customers. In the area of waiting times, we do

need to make some improvements and I aim to try and reduce the waiting times for the listing of small claims, applications, fast and multi track.

- **Clerkenwell** - The increase in Fast Track trials has been attributed to the fact that last year Mayors & City heard a lot of their trials to enable them to achieve the waiting time targets. Having an extra District Judge this year meant that we no longer needed to transfer these cases.
- **Central London** - In comparison to last year there are some particularly encouraging signs in regard to overall performance of the Court. General improvements have been brought about strengthening office systems, performance management and reducing the numbers of days lost due to sick absence. Despite the Court being under its manpower ceiling for most of the year and the continuing difficulties of retention of staff, continuing investment in induction, training and development have enabled the Court to adequately cover priority areas of work whilst reducing the numbers of Ex Gratia payments and justified complaints. However, the levels of inexperience of staff at the junior grades will always be particularly challenging.
- **Edmonton** - This is a pleasing a well-balanced set of figures, which indicate the continuing success of the Front/Back Office set up. There has been a marked reduction in correspondence, confirmed by trend reports, which formed part of our evidence for Charter Mark Accreditation. The assessor was extremely impressed with the morale and helpfulness of the staff and their commitment to providing excellent customer service.
- **Iford** – The court has increased the amount of small claims listed for hearing each week, and this along with extra Deputy District Judges booked has brought their waiting times down for the first 2 months of this year. Productivity is still high and the KPI 1 figure is still above the target and this should continue throughout this year, even while giving assistance to other courts on the group.
- **Lambeth** - Regular contact with the courts two largest boroughs, Lambeth and Southwark continued to underpin the excellent working relationship. The bailiffs have been liaising with the local police, local authorities over evictions at crackhouses (a local community initiative). Further focus groups have been set up with local housing associations to improve communications and improve the service they receive from the court.
- **Mayor's and City** - The court achieved the Charter Mark award in December 2002 having kept quality and customer service as top priority. An overall commitment to continued rotation, training and developing staff across the office and targeting areas in response to workload has meant that this court achieved a positive performance against targets.
- **Wandsworth** - With the assistance of other Bailiffs/Bailiff Managers from across the Group the court has successfully reduced their outstanding warrant list from over 900 to less than 500. The court continues to work with outside agencies and organisations. In the past year it has accommodated over 40 work experience students and agreed mutually beneficial arrangements in respect of issue, hearings, possession warrants and evictions with the London Borough of Lambeth.
- **West London** - The court has met the KPI performance figures for the year. Overall it managed to achieve 95% for KPI 1 for processing most work within 5 days. The change in bailiff manager has proved successful, as per increased KPI 3 figure to 88%.

- **Willesden** - Willesden met its KPI's on a weekly basis, staying within its 100 hours of arrears target. More structured systems were put in place managing the work much more effectively and encouraging flexibility with staff throughout all grades.
- **Woolwich** – Staffing issues are at the forefront at this court. Over the past year over 50% of experienced staff have either left through retirement/resignation/promotion. This has had a knock on effect on experience levels especially on their waiting times. The court is undergoing a rapid training and development programme to combat this.

East Anglia, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire

- **Basildon** - The number of BMS hours have slightly increased but the court has managed to achieve an increase in its performance, effectiveness and in the percentage of work completed within 5 days. The value of enforcement warrants recovered has fallen by 3.7% this year, which was largely due to being unable to recruit a bailiff for 6 months due to there being no suitable applicants. Despite this the court still managed to achieve 74.9% and the bailiffs are now fully trained and up to complement.
- **Bury** – The court made a concerted effort to reduce waiting times because of the reduction in the number of judicial sitting days and the increase in the number of defended civil actions. In conjunction with the judiciary, the court has reviewed its listing practices and is now operating a more robust and effective listing system.
- **Cambridge** – The close work of staff with the judiciary has ensured effective listing during the year. Efforts have also been made to formalise procedures for Fast Track cases to be heard at feeder courts with the aim of providing access to justice more locally than at present. The court was successful in achieving Charter Mark, which was particularly pleasing and recognises the work that had been put into it by the staff and in my view it was well deserved.
- **Harlow** - The Court achieved some excellent results in terms of output and meeting its targets. Much emphasis was placed on Customer Service during the year and this was recognised when the Court successfully achieved the Charter Mark accreditation in March. District Judge allocated sitting days (Civil and Family) were increased from 325 (2001/2) to 342 (2002/3) and the Court actually sat 329 during the year.
- **Hertford** - Hertford was awarded Charter Mark in April 2003 and was particularly commended for the 'friendly and flexible service it provides.
- **Hitchin** - New listing guidelines and a designated listing officer has meant that a good working relationship exists between the staff and judges enabling us to ensure that waiting times and use of resources are maximised.
- **Huntingdon** - The Court continues to maintain one of the highest KPI figures on the Group in terms of work cleared in 5 working days and also has achieved a slight increase on an already impressive Productivity figure. The staff are to be congratulated for their efforts in achieving such results, such efforts being properly recognised in the Court's Charter Mark success. Court user meetings continue to be successful as evidenced by the excellent attendance rates and Diversity of attending Users in terms of gender, age and ethnic background. The Court

continues to network with the local community with visits to the local mental health Team, Small Landlords Forum and a local Women's Institute.

- **Ipswich** - The figures reflect an increase in Allocations to Fast Track and smaller increase in Allocations to Multi track. Fast and Multi track cases were sent to Colchester Trial Centre unless there was a specific reason to keep them at Ipswich. Some cases were heard at Ipswich at short notice when Colchester were not able to accommodate them in their list, and Multi Track cases were retained only where approved by the Designated Civil Judge.
- **Kings Lynn** - During this reporting period King's Lynn County Court was very pleased to be awarded the Charter Mark. Several new initiatives were started, such as periodical local newsletter and self-help packs, which will be continued and built upon. On the subject of Customer Service King's Lynn again gained a very good response to the nationally run Survey actually improving slightly on the previous years good figures. Generally there were a few slight improvements in figures, for example a 1.9-% increase in work completed within 5 days was enough to meet the national target this year.
- **Lowestoft** - The team at Lowestoft have continued to perform very highly in all areas highlighted in this report. There has been a marked reduction in the number of small claims matters both allocated and heard at this Court, a trend of less defended cases has been evident in the last 6 months. Receipts of civil issue indicate a confidence by Court users; the excellent bailiff performance and recovery statistics has been directly shown to influence the choice of some regular local customers to proceed with Court action, according to the feedback received from them. The courts overall consistent performance has been reflected in the team's achievement in attaining the Charter Mark accreditation this year.
- **Luton** – The court has introduced regular listing meetings with its feeder courts, which have proved very productive in bringing down waiting times across the group. The court has also set up a new Customer Service Team, which meets regularly to ensure we are not complacent about Charter Mark achievement.
- **Norwich** - There continues to be an excellent relationship locally between the administrative staff and the judiciary, with both groups working hard to provide a good service to our users.
- **Peterborough** - The court was able to meet all its administrative targets consistently throughout the year. Productivity averaged over 100% & 99.7% of all administrative work was dealt with within 5 days & usually by return. The work was also carried out to a high standard with a very low justifiable complaint level. The court obtained Charter Mark at their first attempt towards the end of 2002, which was justly deserved.
- **Southend on Sea** - The reduction in claim issue and bailiff process was mainly attributed to the loss of a bulk claim issuer in January 2002 and the related warrant issue by March 2002. Although this has resulted in reduced productivity and performance figures, the overall effectiveness of the court has improved with a 4.8% improvement in the volume of work processed within 5 working days, achieving the target of 95% for the year. In fact this was regularly exceeded towards the end of the financial year. The court achieved Charter Mark status during the year, reflecting the continued effort made by all staff in providing good quality customer service to court users.

- **St. Albans** - There has been a significant increase in the amount of bankruptcy work received in the past year and in particular in the last six months. There has also been a considerable increase in the number of possession commenced; however the overall number of monetary claims has fallen slightly against last years figures.

Thames Valley, Surrey and Oxford

- **Aylesbury** – The court has improved its performance in relation to
- **Banbury** – Waiting times have been reduced due to more effective use of judicial time and the ongoing listing of back to back small claims cases in view of the high settlement rate.
- **Epsom** – The court has maintained the performance against the 5-day target admin target. Workload generally appears to have reduced although some new procedures are more time consuming than others. The reduction of available District Judges sitting days has impacted on waiting times, but this is expected to improve with the appointment of a new DJ in September. The court also received Charter Mark accreditation for excellent customer service.
- **Guildford** – This court has suffered with high turnover of staff, which in turn has lead to low levels of experience amongst staff.
- **High Wycombe** – The court has performed well with the majority of targets being met or exceeded. District Judges sit on average twice per week with two DJs sitting back to back three times a month to hear small claim cases. Waiting times have improved with small claims being listed within the 10 week target and possession claims within 8 weeks.
- **Kingston Upon Thames** – Improvements in performance against the 5 day targets and bailiff pence in the pound targets were consistent over the reporting period. We had to cope with the loss of two DJs, listing practices had to be adjusted to make best possible use of the judicial time available. Again, consistent performance against targets has been achieved.
- **Milton Keynes** – Whilst the workload has decreased over the past year, the number of defended actions has increased, which has placed additional pressure on sitting times. The court continues to make effective use of its judicial time through warned lists and regular reviews of its listing policy in consultation with the judiciary.
- **Newbury** – The court has performed well over the past year and managed to recover quickly from dips in performance caused by staff leave. Workload has shown no significant signs of reduction.
- **Oxford** – Waiting times remain good and within target.
- **Reading** – Staff morale has improved and the courts success in obtaining the Charter Mark reflects the excellent work done on customer service including the introduction of an email newsletter and the courts involvement in a pilot scheme to email daily cause lists to court users.
- **Reigate** – The court was pleased to be awarded a Charter Mark for excellent customer service and continue to hold regular well attended Court User meetings.
- **Staines** – Bailiffs work is still reducing slightly but the pence in the pound target has been consistently met.

- **Uxbridge** – Uxbridge has maintained a good level of performance, consistently over the past year. The high level of staff training has assisted in creating a multi skilled workforce, which enables maximum flexibility in the completion of the work.

Kent and Sussex Group

- **Ashford** – Over the last year Ashford has continued to meet, and regularly exceed its performance targets. This has been achieved whilst staff continue to assist other courts and have worked towards achieving a Charter Mark accreditation. Ashford continues to hold hearings and mans a help desk once a month in Folkstone Magistrates Court to assist Court Users. Ashford shares its facilities and regularly permits other Public Services to use its courtrooms wherever possible e.g. Customs and Excise and the Coroners Office.
- **Brighton** – The KPI target for throughput of work was met as a result of the hard work put in by the staff at this court despite staffing difficulties experienced. The bailiffs have managed well and significant progress has been made to improve the amount of money collected through enforcement. Brighton achieved a Charter Mark accreditation in recognition of the excellent customer service provided.
- **Canterbury** – Canterbury has performed well this year and has offered assistance to other courts on the group. A pilot scheme aimed at reducing the waiting times in multi-track trials by encouraging prompter settlement of personal injury cases is to be introduced.
- **Chichester** – New civil business fell against the previous year, but overall work levels were maintained by an increase in defended business. Significant progress has been made to improve the amount collected through enforcement by warrant. The average length of time hearing for multi-track trials was 9.57 hours and the settlement rate was 82%. Around 75% of fast-track work settles and the average length of hearing was 3.86 hours.
- **Eastbourne** - Despite the drop in performance against KPI2 that is of concern, the court is still meeting the target. Performance against KPI3 has continued to improve for which Bailiffs and Cash and Enforcement section staff must take credit. 2002-3 has been a challenging year in some respects.
- **Hastings** – Reports that careful planning and hard work by all concerned has helped the court realise some improvements on last year's figures. The court will be applying for Charter Mark in January 2004.
- **Haywards Heath** - The performance of the Bailiff under KPI 3 targets has been outstanding and credit goes to him for the amount of money recovered.
- **Horsham** - New civil business increased by 2.2% against the National trend and there has been an increase in all matters progressing to hearing despite stringent case management. Significant progress was made in increasing monies collected by the Bailiff and raising awareness of staff on the need to accurately record passthroughs resulting in a 25.5% increase on KPI5. Effective teamwork with a positive approach and a good working relationship with the judiciary resulted in a productive year for this court.
- **Lewes** - KPI 2 is down by 7.6%. This is because of a reduction in Judges and small claims cases are getting longer. Fast track and multi track cases are again

listed from Brighton. KPI 3 continues to improve with a 9.2% increase. Lewes remains the Appeals Centre in Kent and Sussex for all High Court appeals. There were 34 appeals this year. Since the reduction in the number of High Court Judge sittings, most of this work is sent to the RCJ to be heard.

- **Maidstone** – The percentage of work processed within 5 days remained above target, in the high 90s. The bailiffs achieved high pence in the pound figures. The small claim average waiting time was also reduced.
- **Medway** – Suffered increasingly from a shortage in District Judges
- **Thanet** – With the increased jurisdiction of the District Judges this court has been able to retain a wide range of work to be heard locally (squatter's applications, civil injunctions and all fast track trials). Staffing at Thanet was reviewed during the early part of the year and should assist with improving performance.
- **Worthing** - Another excellent performance by the court staff has seen the previous high figures maintained. Civil issue has remained at last year's level as with the national trend. Whilst small claim hearings have reduced in number the hearing time has increased and less now suitable for back to back listing. This trend impacts on waiting times. All work is dealt with within 5 days and most on the day of receipt. The court continues to achieve a same day issue/despatch of all process.

Western Circuit

East Group

- **Aldershot** - Continuing on from the last three years, this court again shows above average productivity and performance figures. This has been achieved even though there has been almost half the staffing compliment lost in the space of six weeks. These lost staff accumulated over 50 years worth of experience. Aldershot has also continued with its teamwork commitment to help other courts on the group and does so, on a regular basis. In addition to this, Charter Mark has been achieved.
- **Basingstoke** - Notable successes have been the increased productivity, performance, and percentage of administrative process completed in 5 days; the continuing performance against KPI 3; gaining Charter Mark and the assistance given to other courts throughout this period. Improvements and the introduction of smarter working practices have resulted in efficiency gains and improved turn around times for issuing process This Court is extremely popular with practitioners which has resulted in year on year increases in claims issued. The reduction in allocations probably reflects the settlement of cases after issue and before allocation. This is a very efficient Court with dedicated and experienced staff who deserve recognition for their performance and hard work.
- **Bournemouth** - The past year has been a difficult one for all of the staff in Bournemouth Crown and County Court. Historically there has been a relatively low turn-over of staff in the court, but the summer of 2002 saw loses equating to 50% of the staff on the civil side of the business. The time taken to recruit then

train the new staff had a significant impact on the court's ability to maintain standards, which is why the performance dropped in some areas. Now the court is again fully staffed, we are currently meeting all targets. Against that backdrop it was particularly rewarding to gain the Charter Mark Award in recognition of the service the court has continued to deliver to its customers.

- **Newport** - This has been another difficult year in terms of long term sick absence. The court has however worked hard to improve the service offered and has shown that despite the difficulties it has been able to improve its performance in many areas including dealing with work within 5 days. The court has also been successful in obtaining a Charter Mark for the service provided to users. The volume of small claims hearings has increased. This has caused some delays in hearings taking place, however by making changes to listing practices to ensure the best use of the limited number of sitting days, the court has been able to maintain the average time within target. The court has provided opportunities for local schools to visit and also offered numerous periods of work experience and job shadowing to students. It has also initiated contacts with the local Housing Advice Centre to assist people with possession matters. Representatives are on hand on possession days to offer advice and assistance to people who are due to attend such matters.
- **Poole** – Since June 2002 this court has been receiving civil litigation work from two large local Bournemouth firms of solicitors, having been approached in early May to transfer their work to us as a result of a pilot they held in April and being impressed by the level of service received, reflecting the positive work that went into achieving Charter Mark accreditation. The increase in work being received is reflected in the above figures. This has put added pressure on the staff and resources, but having made changes to working systems, increased cross-training of staff, encouraged multi-skill adaption and reviewed our listing policy with resident District Judge the impact has been well absorbed. The results against targets and national averages showing increased performance. The court has continued to share the courtroom accommodation with the magistrates, allowing them to use our courtroom for urgent hearings and to increase their Youth Court capacity. Courtrooms are let to the local Marine barracks for mock court martials, and instruction on social impact regarding health issues for local university Nursing students. The courts outreach work has continued to gather pace with inclusion in local council community strategy group and the Poole & Bournemouth CLS committee, being involved with plans to improve the CLS Directory, assist with a local information bus for legal matters that will tour rural areas of Dorset and a local website for the public to receive appropriate guidance on where to get legal assistance.
- **Portsmouth** - The bailiffs continue to perform well against KPI5 with recovery of the full value of the debt and tighter office procedures having a massive impact on the target. The Court has been given an additional allocation of 42 District Judge days this financial year. This coupled with the continued use of basic to back listing and the extension of the target from 10 to 15 weeks should enable the court to achieve a target that eluded us during the last financial year. The District Bench have expressed concern over the number of small claims and the number of people now attending on possession hearings. The court has agreed to review its listing practices but it will be difficult to create any more time in the lists without affecting performance, unless a greater use of back to back listing can be achieved.

- **Salisbury** - Later this year the court will be making an application for the Charter Mark award. In making the application the court will be obtaining greater feedback from its customers and will be making improvements on the current level of customer service. In November 2003 the court is planning to hold an open day for local schools.
- **Southampton** - Southampton is one of the few courts on the Circuit to regularly meet all the listing targets. Much of this is down to the case management in the listing office, checking regularly to make sure that cases are not likely to settle and filling any gaps in the lists as soon as they are notified. The Court user groups continue to be well attended and this year we added a meeting to particularly deal with housing problems. The response has been excellent and a number of areas of concern have been addressed to the satisfaction of all involved. Management and staff have worked hard to put systems in place to improve the service we give our customers and stakeholders and to make them more aware of our standards and targets and what we were doing to achieve them.
- **Swindon** – The court has improved its listing systems to bring small claims hearings on sooner (having dedicated small claims days with 3 District Judge sitting).
- **Trowbridge** - 2002/3 saw a continuing rise in workload of around 10% on both claims and family issue. Notwithstanding this increase, Trowbridge also carried out extensive relief work for Portsmouth and other courts on a remote computer link. Coping with both the rise in workload and helping other courts is reflected in the rise in productivity. Trowbridge has an experienced and well-motivated staff compliment not only put in an impressive performance this year but also carried out the extra work involved in achieving Charter Mark recognition. Waiting times continue to be an issue. Although the workload keeps rising year on year, the sittings allocation has gone down. Furthermore, the rise in family work means that our ticketed family judge who sits two days a week does almost exclusively family work, throwing our ability to list civil work further behind. Possessions rose significantly, as users became familiar with the Housing Reforms of October 2001. The court covers a large number of housing authorities and associations and has had to ask for additional sittings to list possessions within target.
- **Weymouth** – There has been an increase in contested work which the court has had to deal with by way of 'back to back' and 'double' listing. The high settlement rates have enabled this. There has been a decrease in issue of proceedings due to the local authority no longer issuing their 'car parking' claims through this court. This year has seen an increase in litigants in person issuing processes. The court was awarded Charter Mark status in July 2002.
- **Winchester** - Despite the reduction in experience levels there has been a significant improvement in the organisation of work in this court, which has led to improvements both in throughput and customer relations. The application of the Civil Procedure Rules has resulted in the reasonably early settlement of a substantial number of cases. Whilst this represents a benefit to litigants in time and costs it does often result in time set aside for Fast Track trials not being used despite best efforts to source cases elsewhere. This has a knock-on effect on listing shorter hearings. Within the constraints imposed by Winchester being a one-DJ court case management conferences are conducted in accordance with the group practice i.e. at the stage when issues are crystallised.

West Group

- **Bath** - At present court is working on raising its Productivity to reach the target. An action plan has been drawn to achieve this. The high usage of DDJ's should reduce this year with the transfer of a District Judge to the court. This transfer should allow the court to keep civil and family hearings more level.
- **Barnstable** - The pilot Civil Listing Office for Devon & Cornwall has provided the court with several benefits, one of those being the more accurate collation of sittings returns which is reflected in this report. Staff have coped extremely well with the pressures of the last year and have embraced the policy of assisting other courts within the group. Remote working was adopted to clear Exeter County Court's court orders and process the new summonses. Courtroom accommodation continues to be used by Tribunals and Coroner to maximise usage and looking ahead an exercise is being undertaken to consider sharing facilities with the Magistrates Court as a prelude to unification. Workloads have not fallen into arrears and an impressive score of 99.5% for dealing with admin work within 5 days, for the second year in succession, reflects the exceptional commitment displayed by staff. During 2003/4 the court will be piloting the Small Claims Mediation Scheme which has already been a success at Exeter.
- **Bodmin** - The workload is decreasing, but not by a significant amount.
- **Cheltenham** - There has been an increase in small claims hearings. The number of sitting days has been maintained. Small claims hearings have increased by 12.5% that has had a knock-on effect on waiting times. There has been an increase in bailiff process. Cheltenham County Court met KPI 3 and improved upon the previous year despite an increase in bailiff process. There has been a reduction by half a member of staff, but Cheltenham has still improved its figures on last year.
- **Exeter** - The ADR scheme for small claims cases has continued to work well and waiting times have been significantly reduced. The final touches were made pre-implementation of a similar scheme for fast and multi track cases and this scheme was launched recently by Baroness Scotland. The CLO pilot scheme has now been adopted permanently and any teething problems have been ironed out. Liaison continues to be good and Exeter has sat additional days, subject to accommodation being available, to assist with the throughput of cases.
- **Penzance** - This office has been successful in achieving the targets as set. A change in the listing practices for small claim hearings has contributed to the increase in sitting days. This has reduced the waiting time for parties and their witnesses whilst at court. On average the court sits two mornings a month (one morning in Penzance and one in Camborne) to hear possession actions. Approximately 23 days during this period were allocated to final Ancillary Relief hearings. During his period assistance has been given to both Truro and Bodmin Courts.
- **Plymouth** - The Devon & Cornwall Centralised Listing Office for Civil & Family work was set up and ran as a pilot, and was confirmed as a permanent office at the end of the year. This has resulted in better customer service, earlier dates, uniformity of practice and one point of contact for Circuit Judge work in Devon & Cornwall. A vigorous training exercise was undertaken, and staff are now regularly deployed to a back office to ensure throughput of work. At the beginning

of April 2002 there were nearly 200 hours worth of work outstanding and the percentage of work being dealt with in 5 days was 74%. By October the hours outstanding had reduced to 95 hours and the percentage of work completed within 5 days had improved to 89%. Since November the outstanding work has continued to drop each week, and the percentage of work cleared by staff within 5 days has consistently been above target at or around 97% each week. By the end of March the outstanding work was 43 hours, the lowest ever for Plymouth since the Business Management System was introduced over ten years ago. In November this court was successful in achieving Charter Mark.

- **Taunton** - This has been an exceptionally difficult year administratively, due to a flood in the building in April. This led to the general office being taken out of use for three months, with staff having to work in other locations within the building and at nearby courts. Under KPI2, small, fast & multi track trial in target, Taunton achieved 71.6 % (target 75%) against a national figure of 58%. We missed the target for administrative work dealt with within 5 days chiefly for the reasons outlined above. The bailiffs work was largely unaffected by the flood conditions and the value of enforcement warrant recovered target was achieved, at 76.8%.
- **Torquay** - The Court Staff can be congratulated on their performance over the past 12 months. They have provided an efficient and helpful service to all their customers in difficult circumstances and exceeded the level of performance expected of them. Despite a slight increase in workload and staff shortages for parts of the year they have maintained productivity and turnaround times at an excellent level. The Bailiffs are also to be commended for a significant improvement in performance. Despite losing some process from the new Oral Examination procedures, their more complicated work such as possessions has increased and they have still achieved a pence in the pound figure of 82%. Overall morale and teamwork is of a high standard at Torquay.
- **Yeovil** - The productivity & performance figures reflect a good years work, the court having no credits for clerks sitting in court which would enhance these figures. A balance in prioritising the work has been achieved in that we have scored 95.08(civil) and 97.88(family) in dealing with work within 5 days - both figures being above the target set. The bailiffs have risen to the challenge of improving their KPI 3 performance, now achieving above target. The judiciary & court staff work closely together so as to utilise listing time, e.g. block listing of 10 charging orders at 9.50 am; identifying particular time for short appointments, where we are listing 10 x 10 minute appointments in a 45 minute slot. The template for use by District Judges for production of orders is being used successfully and we continue to work towards achieving the best use of variable paragraphs. The Courtroom at Yeovil continues to be under used.

Wales and Chester Circuit

North Wales and Chester

- **Caernarvon** – reports a satisfactory performance against the targets over the period despite its size and impact of staffing difficulties from time to time.

- **Chester** - This has been a very successful year for the court in terms of the delivery of Civil justice. As the figures show, with the exception of small claims, all areas have seen an increase in throughput, most notably fast and multi track allocations and trials which, when taken together with increases in settlements prior to trial, may be regarded as effective operation of case management and the Civil Justice Reforms in general. Figures in all of the above mentioned areas exceed the national averages by a considerable margin. Administratively, the court has also continued its excellent performance in terms of speed of throughput, being one of only a handful of courts, which consistently maintains a 100% KPI in terms of work completed within 5 days. This is testimony to a hard working and dedicated work force. In terms of Customer Service initiatives, the court held a very successful "Open Day" in July which helped forge new links with the community, especially schools, and promoted better working relationships with co-providers such as CAB, CAFCASS and Local Authorities. This type of initiative when combined with a very active Court User Committee, which meets on a quarterly basis, was instrumental in the court achieving Charter Mark accreditation in October 2002.

Conway - This Courts business seems to have decreased overall but Staff are being utilised to the full. It could be due to the restricted jurisdiction i.e. County Court only making users issue through the larger Courts in the area.
- **Crewe** – Despite a drop in overall productivity and effectiveness brought about by enforced staff absences, the court achieved Charter Mark in recognition of the good service given to customers.
- **Llangefni** - The office has experienced staff shortage during this year as two members of staff on maternity leave with only one casual AA to cover. During this period the KPI's have been met and exceeded by extra effort made by the staff. In April 2003 the court received recognition for its customer service and was awarded the Charter Mark.
- **Macclesfield** - Figures produced for the year ending 31st March 2003 show that this court now has the second largest County Court workload in the North Wales & Cheshire Group. Despite this heavy workload the court is still able to provide an excellent service to its customers and was able to give assistance to other courts within the group. An excellent team effort saw the court successfully achieving Charter Mark for excellence in the provision of public services. A business case to re house the Court Rooms into a single self contained site with the Court Offices at Silk House has been approved and the new Court Rooms are scheduled to be operational by 18th December 2003. The new premises will improve working efficiency and will provide much better facilities for customers. Staff development continues to be given a high profile. Staff encouraged to and has participated in local, Circuit and Court Service initiatives.
- **Mold** - Mold is a busy Court Office with an increase in issue in the past 6 months of this year. It experienced difficulties in maintaining usual standards because we continued need to provide substantial relief to Wrexham County Court and apply for Charter Mark accreditation during the period of this report.
- **Northwich** - The business performance at Northwich County Court continues to be significantly above national targets. In recognition of excellent customer

service the court has been awarded Charter Mark status. This is an admirable achievement by the courts small, customer focused team who have worked exceptionally hard to demonstrate and maintain the standard of service their customers expect. It continues to offer customers extended opening hours, opening each day at 8.30am instead of 10.00am. The District Judge's chambers have recently been renovated and extended providing a more comfortable environment for court users.

- **Rhyl** - Year 02/03 was again a difficult year for KPI's due to preparation for their Charter Mark application, sick leave and training but despite this, staff able to keep all work within 10 days and most work within 5 days. Circuit Judge civil trials and District Judge trials with a time estimate in excess of one day continue to be heard at Chester Civil Justice Centre as part of the group central listing arrangements.
- **Runcorn** - Runcorn had to be moved from its premises to Warrington in August 2002 due to accommodation problems. At this time there was a significant problem with long term sick absences, which affected the KPIs for admin and bailiff work. The District Judge sittings also had to be re-sited at Warrington and were sometimes affected by the limited availability of accommodation. The staff vacancies have now been filled and with greater flexibility provided by the larger centre at Warrington it has been possible to improve the KPI for admin work to 96% and this has been maintained since March.
- **Warrington** - During the last year Runcorn County Court was temporarily closed and all aspects of the work was moved to Warrington. All administrative work continued to be carried out at Warrington. In the last 8 months of the year there has been a slightly detrimental effect on Warrington's productivity and targets due to the enforced re-deployment of staff to cover Runcorn vacancies. However, by the end of the year this had settled down and both offices are regularly attaining 96% and over for admin work dealt with thin 5 days. The waiting time targets for both district and circuit judge work was well maintained and trial work has been accommodated from other courts in the Group to assist where possible.
- **Welshpool** - The greatest achievement over the past year has been the preparation for and award of the Charter Mark. The preparation involved a vast amount of work which, owing to the small number of staff, was difficult to delegate and which made it all the more rewarding for the 3 members of staff involved in the application. Although the civil work has decreased the family work has been maintained and increased by 75% over the last year. The staffing level has remained the same though help is given to Wrexham on a regular weekly basis.
- **Wrexham** – Reports that the overall performance of the court was satisfactory and represents the hard work put in by the staff despite staffing difficulties encountered over the period.

South Wales

- **Aberdare** – Performing to the targets

- **Aberystwyth** - As a result of increase in Small Claims hearings the courts bid for an additional DJ sitting day a month was successful and should ensure all cases are heard within 15 weeks.
- **Blackwood** - The KPI3 figure is a concern and work is being undertaken this year to improve this figure. Blackwood's jurisdiction covers some of the poorest areas in the Country and achieving the target on the KPI will be difficult. However there is room for improvement and hopefully this will be seen during this current year.
- **Brecknock** - It is proposed to make more use of the courtroom at Brecknock County Court. His Honour Judge Hugh Jones lists suitable Powys County Council cases at this court to accommodate the court users involved and reduce the time/cost spent in travelling to court.
- **Bridgend** - In all but two areas the figures have increased. The most significant rise in allocations to fast track is due to a number of Housing Disrepair actions taken out by a bulk issuer. These were initially allocated to the small claims track but later revised to fast track. The increase in multi track trials could be attributed to an increase in more complex matters. The small claim average has decreased slightly still keeping below the national target. Although the number of claims issued is continuing to drop the courts workload has remained consistent this year. Possession actions have increased but it is insolvency work that plays a major role in weekly workload. Whilst there has been a fall in effectiveness, the figures for staff utilisation, performance and productivity have increased. The % of admin work dealt with within 5 days has dropped slightly this could reflect the increase in sick absence. KPI 3 has risen by 7%, the bailiffs continue to excel in this area.
- **Cardiff** - The % of Admin work dealt with within 5 days was 95.6% (against the target of 94%). This level of performance was achieved despite a significant amount of staff time in the first 6 months of the year being used in compiling the application for Charter Mark. The Court was awarded the Charter Mark in December 2002 confirming the commitment of staff toward providing a high level of service for our customers. The improvements in performance made in 2001/2002 have been maintained over the past 12 months. The commitment to reviewing office structure, communication and training has been maintained despite the turnover of staff, ensuring that the office can maintain this level of performance. The performance of our Bailiff team against KPI3 is noteworthy. Despite assisting other courts within the Lead Court Manager's Unit for substantial periods of the year, they have achieved an 18.3% improvement in the value of warrants recovered to 88.1% against a target of 76%.
- **Carmarthen** - The increase in DJ sittings this year was reflected in the reduction in the waiting time between allocation to the Small Claims Track and hearing.
- **Haverfordwest** – Reports success in obtaining Charter Mark recognition, despite difficulties experienced last year caused by the extensive building work being undertaken on the premises. The officers of the CAFCASS service have moved into premises on the floor above this Court which has proved to be beneficial to both the Judiciary and our customers as they are on hand to answer queries or attend Court if required at short notice. The court has developed a good working relationship with them, the local CAB, colleges and schools. Arrangements are in place for school pupils and college students to attend this office on Work experience in 2003.
- **Llanelli** – Good achievements made.

- **Merthyr Tydfil** – Good achievements made.
- **Neath** - 2002-2003 continued to be a year of good achievements for the Court despite a number of changes amongst the administrative staff. A good result was achieved against KPI1 targets. A few of the contributory factors were the achievement of Charter Mark accreditation, over 98% of correspondence being processed within 5 days and no errors leading to ex gratia payments. Achievements against KPI2 were pleasing with small claims hearings being listed within an average of 8.2 weeks of allocation. Over 99% of civil process was completed within 5 days. KPI3 was achieved by the Bailiffs recovering 78.4p in the £ on enforceable warrants.
- **Newport** - The Court is celebrating its success in retaining Charter Mark for a second time, but continues to struggle with remote sites. Since the closure of Monmouth and Chepstow County Courts this has been compounded by the addition of a third site at High Trees, Chepstow.
Pontypool - The court continued to perform well over the past year despite some staff changes and a reduction in the Court Managers working hours. Assistance was given to a neighbouring court and the court was successful in its application for Charter Mark whilst continuing to meet targets. The court has improved its Courtroom utilisation by allowing the IAA to sit three days each week, however meeting waiting time targets remains a problem due to a lack of judicial resources.
- **Pontypridd** - Despite a reduction of 3% in staff hours worked (due to two full time clerks changing to part time working) and an increase of 3.8% in workload, the court completed 96.8% of the administrative work within 5 days which exceeded the target of 94%.
- **Swansea** - The year 2002-2003 has seen a continuing increase in the business, and the court continues to achieve high levels of productivity. The increase in sitting days has continued to put pressure on courtroom accommodation. Work has now begun to provide a new courtroom and to replace District Judges Chambers with Hearing Rooms. This will provide the judges and court users with more suitable accommodation for their needs. It has been a disappointment to see a reduction in the percentage of admin work dealt with within 5 days. Staffing difficulties coupled with the increase in workload have put enormous pressure on existing resources. Assistance has been provided by a number of neighbouring courts and admin work is routinely completed by remote access to the courts computer system. The appointment of new staff is currently taking place and in the short term we will be focussing on their induction and training.

Midland Circuit

East Midlands

- **Boston** – Boston has very experienced staff. The slight reduction in workload has resulted in Boston being able to set up a back room system helping process orders for other centres. This has enabled other courts in the Group to reach its 5 day targets. The performance of the court has been maintained and we had a successful Charter Mark application.
- **Burton-on-Trent** – We have reduced our staff number at the end of last year and have, through hard work by dedicated staff managed to maintain a high level of

performance. However we do continue to have our problems with facilities in the building due to the Court being a Grade 2 listed building.

- **Buxton** – I am pleased to report that during this period most of the Court Service targets have been achieved for example 99.6% of incoming work has been disposed of within 5 working days, most work being disposed of within one or two days and urgent matter being dealt with immediately.
- **Chesterfield** – Performance has improved with the introduction of new working practices and the creation of a front and back office. The courtroom has been utilised by the court taking more ring-fenced work.
- **Derby** – The partnership and effective working relations between the staff and the judiciary ensure that the benefits and foundations laid in the previous year have been maintained. In particular it has been possible to make greater use of the temporary courtroom to target old case and use recorders to free up the main civil courtroom and judiciary and to adopt a mixed list approach to dispose of business.
- **Grantham** – Performance has been good due to the dedication of the staff.
- **Kettering** – During the year the workload has decreased. This is due to a combination of events. The amount of issue from local councils has declined steeply. The number of orders to attend court has decreased since the enforcement review. We have gone from 300 per year to 30. The parties will not issue because of cost implications. In addition, we have lost all our case management work as all fast and multi track work is now transferred automatically to Northampton so we have lost orders and documents filing work. However the court has continued to strive to improve customer services and achieved Charter Mark accreditation in April.
- **Leicester** – Performance plans to meet targets were made and reviewed throughout the year and whilst excellent results were achieved in some months, the situation remained fragile. Promotion of work/life balance has provided opportunities for staff to change their working patterns including staff on compressed hours and term-time working. Work continues on building partnerships with the magistrate’s court although this has been mainly connected with family work.
- **Lincoln** – This year the court has successfully dealt with the work of the “Lincolnshire” group, utilising courtroom capacity at Boston as required. The Judiciary in Lincolnshire have played a central part in this success. They continue to be both supportive and flexible towards the Diary Manager which in turn creates confidence, respect and ensures best use of judicial resources. One of the greatest growth areas has been the demand for case conferences. We have seen requests for this service increase substantially and we have also made use of the Crown Court video link equipment on regular occasions.
- **Mansfield** – The figures reflect another highly successful year for the Court and its staff, with increases above the national average for performance, productivity and effectiveness, all of which directly benefit all our stakeholders. In addition the slight rise in work turn around times, demonstrates the commitment to improve service delivery for stakeholders.
- **Melton Mowbray** – This year has been both challenging and rewarding for all the staff. We have improved relationships with various agencies. A seminar was arranged for local CAB offices. This proved very successful and it is hoped that further events will be organised, tailored to the requirements of the agencies.

- **Newark** – The year has shown an overall decrease in the courts workload approaching 20%. Where possible any spare capacity has been redirected to the relief of other courts. In addition has been directed to improving customer care. This has been reflected in the court achieving Charter Mark status.
- **Northampton** – The court has continued to achieve its targets despite 40% of the Administration team being inexperienced. This has been achieved by closely monitoring the work and ensuring that all the resources are deployed to optimum effect. It is also due to the hard work and commitment of the team who have pulled together in challenging circumstances.
- **Nottingham** – Nottingham is one of the busiest Civil Courts in the country. During this financial year, there has been significantly improved service in terms of delivery of the business, supported by well managed system mechanisms which enhance the service that is provided. The Court has also successfully attained Charter Mark, which is a commendation to the hard work that all managers, staff and judiciary have put in over the last 12 months.
- **Skegness** – A monthly outreach service was provided at Mablethorpe CAB with no cost to the department other than the time of the officer running the service. The court is making plans to relocate to the Magistrates Court in the near future, which will result in a different service with some back office work being undertaken at Boston.
- **Wellingborough** – There has been a significant improvement in the KPI 3 target, this is due to a pro-active approach by the bailiff and Court Manager.
- **Worksop** – There was a reduction in work during the past year but the Courts performance was still maintained above the National Indicators. Staff on many occasions assisted the other courts on the Group. The court was also successful in gaining the Charter Mark accreditation.

West Midlands and Warwickshire

- **Birmingham County Court** – The court made huge strides over the year against the backdrop of staff reductions of 26 across the whole range of business and a significant increase in defended cases. Sick leave has reduced significantly and the morale has been high.
- **Coventry** – Our BMS workload has only slightly decreased over the year however there has been a pleasing increase in the productivity and performance figures and this has contributed to us narrowly missing the throughput target. The court achieved the Charter Mark last year and this has helped us continue to improve our service to court users.
- **Dudley** – A very good overall performance with the Court regularly achieving and often exceeding productivity and KPI targets. Special mention should be made of the bailiffs' performance during a very difficult period, together with reduced staffing. They have worked hard to maintain a high level of service to their customers and managed to improve KPI3.
- **Nuneaton** – The court has again performed extremely well with significant achievements in the turnaround of admin work and pence in the pound. The court has during the year gained re accreditation for the Charter Mark, again a major achievement for the office.

- **Rugby** – The court has secured a higher productivity figure this year due to staff members being fully trained and their experience growing. Rugby now looks forward to the new challenge of the potential move to the Magistrates building, new surroundings, new facilities whilst keeping our focus on providing an excellent service to our customers.
- **Stourbridge** – The court has had a good year meeting all the targets. The staff received an award of excellence from the Circuit Administrator for successfully handling a 15 day jury trial in such limited accommodation receiving many letters of praise from the practitioners. The court was given the Charter Mark award recognising the efforts of the staff in giving excellent customer service despite the drawbacks of the accommodation.
- **Stratford** – Our workload is still increasing, but performance is still maintained. The move of the bailiffs here to cover Warwick and Stratford areas is still working effectively. Our systems set up with Warwick for transfer of work is running smoothly and our figures are some of the highest in the Group.
- **Walsall** – Staff at Walsall have coped extremely well during a difficult and challenging business year which has been dominated by our participation in the CTMP's Business and Hearing Centre Pilot Scheme. The creation of a completely new organisational structure within the Business Centre has all been tackled positively and enthusiastically.
- **Warwick** – The reduction in hours is mainly due to the relocation of the bailiffs, and their work, to Stratford County Court. However, this has been extremely worthwhile, with a much better service being provided to our customers. Significant progress has been made in productivity over the previous year which followed analysis of the workload using the Pareto exercise. This highlighted several key areas of work, which are now targeted. In addition a review has been completed of the accounting procedures, which has tightened control within the office. The achievements of the office are down to the hard work, dedication and loyalty of the staff who work within this busy small office.
- **Wolverhampton** – Improvements have been achieved in respect of productivity, effectiveness and KPI3. The court has continued to perform well in relation to the percentage of admin work dealt with within 5 days. It is worthy to note that about half the staff have only about 12 months experience. The appropriate training needs have been identified and an action plan drawn up to provide the appropriate training within the next few months. This together with the increase in sick absence, the fact that 2 managerial vacancies have been held and that a span 4 was sent on detached duty for 3 months makes the performance achieved all the more commendable.

Staffs/West Mercia

- **Evesham** – We have seen an increase in the number of cases allocated to the small claims track. The number of claims issued by the inmates at HMP Long Lartin has increased and their claims are usually allocated to this track. However the number of cases actually reaching hearings has decreased, this is probably due to the settlement rate that we have at Evesham.
- **Hereford** – I am encouraged by the performance and productivity.

- **Kidderminster** – I am encouraged by the reduction in sick absence and by the increases in productivity and performance.
- **Ludlow** – Over the last 12 months the court has been covered by a full time Court Manager and 15 hours per week casual. Workload has dropped, although issue is about the equal to previous years, the quality of work has dropped, claims are smaller, larger quantities aiming for fast track and multi track which are not issued locally. This is possibly due to the status of the town.
- **Oswestry** – The office has maintained an excellent relationship with all linked offices e.g. Group Managers, Telford, Shrewsbury and the Judicial Team at Birmingham. The office has held regular Focus Groups and Court User Meetings. I am greatly encouraged by the feedback received so far and the office morale is both good and strong.
- **Redditch** – Despite losing a member of staff and taking extra work Redditch has maintained an excellent performance and continued to assist other courts on the Worcester Group.
- **Shrewsbury** – The court has had a difficult past 12 months with a high level of sick leave, however, despite this morale has remained high and targets achieved. The court has managed to achieve the performance target for the work dealt with within 5 days, an area the court has had difficulties obtaining in previous years.
- **Stafford** – Despite ongoing staffing problems the court has continued to meet the majority of the targets for civil and family work consistently and cumulatively for the year. The staff in the court has not been increased despite the increase in workload.
- **Stoke on Trent** – The court performed well over the last 12 months and achieved all targets whilst also being hit with the loss of a number of experienced staff. Sick leave averaged out at 7.56 days compared to the National Target of 7.5 and we are aiming to continue to reduce this figure by holding timely and effective return to work interviews.
- **Tamworth** – A fall in workload hours at this court was used as a case for us to provide relief to other courts on our Group and on the West Midlands Group. Customer service has again been a priority issue with court user meetings being held locally rather than at the lead court.
- **Telford** – The continued hard work, commitment and flexibility of the staff enabled the Court to achieve all Key Performance Indicators over the past year. Staff are committed to improve on the previous years performance.
- **Worcester** – The court has performed well throughout this year.

North Eastern Circuit

Tyne-Tees

- **Bishop Auckland** – Charter Mark was awarded to the court for excellence. The court continues to develop its connections with agencies such as the CAB, Trading Standards etc. There are regular visits from CAB caseworkers who sit in with judiciary to observe procedures. The Bailiff Manager and myself have also attended CAB meetings within our jurisdiction and given Q & A presentations. The staff responded positively throughout the year to various challenges that have been presented to them.

- **Consett** – We continue to produce figures of a high standard despite the fact there has been 3 Court Managers in post over the last 12 months. This meant that 2 of the office staff have had to assist the Court Managers in settling to their new roles and giving assistance when training was being received. We give a high level of customer service which has resulted in good relations between staff and court users.
- **Darlington** – This report covers a demanding period for the court, encompassing our pursuit of the Charter Mark combined with the impact of extensive periods of sick leave by certain members, placing additional pressures on those remaining. It is to the credit of the staff that they have produced a performance that has in many respects exceeded that of previous years. Our successful achievement of the Charter Mark reflects the staffs commitment to customer service and the proactive way in which this is delivered and maintained. The Charter Mark process has encouraged the court to build upon its existing community contacts.
- **Durham** – Despite tight staffing levels and a complete change of management the court has produced some excellent results. The highlight of the year was being awarded the Charter Mark.
- **Gateshead** – The focus this year has been on customer service with the drive to achieve the Charter Mark high on the agenda. At the start of the year Gateshead was under the threat of closure, so it is a testament to the dedication of staff that they were able to put their own concerns to one side and concentrate on improving the service we give our users. The hard work resulted in being awarded the Charter Mark. We have assisted the Group during the past year by contributing 2 part time members to the back office team. This has helped to keep the unit working at the optimum level and so make a significant contribution to the overall achievement of targets particularly in relation to orders.
- **Hartlepool** – Overall the court has continued to perform well this year, despite problems caused by understaffing against allocation, and long term sick. It is the credit of the staff that they have continued to deal with 96.1% of administration work within 5 days and achieved productivity of 104.9% and effectiveness of 80.2%. The bailiffs have also had an excellent performance by recovering 90.3% of the value of warrants issued.
- **Morpeth** – Once again the trend seems to follow the National picture of the issue being down, as more use is made of MCOL. My team continue to give a good performance and we are delighted with our Charter Mark success and our excellent feedback report.
- **Newcastle-upon-Tyne** – Despite a 5% increase in civil work and a 6% reduction in staff resources, most KPIs were met. We were able to achieve this due to a back office set up solely concentrating on the production of orders. This initiative has now been extended to other areas of civil work. The achievements are all the more commendable during a year when other significant projects and initiatives were completed for example - Charter Mark a huge amount of time and effort was spent by the staff, judiciary and other agencies to enable an application to be submitted which proved successful. A Heritage Open Day which was a hugely successful 2 day event, opening the building to 2000 visitors from local schools and members of the public, it included mock trials, interactive events and historic talks.
- **North Shields** – The good overall results were achieved despite the court operating for a large part of the year without a substantive Court Manager,

resulting in that role being covered by deputising. The court will be applying for Charter Mark re-accreditation in early 2004 and a number of further customer service initiatives are being planned and implemented before that date.

- **South Sheilds** – The court continued to maintain good levels of performance this year, despite changes in staff, management and inconsistent staffing levels. Additional pressures resulted from the court preparation and application for Charter Mark which was subsequently successful. The satisfaction expressed by users of the court was a particular credit to the staff in support of the application.
- **Sunderland** – Despite changes in the Court Manager, loss of staff, reductions in staff working hours and changes in working procedures, there has been a constant effort by the staff to maintain performance and reach targets. Managers have shown a commitment to training and developing staff which has given the court increased experience and flexibility, and allowed us to maintain a good performance during difficult periods. At the same time, there has been a huge effort, to work towards, and gain, Charter Mark accreditation.
- **Teeside** – The court did well in difficult circumstances over the year. Despite a reduction in our staffing levels the court improved against each of the BMS supporting indicators. The management has had to look for more efficient ways of managing the work with fewer resources and a very successful initiative was introduced of a support office.

Humberside and South Yorkshire

- **Barnsley** – Staff at Barnsley have worked hard in order to meet both the court and group targets. As a result KPIs show improvements in most areas for this court. Staff responded well to the change of Court Manager, reduction in budgets and resources, and the need to assist other courts. There is a strong commitment to customer care here, staff are experienced and well trained, this is reflected in the high level of satisfaction we receive from our users and the fact that we have gained the Charter Mark for the second time.
- **Doncaster** – The performance of the court fell during the year due to a short fall of experienced staff being absent due to long term sick and resignation. An action was produced which resulted in some staff moves and setting up a back office where orders are produced. Since the implementation of the back office there has been a steady improvement in the court KPI figure and the hours of work outstanding.
- **Rotherham** – This year has seen another year of pressures for the staff with continuing high levels of sick, together with assistance provided on a weekly basis to other courts on the Group. The staff at Rotherham work well together as a team and their hard work and efforts are reflected in our targets.
- **Sheffield** – There has been a significant increase in cases listed for fast and multi track trials over the year. Careful listing and a high settlement rate have contributed to the targets being achieved. The court has also faced difficulty with the loss of several experience staff going to the Home Office, the resource situation on the Circuit has meant that none of these people have been replaced. The creation of the back office to process orders has helped with the throughput of work and the staff have responded positively to the challenge. We have been

successful in our application for the Charter Mark, which demonstrates that despite the pressures, the staff put the customer first.

North and West Yorkshire

- **Bradford** – The listing and the hearing side of the court business continues to perform well and the role of the Diary Manager is crucial to this throughout the six courts in the unit. Likewise the bailiffs performance is excellent.
- **Dewsbury** – There has been a slight reduction in the workload in BMS hours in the period 2001/2002. This is reflected in the amount of claims issued and the number of possessions. Productivity has increased during the period, but performance, effectiveness and staff utilisation has decreased. This is due to the court having two vacant posts throughout the year and the level of sick absence. The court is currently undergoing a recruitment campaign to fill these posts.
- **Halifax** – In the period April – November 2002 the court was performing consistently above the performance targets and it was very rare for any work to be dealt with outside of 5 days. Since that time it has been difficult to maintain these figures due to the loss of a number of experienced staff. During the year we have worked hard to improve the standard of Customer Service for example we have had an open day for court users and made visits to schools and colleges. As a result of the hard efforts of the staff and the improved service to our customers we have been awarded the Charter Mark.
- **Harrogate** – The slight increase in the civil workload was matched by the increase in productivity and the court achieved a very creditable figure of 93.4%. However despite this, the effectiveness of the court fell by 8% and this was reflected in the amount of process dealt with within 5 days. During the year the court also devoted a considerable amount of time and resources applying for the Charter Mark which proved very successful and was obtained in October 2002.
- **Huddersfield** – Although the figures show a reduction in our productivity and effectiveness figures, it is worth noting that considerable assistance has been provided to other Courts on the Group, particularly Bradford, and that we are performing well when compared with similar sized Courts on the Group.
- **Keighley** – The court has made very good achievements in this year, achieving a productivity figure of 90.8%. This figure achieved during a period of change, having a new Court Manager, loss of an experienced clerk and coping with uncovered maternity leave and long term sick absence at span 3 level, staff have coped admirably. Our biggest challenge for the forthcoming year is to successfully apply for a Charter Mark accreditation, but it is anticipated that there may be a drop in performance at times throughout the year, while staff devote an increasing percentage of their time to working Charter Mark.
- **Leeds** – The amount of claims issued continues to fall although Leeds is still the largest issuing court after the Bulk Centre in Northampton. There have been a number of mid level issuers who have moved to the Bulk Centre this year and as the court has actively promoted MCOL this has also been taken up by several local solicitors and litigants. There has been a slight reduction in the number of measured hours compared to last year which corresponds with the fall in claims issued. More efficient listing practices have allowed for a higher volume of work

to be dealt with at Circuit Judge level despite a reduction in the sittings allocation. The change in allocation of disposals has resulted in more cases being allocated to track and there has been a distinct increase in the number of fast and multi track trials heard. The number of small claims hearings have however reduced which is probably due to less of this type of work being issued. The rise in the amount of bailiff process corresponds with the continuing excellent performance of value recovery.

- **Pontefract** – Over the last year there has been little change in the staffing save for the change of the Court Manager. Having an experienced workforce has ensured that levels were maintained and also resulted in a slight increase in figures achieved in the majority of areas. Overall performance of the court has been very good and compare favourably with the national average.
- **Scarborough** – The collapse of approximately 10 linked cases due to be heard over 10 days had a big impacted on the courts CJ profile, but we still managed to sit 31 days against a profile of 36.
- **Skipton** – There was an overall decrease in the number of claims issued during 2002/03 as a result of this waiting times were easier to maintain and the number of District Judge sitting days were reduced accordingly. For the coming year Skipton will re-locate to the Magistrates Court Building. This will provide much better court room facilities.
- **Wakefield** – The court has done well this year in the face of the usual difficulties with staffing during the summer period. We worked hard throughout the year to improve customer service and are efforts were rewarded on receipt of the Charter Mark. A number of initiatives were undertaken including school visits, providing a presence at the local Careers Fair, holding a roadshow in the local shopping centre to heighten the profile of the court.
- **York** – This was a very difficult year with a good deal of the Court’s manpower resources being used in other courts on the unit and the group. The use of overtime and system reviews (CITSM visit) has contributed to the performance achieved. We are working towards identifying delays in care cases in accordance with the National working party and have contributed our results thereto. The performance in this area is very good at this court. We have developed a working relationship with local cafcass and have prop-active judiciary who deal with these matters.

Northern Circuit

Greater Manchester

- **Altrincham** – Overall productivity improved by 10% and is 9% above the national average. These figures reflect the work and commitment of staff who saw their number drop by 2 during the course of the year. This is a substantial achievement when borne in mind the court prepared for, applied and achieved Charter Mark, which was through real improvements to customer service standards.
- **Bolton** – Overall we have had a very successful year despite several problems. We have experienced staff shortages for most of the year. In spite of the difficulties the staff averaged a productivity level of 97.7% throughout the year which is slightly higher than the previous year and significantly higher than the

national average. As a result the court still exceeded the target set for dealing with administration work by some 3%.

- **Bury** – This has been a difficult year as more experienced staff have been lost to other courts. Due to the loss of one of the managers the office had to undergo further re-organisation, which is involved in depth training because of the lack of experience. Despite this, the figures on the whole have improved from the previous year. This has been due to the constant review of systems and processes. In addition all the staff were delighted to achieve the Charter Mark accreditation.
- **Leigh** – The report shows a decline in several areas of work, such as claims received, which is reflected in the reduced BMS hours. The reduced volume of business has resulted in a net staff reduction of 0.8 x Span 3 for the current financial year. The court received accreditation under the Charter Mark, which is a tribute to the work and efforts of the staff.
- **Manchester** – We have continued to achieve an excellent performance and in some areas the work has surpassed it. We have seen a high turn around of staff at all levels, which resulted in new managers joining the team at both junior and senior spans. Both managers and staff have continued to work hard reviewing working practices and systems, streamlining where appropriate which has enabled us to meet and surpass our targets despite carrying several vacancies at all spans.
- **Oldham** – Workload increased by 1.77% on the previous year but staffing was reduced by 6.5%. Despite this the court improved its overall performance in every target area. We have continued to improve productivity. We have exceeded the KPI 2 figure for the year and made excellent improvements to our effectiveness. This has been a tremendous achievement for managers and staff who have worked very hard to provide an excellent service to the customers in spite of staff losses.
- **Salford** – This has been a difficult year, the court has continued to lose experienced staff and this has and continues to have an impact on performance. The staff losses have resulted in the need to reorganise on a number of occasions and this has caused increased pressure and disruption for all staff. Despite this the court has done well in the performance it has achieved and has been successful in obtaining the Charter Mark accreditation.
- **Stockport** – During 2002/3 the court has started to prepare it's application for the Charter Mark and is becoming more customer focused, making links with other agencies to improve the service we offer and consulting with our customers on a more regular basis about the issues that effect them. The court plans to submit it's application in January 04.
- **Tameside** – We have recently moved to the magistrates building and although there have been teething problems and a few problems with the office accommodation, the overall move has been very successful. The new courtroom accommodation and waiting area are very professional with the Judges using the courtroom for all types if hearings. Both resident and visiting Judiciary are impressed with the facilities. The court has a proactive customer service officer who has maintained a high profile of customer service following the accreditation of the Charter Mark and is currently working with the court towards renewal next year as a pilot under the new scheme.

- **Wigan** – The performance of the bailiffs was again commendable and amongst the best in the country, further improving on last years figures. The court applied for and was successful in achieving the Charter Mark accreditation to recognise its commitment to customer service.

Merseyside

- **Birkenhead** – At the conclusion of the year end Birkenhead was in a stronger position than at the start of the year. The reliance on casual staff has diminished considerably and although remained unfilled posts, due to the difficulties elsewhere in the group, the court was experiencing more stability in its workforce. The court was also awarded the Charter Mark for excellence in customer service.
- **Liverpool** – Staff resource has been the major difficulty during the year 2003. We continued to lose staff to other government departments on lateral transfer, to other court service offices on promotion and were hit by long term sick absences. The loss of knowledge and experience impacted severely on the performance of the court. A major re-organisation took place to assist the court in meeting the staff allocation for 2003. This again had a partial impact on performance. The court remains committed to working towards achieving targets and improving customer service. We will continue to make best use of the resources available and review systems and procedures.
- **Southport** – The court continues to proceed with its application for Charter Mark. Many new initiatives have now been put in place and the court hopes to be in a position to apply in January 2004. As part of the application, two customer surveys have been completed both of which showed a high level of satisfaction with the service provided by the staff. Once again the negative aspects of the survey were in relation to the facilities provided e.g. lack of conference rooms, sound proofing of rooms and temperatures too warm. The business case for the waiting area to be upgraded, which was prepared the previous year, but there may be delays due to financial constraints.
- **St Helens** – Another slight increase in % of administration work dealt with within 5 days was seen, however what was pleasing was that this was levelled out more throughout the year rather than seeing many ups and downs as in the previous years. The court is far more effective as shown by the rise in this figure of 5.5% with a better utilisation of staff which itself was helped by a 5.3% drop in sick absence.

Lancashire and Cumbria

- **Accrington** – During the previous year the court has made improvements in productivity and performance against the background of staffing difficulties and increasing demands from the group. A great deal of time

and commitment went into the Charter Mark application which ultimately proved to be successful.

- **Barrow-in-Furness** – The small claims figures have gone down but more cases have been allocated to fast and multi-track which even out the figures. Fast and multi-track have more work than small claims cases. Although many cases have settled, there is a lot of work done on cases before they settle.
- **Blackburn** – Through an extensive training program on business skills with the staff at the court this has achieved greater flexibility and as a result there was a significant improvement on the KPI 2 figure. During the year there were 2 span 4s promoted to span 5 Court Managers and 1 span 3 promoted to span 4. This is testimony to the success of the court in providing opportunities to our staff as part of their development and contribution to succession planning on the group.
- **Blackpool** – There appeared to be some leveling out of civil work after the initial impact of CPR. There was a reduction in the settlement rate which might suggest that pre action protocols were having the desired effect. There has been a number of staff changes throughout the year and there is now a settled management team, this has done much to improve staff morale and there is a much improved team spirit which has encouraged an improved performance particularly in the latter part of the year. Where ever possible the court has made use of the operation support centre and remote working to deal with input and orders.
- **Burnley** – We have seen an increase in civil workload this year, as reflected in the figures on the report. One of the main areas of increase has been in claim issue, especially in the area of detailed assessment requests. There are at least three local firms of solicitors dealing with accident management company claims which, although often transferred to other parts of the country, still increase workload for the court staff and judiciary prior to transfer and this has had an impact on court resources. Bailiffs performance against the KPI remains excellent with the target being met throughout the year. A further achievement this year, whilst facing staffing difficulties, has been the achievement of the Charter Mark, endorsing the excellent customer service that the court has, and continues to, provide its court users in the area.
- **Carlisle** – We anticipate an increase in the number of possession cases as the local council have handed over this area of work to a housing association. The latter are taking a much more active approach which has a knock on effect for the judiciary and bailiffs.
- **Chorley** – Last year the management was fragmented, with the existing Court Manager leaving and various temporary managers brought in. Since January there has been a permanent Court Manager replacement. It is hoped now and the future there will be more stability, with areas such as the business targets being looked at. The overall workload hours has shown a dip of 8.4% although there has been an improvement on the figures for productivity, effectiveness and bailiff process.
- **Kendal** – The BMS hours worked is back to the figure it was for the period 2000 to 2001. The staff at Kendal have also completed 626 hours of

remote work during the year and spent 34 days assisting other courts. I think a special mention should be made regarding sick absence, for the third year running it is more than 4% lower than the national average. We were also awarded the Charter Mark.

- **Nelson** – We are a small court with 4.68 staff. It has one District Judge sitting once a week. We work closely with our regular Judges ensuring best use is made of judicial time and case management is carried out efficiently. The court regularly assists the Group by taking remote work from other courts whenever possible.
- **Penrith** – We are a small court in a rural area and this fact is reflected in the relatively small amount of claims we issue each year. However we pride ourselves on the standard of our work and always ensure that the KPIs are achieved. We have assisted all other courts in the Group with remote work each week and also provided assistance by sending staff to various courts to provide usher attendance, bailiffs assistance etc.
- **Preston** – We are a combined court centre with 9 criminal courtrooms and 1 civil courtroom. Use is also made of the courts at Lancaster and Sessions House. As a hearing centre we take hearings from all three tracks (small, fast and multi) from the feeder courts, maintaining back to back listing and making best use of resources. The staff work closely with the judiciary to ensure that cases are managed effectively and best use is made of judicial time.
- **Rawtenstall** – BMS hours workload has increased slightly this year. The court currently overstaffed by 1.5 staff which has meant that we have been able to provide staff relief for the Group, we have also been able to provide a remote working service. Productivity, performance and KPI 2 figures have all shown an increase from last year and a substantial improvement compared to the national average figures.
- **Whitehaven** – We are a small court and the staff work effectively to ensure a good service to the customers at all times. We are proud of the service that we give.

