

Foreword to the Crown and County Court Annual Reports 2007/2008

This is the eighth annual report on the crown court and county courts. It provides an overview of performance and information about local service delivery at each court centre from a judicial and administrative perspective.

Effective, transparent and accessible civil courts are more important than ever given the difficult economic conditions to which we are all subject. It is at such times that people need to feel confident that the justice system is working in their interests.

We recently introduced measures further to protect the most vulnerable households, and we are working with lenders and others to help people avoid losing their homes. A new mortgage arrears pre-action protocol has been introduced by the judiciary, designed to help those facing possible repossession. Lenders will be expected to demonstrate to courts that they have tried to discuss and agree alternatives to repossession when borrowers struggle to meet their mortgage repayments.

In-court duty advice desk schemes now operate in over 200 county courts in England and Wales, providing support and guidance for home owners, and free representation is available for more households at risk of repossession.

In many civil cases, mediation offers a cheaper, quicker and less stressful alternative to going to court. The Small Claims Mediation Service provided by Her Majesty's Courts Service is now available across the country, and has already proved popular and effective. Between March 2007 and February 2008, the small claims mediators at county courts settled 2097 cases, saving over 2300 sitting hours. A survey of 750 parties who participated in mediations found that over 98 per cent were satisfied with the service.

The success of the Small Claims Mediation Service has been recognised at both national and international level: HMCS won the Crystal Scales of Justice Award (presented by the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice),

another award from the Centre of Effective Dispute Resolution, and at the time of writing, it was short-listed for the 'Customer Service' Guardian Public Services Award 2008.

The Crown Court continues to deal with a rising volume of the most serious criminal cases. It is essential that the court processes are as speedy and efficient as possible, and we are seeing some not inconsiderable progress in this regard.

The ineffective trial rate has continued to beat expectations over the past year. The target of 14% was bettered, with the proportion of ineffective trials at 11.9%.

The judiciary and Her Majesty's Courts Service have also worked closely together to improve the timeliness of Crown Court trials. In 2006-07, 67% of committals for trial commenced within 16 weeks. By 2007-08, this had risen to 70%. Over the same period, the timeliness of sent for trial cases improved from 73% commencing within 26 weeks to 77%.

Going to court as a victim or witness of crime can be a daunting and traumatic experience. We have therefore focused on improving support for victims and witnesses and keeping them informed about the progress of their case. In particular, we launched a DVD in September last year, 'Going to Court – A step by step guide to being a witness', to help adult prosecution and defence witnesses to understand their role in the court process.

Work has continued to assist vulnerable and intimidated witnesses to give their best evidence in court. The Victims' Advocates Scheme has been piloted in five Crown Court centres to explore how the criminal justice system can improve the service provided to relatives of murder and manslaughter victims. An intermediary scheme for vulnerable witnesses with communication difficulties was rolled out nationally from November 2007. And video link equipment has been installed in all major Crown Court Centres, enabling vulnerable and intimidated victims and witnesses to give their

evidence remotely, subject to the leave of the court, without having to go to the courthouse where the trial is taking place.

Jury service can have a significant impact on jurors' lives, particularly where they are required for a long trial. This year, we implemented a long trial strategy with the judiciary, comprising measures – such as information booklets and standard letters to employers – to assist juries on longer trials. In conjunction with the Samaritans, we also introduced a national counselling service for jurors who feel distressed by their experience.

Credit for these successes lies with court staff, the judiciary, and other partners across the justice system. I am enormously grateful for all of their efforts, and I look forward to continued progress over the year ahead.

Rt. Hon Jack Straw MP

Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice