

Crown Court and County Court Annual Report April 2003 to March 2004

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

This is the fourth annual report on the Crown Court and County Courts. It gives a complete picture of how we are striving to improve the delivery of better quality services to those who use the courts.

There has been little change in the number of cases committed for trial, the number of cases disposed of and the number of outstanding cases in the Crown Court over the period of this report. I am particularly pleased that the proportion of ineffective trials continues to reduce. During 2002/03 the annual average number of cases that were ineffective was around 23%, compared to the average for 2003/04 of around 20%. Furthermore, in the last quarter this was down to 18% and well ahead of target (20.4%).

The creation of Local Criminal Justice Boards in each of the 42 criminal justice areas in April 2003 in England and Wales has enabled much better joint working between the criminal justice agencies. These have contributed to excellent results achieved and demonstrates real and effective commitment to improving the performance and the service provided to those who come into contact with the criminal justice system. In addition, three key initiatives (the Effective Trial Management Programme, Statutory Charging and No Witness, No Justice), which are in place in some parts of England and Wales, will continue to be rolled out during 2004/5. Together these will continue the downward trend in ineffective trials and reduce delays.

The County Courts have continued to perform well in the disposal and enforcement of Civil Business despite the additional pressures of implementing wide-reaching initiatives in Family Work. The number of new claims has continued to fall with a further reduction of 44,000 on the previous year. This trend is expected to continue as the Court Service develops initiatives to reduce the number of civil cases that need to be resolved by the courts.

The reduction in the number of new claims is not reflected in the number of defended cases allocated to the fast track and multi-track which has risen by 14,725. Despite this increase, over the year the proportion of fast-track cases heard within 30 weeks was 80.4%, comfortably exceeding the target of 76%. The target for small claims has also been exceeded with 82.3% cases being heard within 15 weeks. It is also interesting to see that settlements in multi-track cases has increased by 13% to 24,655 which may reflect the continuing success of judicial case management.

County Court bailiffs continue to produce an outstanding performance with a success rate on correctly directed warrants of execution of 90%, an increase

of 4% on the previous year. The number of attachment of earnings orders made has risen by 2% to 79,200. This is not remarkable in itself but when coupled with the 4.8% reduction in new claims it becomes more significant.

A number of Designated Civil Judges have raised concerns that the statistics collected nationally do not necessarily reflect, precisely, the position for each group of courts. A review of how the statistics are collected has been commissioned and should result in more meaningful figures being available for the report in future years.

I am pleased to report that by summer 2004, some 248 courts had been awarded Charter Mark in recognition of the standards of service provided to the customer. This represents over 97% of all Crown Court centres and County Courts in England and Wales. The performance reflects the results of the close and excellent working relationships at local and national level between the court administration and the judges. The Court Service has been recognised as the most successful public service organisation to take part in the Charter Mark process.

The Court Service has held Investors in People (IIP) recognition since 1999. Earlier this year the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA), for the first time in its entirety, received IIP recognition, acknowledging the Department's continuing commitment to the development of its staff and, therefore, the quality of services provided to our customers.

I am enormously grateful to the committed staff in the courts who work tirelessly in providing such a good service and in rising to the challenge of my far reaching change programme.

Charlie
Falmer