

**Crown Court and County Court Annual Report  
April 2004 to March 2005**

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

This is the fifth annual report on the Crown Court and County Courts. It provides an overview of performance and local service delivery issues at each court centre from a joint judicial and administrative perspective.

The year 2004/5 represented the start of a new era for the courts. Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) undertook a year of shadow running during this period before being launched in April 2005. The launch of this new agency has enabled closer ties and working to be developed between the Crown, County and Magistrates' courts. A number of judges and court managers have already commented on the benefits this will bring in terms of shared resources and greater flexibility around the use of courtrooms to meet customer need.

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, however, particularly pleased that the proportion of ineffective trials (those cases the trial does not go ahead due to action or inaction by one or more of the prosecution, the defence or the court) continues to reduce. During 2004/05 the annual average number of cases that were ineffective was around 15%, compared to around 20% in 2003/4.

This is undoubtedly due to commitment locally to reduce ineffective trial rates as part of the wider criminal justice reform agenda. Three key components are transferring the responsibility for charging to the CPS, providing tailored support to victims and witnesses through the "No Witness, No Justice" initiative and better case management through the "Effective Trial Management Programme". Crown Court centres have been working closely with other criminal justice agencies (under the Local Criminal Justice Board) to identify and reduce the key causes of ineffective trials.

A purge on outstanding failure to attend warrants (entitled Operation Turn Up) during 2004/5, which resulted in the arrest of a significant number of defendants, in some areas has skewed performance figures. However, it is important to note that this is a temporary glitch resulting from the outcome of a positive initiative and does not signify a downturn in performance more generally.

In the County Courts, the number of claims issued has fallen by 5% to 881,300, although it should be noted that there has been an increase of 8% in the number of housing and recovery of land claims commenced. An overall drop in claims issued was anticipated due to the implementation of initiatives aimed at reducing the number of disputed cases coming to court. Initiatives implemented on family work appear to have impacted on civil business, as

foreshadowed in last year's report, resulting in a reduction in both Circuit and District Judge sitting days for civil matters.

There has been an increase of 4.6% in Fast-Track cases heard within 30 weeks to 79%. The increasing length and complexity of Multi-Track cases has meant that the target of 76% heard within 50 weeks has been narrowly missed. In addition county court bailiffs have continued with their excellent level of performance in achieving a success rate of 91% on warrants of execution.

County courts that have implemented Alternative Dispute Resolution and mediation schemes are encouraged by their success and increasing levels of usage. More courts are developing these facilities and I am encouraged by the results so far.

A number of judges have commented that modernisation of the County Court infrastructure and the introduction of telephone and video conferencing is proving valuable to effective case management and in helping courts to meet targets.

Concerns have been raised again that the statistics collected nationally do not necessarily reflect, precisely, the position for each group of courts. Progress has been made since last year but some apparent discrepancies remain. A review of how the statistics are collected has been commissioned and this should result in a better understanding of what is being measured and why.

I am pleased to say that all Crown Courts, 7 Magistrates' Court Committees and 85% of the civil and family courts have been awarded Charter Mark accreditation. During the forthcoming year, 2005/06, the HMCS Charter Mark strategy (all courts and offices to achieve Charter Mark accreditation by end 2007/8) aims to move towards area applications and generic group applications to facilitate a more corporate approach.

All courts are actively involved in various outreach projects within their local communities, including with educational establishments of all levels and religious community groups, which is particularly encouraging.

I remain enormously grateful to the committed staff in the courts who continue to work tirelessly to provide a good service. I also want to acknowledge the important role that staff at all levels are playing in making HMCS a success and their continued commitment to many other initiatives aimed at improving the delivery of justice.

The image shows a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read 'Charlie Falconer'. The first name 'Charlie' is written on the top line, and the surname 'Falconer' is written on the line below it.