

# **Magistrates Courts and Local Justice Conference**

## **14 March 2005**

### **Speech – Sir Ron De Witt, Chief Executive of HMCS**

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I'm absolutely delighted to be here this morning and have the opportunity to meet some of you newly and many of you again. It's hard to believe that we're so close to the first of April. Only seventeen days to go, is what I'm counting. I think that works out at four hundred and eight hours. But what I'm absolutely delighted about is that we are absolutely on course for a successful launch of Her Majesty's Court Service. It's really amazing to think how fast the transition year has actually gone, but I've sometimes changed my vocabulary as I've talked about transition that this year really has been a preparatory year and next year is the real transition as we all work together to make a success of the new organisation.

It seems amazing that it's a year next week that I made my first visit out to meet the chairman of the benches in South Yorkshire. I'm very pleased to say that that was a great success from my perspective and gave me great encouragement in terms of working with you in the future. I remember when I started the job last year one of the first things I was given was a cultural audit of how the staff in both magistrates' courts and the court service saw themselves and how they saw each other. It was absolutely fascinating and unbelievably encouraging as both sets of staff independently identified the same sets of goals and aspirations. They had different views on how they thought of each other at different times and where you were going but they all wanted the same kind of organisation for the future and it was on this basis that I have steered the whole programme to form HMCS. What was absolutely clear was how absolutely and without caveat that they saw the importance of providing you the magistrates and judges with the right tools and materials to make your judgements in the best form and to ensure those judgements were then enforced as we've heard the Lord Chancellor say. Her Majesty's Court Service has been created to combine the best elements of the two services, the magistrates' courts and the court service, and also to bring new and different ways of improving the way we deliver the services, services to the public, services to our users, and services to you, the magistracy and judiciary. This has been a very exciting year for me and I think it's been a very exciting year for many people in the field, but I also know that it's actually been an enormous amount of hard work and I would like to thank many of you and all of those at the front line for the dedication and commitment to making things work so well.

This has been an excellent opportunity for us to effectively manage the way forward in the criminal justice agenda but we also must not forget the family and civil agenda as we move along by providing services effectively to both the magistrates', crown and county courts. This is the right

time for us to be building on the strong foundation that the magistrates' courts have established. Critically, the management team has been establishing early dialogue and best practice in supporting magistrates and of course HMCS management has been fully involved in Lord Falconer's programme on supporting magistrates to provide justice.

We have also been involved in many nuts and bolts work, the nitty-gritty. As an example, Alan Eccles, the Midlands regional director, is leading on a number of important agenda projects, enhancing career paths for legal advisers and support for training of magistrates alongside the judicial studies board. We think there are real opportunities to improve how the training of magistrates is carried out as we have previously heard and we recognise the time commitment this requires from you. But equally we know you want to feel confident in your role. Steven Caven, the North East regional director, has been looking at the support we HMCS provide to magistrates and judicial groups at various levels including the judicial issues group and the area judicial forum, as proposed and developed by the Magistrates' Association. Consultation with these groups will be incredibly valuable ensuring that the concerns of the whole judicial family are heard. Of course local effect and decision making is the crux on which HMCS has been established. The regional directors are the headquarters team and they are geographically based across the country, and it is at the local level that we are going to see some of the most dramatic improvements in the effectiveness of the courts. Effective functioning at the local criminal justice boards will be dramatically improved. No longer will we be sitting with disjointed voices and wielding less influence than other agencies at the table. We now have one voice the Area Director, at the local criminal justice board, a powerful single voice speaking on behalf of all of us.

It is interesting to look at the makeup of the senior people that we have appointed to the Area Director positions. A third have come from the Magistrates' courts background, a third from the court service, and a third have come from outside the services. This has actually made an experienced mix which has been already invaluable in shaping the way forward. It wasn't stage-managed, it just happened that way. Crucially, they have all committed to creating effective court systems in their area, understanding the different needs and issues in different parts of the country, and dedicated to excellence in customer services for the public, for all court users and to you the magistrates and judiciary.

What I am encouraging is innovation and creativity with a focus on local delivery within a national framework. Obviously I am interested in the inputs just as you are, but I am more concerned about the outputs and outcomes, and you locally should be focussing on the processes by which we actually make it all work.

So what do I want from the new HMCS services? I want the best from both services that went before, and there was a great deal of good practice to build on. But more than that, I want to bring

new and fresh perspectives so that we can develop new and novel approaches to improve on where we have already got to. I'm really looking forward to the first of April, it's a great exciting day for all of use, and I am sure that the new organisation will really make a difference, and I look forward to working with all of you. Thank you.