



HMCPSI

HM Crown Prosecution
Service Inspectorate

Custody Time Limits

**An inspection of the assurance
systems for cases subject to
custody time limits by CPS Areas**

May 2026

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Who we are

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPPI) inspects prosecution services, providing evidence to make the prosecution process better and more accountable.

We have a statutory duty to inspect the work of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and Serious Fraud Office (SFO). By special arrangement, we also share our expertise with other prosecution services in the UK and overseas.

We are independent of the organisations we inspect, and our methods of gathering evidence and reporting are open and transparent. We do not judge or enforce; we inform prosecution services' strategies and activities by presenting evidence of good practice and issues to address. Independent inspections like these help to maintain trust in the prosecution process.

Our vision

We are part of the solution to improving the Criminal Justice System through high quality inspection.

We have four priorities to enable us to deliver this vision:

- we hold the CPS and SFO to account for what they deliver (we make recommendations that drive improvement)
- victims will be at the heart of inspection (where we can, we will use victim experience in our inspection)
- using our 25 years of experience we will help public prosecutors improve (their legal casework)
- inspection will identify and spread best practice.

Our values

We act with **integrity**, creating a culture of **respect**, drive **innovation**, pursue **ambition**, and commit to **inclusivity** in everything we do.

Contents

1. Chief Inspector’s foreword	6
2. Summary.....	9
Summary	10
Context.....	10
How we inspected.....	10
Headline findings	11
National policy and staff understanding	11
Variation between areas	15
Governance and leadership	16
Conclusion.....	17
3. Context	21
Context.....	22
Caseload	24
The increase in the number of CTL cases.....	24
CTL failures	25
Assurance	26
4. Framework and Methodology.....	28
Framework and Methodology	29
The inspection framework.....	29
Methodology	29
5. National Assurance and Oversight of Custody Time Limits Casework	32
National Assurance and Oversight of Custody Time Limits Casework	33
Levels of assurance	33
Level 1 assurance	33
Level 2 assurance	37
Governance.....	40
6. Policy – Knowledge, Application, and Consistency	44
Policy – Knowledge, Application, and Consistency	45
Overview.....	45
Clarity of the CTL policy	46

Understanding of CTL policy	46
Consistency in policy implementation	48
Conclusion.....	54
7. CPS Areas	55
CPS Areas	56
Summary of evidence from the 14 Crown Prosecution Service Areas	56
Index page.....	58
8. Area Variations	76
Area Variations	77
Causes of variations between Areas	77
Variation in Area CTL caseload	77
CTL failures	79
Variation in adherence to escalation policy	80
Variation in Level 1 assurance processes	81
a) Weekly Assurance Reports and additional assurance checks	81
b) CTL Assurance app	87
c) Level 1 assurance monthly assurance checks.....	90
Governance and Area CTL champions	92
 Annexes	
Annex A	94
Annex B	97

1. Chief Inspector's foreword

Custody time limits (CTLs) are a fundamental safeguard within the criminal justice system. They ensure that defendants who are remanded in custody are not deprived of their liberty for longer than is reasonable without their guilt or innocence being determined through a fair trial. Effective management of CTL cases is therefore central to fair process, public protection and public confidence in the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

This inspection examined how well the CPS assures its handling of CTL casework across its 14 geographical Areas, focusing on whether assurance processes were applied consistently and whether they supported effective case progression and reduced the risk of CTL failures. The inspection took place against a backdrop of sustained increases in CTL volumes and failures, driven by court backlogs, increasing case complexity and growing demands associated with digital evidence. These pressures have amplified the risks inherent in CTL casework and tested existing assurance arrangements.

HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSP) has previously inspected the management and handling of CTLs, but all of our previous reports were conducted before the significant rise in cases to the unprecedented levels seen today. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it was unusual to find cases listed outside of the custody time limit; this is not the case today. Given the current operating environment, viewing CTLs as a shared responsibility between the police, CPS and courts is essential. The joint protocol between these parties should sit at the heart of the handling of CTLs.

Once again, this inspection identifies that the management and control of CTLs is seen as a responsibility of the prosecution. This is not right. It is incumbent on all parties to ensure that CTL cases are managed properly. The police should prioritise actions and communicate clear timescales; the courts should, where possible, aim to list cases within the CTL. We saw examples in this inspection of good practice where CTL cases were managed together, but equally we also found many where the CPS were not helped by partners.

Across all Areas, we found strong commitment from CPS staff to preventing CTL failures. Managers generally demonstrated a sound understanding of the seriousness of CTL obligations and the consequences when cases are not progressed with due diligence and expedition. We also identified pockets of strong practice, particularly where early case grip, structured engagement with police partners and timely escalation were embedded.

However, this inspection identified significant variation in how CTL assurance is understood and applied across Areas. Inconsistency was particularly evident in the early assessment of Crown Court cases following remand, which is a critical stage for establishing effective case strategy and identifying risk. We also found delays in

the timely application of the full Code test in a notable proportion of cases, undermining the prosecution's ability to demonstrate due diligence and increasing exposure to CTL risk in cases charged under the threshold test.

A central finding of this inspection is that assurance activity has expanded over time without clear evidence that it has added value. Weekly assurance reports, in particular, have become increasingly burdensome and variable in quality and purpose. In some Areas they absorb disproportionate amounts of legal manager time, duplicate information held elsewhere and obscure, rather than illuminate, current risks to CTLs. This reflects a broader pattern in which assurance has grown reactively in response to individual failures, creating an 'assurance industry' that is increasingly unsustainable and insufficiently focused on early case strategy and risk.

Limited national oversight has contributed to this divergence. The absence of a functioning, dedicated CTL national forum reduces opportunities to share learning, identify emerging risks and recalibrate expectations. Systemic pressures, most notably delays in digital forensic evidence, continue to drive risk to the CPS being able to demonstrate due diligence and expedition in their preparation of CTL cases, and have prompted further local assurance workarounds that increase activity without addressing root causes. We also found that the language and culture surrounding CTL "failures" has encouraged defensive practice and excessive assurance, rather than proportionate, risk-led management.

The current national assurance framework was designed for a different operational environment. In today's conditions, it is no longer fit for purpose. The CPS needs a different approach: one that is simpler, risk-led and applied consistently; one that prioritises early grip of Crown Court cases, clearer national tools, stronger governance and proportionate assurance focused on high-risk cases. The recommendations in this report are intended to support that shift.

I am grateful to CPS staff at all levels for their engagement with this inspection. Their commitment is evident. Delivering improvement now requires clear national leadership to reset expectations and ensure that assurance activity supports, rather than distracts from, effective casework and the fair administration of justice.



Anthony Rogers
HM Chief Inspector

2. Summary

Summary

2.1. This inspection assessed how well the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) assures its handling of casework where custody time limits (CTLs) apply in its 14 geographical Areas. CTLs are the statutory time limits designed to ensure defendants awaiting trial are not deprived of liberty for longer than is reasonable; they are fundamental to fair process, public protection and confidence in the CPS. The core inspection question was:

‘To what extent were CPS assurance processes for CTLs consistently applied across Areas, and did they assist in progressing cases effectively and reduce the risk of CTL failures?’

2.2. The inspection focused on the 14 geographical Areas, as this was where the majority of CTL cases are dealt with and consequently where the greatest risk lies. Inspectors conducted on-site work in all 14 CPS Areas. Specialist casework divisions were out of scope of the inspection due to low CTL volumes and a single recent failure.

Context

2.3. CTLs are set in statute and regulation, with shared responsibilities between His Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) and the CPS, governed by an agreed protocol. CTL failures occur when the court decides that a CTL will not be extended because the prosecution has not progressed the case with due diligence and expedition, leading to the defendant being released from custody and granted bail.

2.4. Recent years have seen a sustained rise in live CTL volumes and also in CTL failures across the CPS. The increase in CTL failures has been driven by caseload pressures, court backlogs and increasing case complexity. In April 2020 there were 7,493 cases which had a defendant subject to a CTL, yet by January 2026 this had risen to 11,411 cases. In the 12 months to 31 March 2020, there were 11 failures; in the first three-quarters of 2025–26 there have been 43. These trends raise legitimate concerns about proportionality, grip and the consistency of assurance of CTLs by the CPS.

How we inspected

2.5. We reviewed the national policy and operational guidance. In addition, we reviewed Area policies and examined assurance documentation from all 14 CPS Areas. In October and November 2025 we visited all 14 CPS Areas, where we observed legal managers completing the CTL assurance process and interviewed a

range of legal and operational managers. In December 2025, we interviewed national CPS leaders.

Headline findings

National policy and staff understanding

2.6. Most managers showed sound knowledge of key CTL principles and responsibilities, reflecting a shared organisational commitment to ensure cases where a defendant's liberty has been restricted are progressed effectively, and preventing CTL failures. It was clear from our time on-site that legal and operational managers in all Areas take their casework responsibilities on these cases very seriously. The commitment and efforts of staff to prevent CTL failures was evident irrespective of significant operational pressures, including very high CTL caseloads and complex evidential demands.

2.7. However, the inspection identified substantial variation in the depth of policy knowledge and confidence in applying national guidance. The Level D aide memoire – a central tool for supporting risk assessment and case assurance – was repeatedly described by legal managers as unclear, outdated, or insufficiently aligned with current casework challenges, particularly those involving extensive digital forensics and multiple lines of enquiry. Managers across a range of Areas reported difficulty using the document to meaningfully assess risk. This variability in understanding was particularly evident in the completion of the initial assessment of the case after a defendant has been remanded in custody and the case transferred to the Crown Court¹. This is a key point in the case, as early grip on case progression reduces risk as the case approaches the trial date.

2.8. Workforce factors contributed to this inconsistency. Many Areas noted high turnover and mixed levels of experience among newly appointed legal managers. Although induction training was generally well received, some legal managers lacked confidence in assessing CTL risk, especially in the more complex Crown Court cases. In this context, risk refers to the likelihood of CTL failures stemming from delays in progressing cases, outstanding evidential issues, or gaps in reasonable lines of enquiry. These are case-specific factors, such as digital or forensic evidence, or the complexity of investigations, that may affect timely case preparation.

2.9. Some Areas had already introduced local coaching or additional training to bridge these gaps, but this was not a uniform process nationally and points to the

¹ This takes place after the first hearing in the magistrates' court, when more serious cases are sent to the Crown Court. A legal manager will carry out a legal assessment of the case to identify issues, such as digital or forensic evidence which could affect case preparation.

need for a more consistent, structured approach for new legal manager CTL training.

Early case grip and identification of risk

2.10. Early case management is a critical factor of CTL performance. Where early reviews and structured engagement with police partners were embedded, Areas achieved stronger case progression, more timely escalation, and better identification of high-risk CTL cases. In Mersey-Cheshire, Yorkshire and Humberside, Wessex, and the South West, early case-planning conferences with the police and consistent use of escalation procedures supported proactive case management and reduced unnecessary delays.

2.11. Inspectors also identified widespread inconsistency in the completion and recording of the initial CTL assurance review by a legal manager of cases sent to the Crown Court, despite its central role in establishing early grip. Several Areas – including London North, London South and parts of the South East – did not consistently record this review on the assurance report or on the CPS’s case management system (CMS). In other Areas, the quality and depth of these initial assessments varied significantly. This lack of consistency weakens early visibility of risk factors that may impact on expeditious progress of the case and limits the ability to ensure that cases progress in line with CTL requirements.

2.12. The inspection also found delays in applying the Code for Crown Prosecutors² (the Code) full Code test, with 35% of cases examined during the inspector’s on-site visits lacking timely decisions. When taking the decision to charge, prosecutors apply the Code. The full Code test requires sufficient evidence to establish a realistic prospect of conviction and a determination that prosecution is in the public interest. Where the full Code test cannot yet be met because key evidence or reasonable lines of enquiry are outstanding, but the case is serious and the suspect presents a significant bail risk, prosecutors may instead apply the threshold test, which allows an immediate charge based on reasonable suspicion and the limited material available at that time. Where the threshold test is used, the decision must be kept under review, with outstanding evidence actively pursued in line with an agreed timetable. The full Code test should be applied as soon as is reasonably practicable once the anticipated material is received, and in Crown Court cases, before service of the prosecution case. Delays in applying the full Code test undermine the ability to show due diligence and expedition, especially where evidential problems arise later in the process. This in turn may influence the court’s decision on whether or not to grant an extension of the CTL.

² [The Code for Crown Prosecutors | The Crown Prosecution Service](#)

2.13. In particular, threshold test cases require early and well-defined case strategies, as they often carry heightened CTL risk and depend on outstanding evidential material being actively pursued. Where case strategies were limited or delayed, assurance activity tended to expand to fill the gap, reinforcing the need for early, structured engagement with police and clear agreements on evidential timetabling.

2.14. Several Areas had implemented a mandatory mid-point check on Crown Court cases at around 90–100 days. This created a clear safeguard: any concerns about case progression were identified early enough to be addressed and prompt remedial action could be taken. In one Area, the mid-point review highlighted that a key forensic report had not yet been commissioned. Managers intervened immediately, ensuring the work was expedited and the case was ready for the scheduled trial date.

Assurance systems and national oversight

2.15. The CPS's assurance framework consists of national and Area assurance systems. Although this assurance framework is comprehensive, its effectiveness at the time of inspection was limited by significant variation in application by the 14 Areas. The extent of the variation has increased over time as a result of the very limited national oversight of CTLs; the national CTL forum, the body responsible for coordinating work across Areas, had not met since December 2024³. There is an online Teams channel accessible to Area CTL champions, who lead on CTL issues. The channel provides a forum to raise issues and queries and share best practice. We accessed the Teams on several occasions during the inspection and saw that use of the channel by Area leads appeared limited and sporadic.

2.16. After a CTL failure, the national Legal Assurance Team (LAT) completes a detailed review of the case. These reviews provide a rigorous analysis of what occurred and identify the steps that should be taken to prevent a reoccurrence.

2.17. This is a necessary step, given that CTLs are there to ensure that defendants are not deprived of their liberty indefinitely without their guilt or innocence being determined through a fair trial process. Defendants are remanded into custody for specific reasons, one of which is often to protect the public from further harm and, as such, a failure of a CTL which leads to the release of a defendant on bail can have significant consequences. However, we found that a culture pervades in the CPS where individuals we spoke to were so concerned

³ Since completion of the evidence gathering phases of this inspection, the newly appointed Chief Crown Prosecutor CTL lead has set up a CTL Oversight Board that has met twice at the time of writing, in January and March 2026.

about the consequences of a CTL failure, not only in terms of protection of the public but also in relation to their own performance, confidence and career, that it encouraged the proliferation of assurance activity and had a detrimental impact on prosecutorial decision-making. This is perhaps a legacy from past approaches, but it is unhelpful and the use of the word ‘failure’ has in part allowed this to perpetuate.

2.18. We found that ongoing reviews of the reasons to keep defendants remanded in custody was often treated as procedural formality rather than a meaningful, analytical exercise. Earlier identification of cases which could be suitable for bail, with appropriate conditions, would reduce the CTL caseload, allowing assurance activity to be focused on cases where defendants remain in custody appropriately.

2.19. The lack of national CTL forum meetings had limited the opportunity to share learning, themes and emerging risks across CPS Areas. As a result, opportunities for organisational learning at a national level have not been fully realised.

2.20. The limited national oversight also allowed some assurance activities to grow substantially beyond what the national framework envisages. Many of these developments were introduced reactively following CTL failures, gradually creating a wide-ranging ‘assurance industry’ that does not consistently support better case outcomes. Without national scrutiny or recalibration, these local additions have expanded unchecked, absorbing significant managerial time while providing limited demonstrable impact on preventing failures.

Weekly assurance reports

2.21. The process of weekly assurance reports (WAR) completed across CPS Areas remains the primary local assurance mechanism, in line with the national requirement set out in the national assurance framework. We found that the format and use of these reports diverged sharply across Areas. Some Areas produced lengthy, narrative-heavy reports with extensive case progression detail. These documents often duplicated what should have been recorded on the case in the CPS’s CMS, making it difficult for managers to isolate current CTL and case risks. In contrast, other Areas had shifted to adopt more concise formats focused on the key assurance questions, enabling more effective and efficient oversight. Across a range of Areas, the weekly assurance system had become so extensive that legal managers routinely spent up to two days each week completing it. This is unsustainable and raises concerns about proportionality and value. These inconsistencies were exacerbated by an overreliance on the WAR to record case status, rather than using CMS or contemporaneous case progression tools. This

diluted visibility of the risk to CTLs and contributed to unnecessary administrative work that often failed to add clarity to the underlying case position.

2.22. The inspection found limited evidence that the current system of weekly assurance improves CTL outcomes. In several Areas, the WARs had become lengthy, complex documents – sometimes running to hundreds of pages – yet they were not associated with lower rates of CTL failure. Managers reported spending up to two days each week on these returns, which is time that could otherwise have been devoted to progressing cases, resolving evidential issues, or engaging with police partners. In practice, the weekly assurance process too often redirected effort towards maintaining the report rather than maintaining grip on the case. It also duplicated information already required on the CMS. Taken together, these factors raise a serious question about the proportionality, value and ongoing necessity of the assurance system.

Monthly dip sample assurance checks

2.23. Monthly dip sample checks were introduced in response to our 2023 inspection of CTLs⁴ to strengthen compliance with national CTL standards, but their implementation varied. Some Areas integrated these checks effectively into governance structures and used the findings to identify trends, strengthen processes, and support local training. Others treated the checks as a procedural exercise, with limited evidence of structured follow-up or meaningful impact.

CTL Assurance app

2.24. The CTL Assurance app is the method by which CPS staff are expected to report issues relating to a CTL case that could impact upon the CTL and the effective progress of that case. We found wide variation between Areas in use of the app. Knowledge about the purpose of the app and the data it could produce to improve performance in relation to CTLs was limited across CPS Areas and legal and operational managers.

Variation between areas

2.25. Variation in how Areas approached and operated CTL assurance was one of the most striking findings of the inspection. Differences were seen in:

- when cases returned to WARs before the trial or expiry of the custody time limit
- how cases were initially assessed after they were sent to the Crown Court

⁴ [HMCPSI - Crown Prosecution Service handling of custody time limits follow up - November 2023](#)

- additional Area checks, initiatives, and processes to assist with assurance, such as risk ratings systems.

2.26. These variations reflect local efforts to address risk but also highlight gaps in national guidance and oversight. Much of what we saw in variation had developed following Areas' reaction to failures. This is understandable to a degree, but moving away from nationally mandated and approved procedures has resulted in CTL management becoming an 'industry' with a disproportionate amount of time being spent managing CTLs. Without clearer expectations, Areas will continue to introduce divergent local practices, some of which are beneficial, while others are resource-intensive or inconsistent with national policy. Often, these practices are a reaction to recent CTL failures within Areas and there is limited evidence that they improve existing assurance systems.

Digital forensics and systemic pressures

2.27. Delays in the receipt of digital forensic evidence emerged as the most consistent and significant systemic risk. Digital evidence was a factor in 40% of the CTL failures we reviewed. Many Areas reported the need for better national guidance on assessing and managing risk related to digital forensics, as well as the need for better national agreement at CPS and National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) level to support local engagement around timeliness and escalation.

2.28. Persistent delays frequently prompted Areas to introduce extra assurance steps or expanded reporting requirements to track digital evidence, further adding to the overall assurance burden. Without clearer national arrangements with policing partners and forensic services, Areas will continue to feel compelled to compensate through local processes that increase activity but do not reduce risk.

Governance and leadership

2.29. Governance arrangements varied widely. Some Areas maintained effective CTL Boards⁵ with structured reporting and accountability, while others relied on informal arrangements or included consideration of CTLs within broader Area Boards. Areas are expected to have local champions who lead on CTL issues. Each Area Strategic Champion is expected to be a senior manager with responsibility for CTL strategy across the Area. They are assisted by Operational Champions from both legal and operational staff. The role of Area CTL Champions – both strategic and operational – was inconsistently defined and implemented. In Areas where champions had clear responsibilities and were actively engaged, assurance was stronger.

⁵ CTL Boards are committees that comprise senior legal and operational managers who monitor Area performance in relation to CTLs. The Board is normally chaired by the Area Strategic Champion who is a senior legal manager and usually a Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor.

Conclusion

2.30. The current approach to the management of CTL cases pre-dates the significant and continuing increase of CTL cases across the CPS. The national assurance framework was designed to deal with far fewer custody cases and was implemented at a time when the majority of custody cases in the Crown Court were listed well within the CTL of 182 days. With the backlogs that have continued to rise since the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing volumes of serious Crown Court custody trials being fixed outside the CTLs, the current system has become unmanageable. The ‘touch points’ in the assurance regime are no longer happening at the right times to be sufficient, particularly in Crown Court casework, which is leading to differing, piecemeal expansion across the Areas to address specific issues, usually as a result of CTL failures.

2.31. Despite the considerable effort invested across Areas, we found little correlation between the extent of assurance activity and reductions in CTL failures. Legal managers in some Areas now spend up to two days each week completing assurance checks. This reflects a broader pattern in which the assurance system has expanded reactively in response to rising caseloads and individual CTL failures, creating a level of assurance activity that is increasingly disproportionate to its impact and taking away the valuable legal manager resource from their focus on the fundamentals of improving casework analysis, strategy and grip.

2.32. The CPS puts significant effort into managing CTL cases, but we found its assurance systems are not sufficiently clear, early, or consistent to prevent avoidable risk. While pockets of strong practice exist, the national framework has not kept pace with the modern complexities of CTL casework. Assurance remains too procedural and often too late in a case’s life cycle. Some local workarounds have been developed to address assurance gaps at earlier stages in the lives of cases.

2.33. Legal managers spend too much time documenting the ongoing case progression status of individual CTL cases during the WAR checks. Their efforts would be more effective if they were focused on identifying cases involving aspects of work or evidence that are known to be high-risk, in terms of potential impact on CTLs, and detailing actions taken by lawyers and police to mitigate those risks.

2.34. CTLs remain one of the most demanding aspects of CPS casework, requiring timely case progression, effective risk assessment, and a coherent national assurance framework. This inspection found that although the CPS has established national standards and detailed legal guidance, the depth of understanding, implementation of policy, and functioning of assurance processes continues to vary significantly between Areas. These variations directly influence the CPS’s ability to maintain consistent oversight of CTL cases.

2.35. Across the CPS, everyone we spoke to was committed to delivering high standards of casework and assurance. This is unsurprising, as CTL failures pose a significant risk to victims, witnesses and the public and a reputational risk for the CPS. However, the inspection identified several areas where greater national consistency, clearer guidance, strengthened assurance processes, and more coherent governance are required. Addressing variation in early CTL reviews, escalation, monthly assurance, and use of the CTL Assurance app will all be essential towards achieving a more consistent and effective national CTL assurance system.

2.36. National leadership must set clear expectations and ensure that assurance activity is proportionate, risk-led and focused on early case strategy rather than maintaining extensive reporting structures. CTL performance is a shared responsibility across the criminal justice system, and assurance arrangements must reflect meaningful engagement with police and the courts to ensure that they too deliver consistently on their responsibilities.

2.37. To drive improvement in this new climate of increasing CTL caseloads, the CPS needs to implement a different approach. This will involve stopping the current weekly assurance process that has become unwieldy and instead focusing the legal manager's time on early grip of casework, earlier and risk-led assurance, clearer national tools, and stronger, consistent governance.

2.38. The CPS should replace the current WARs with a national risk-led assurance model focused on the early identification and active management of high-risk CTL cases. Areas should be required to implement structured mechanisms to detect cases at heightened risk of delay (such as those with outstanding evidence, complex disclosure, multiple defendants, or previous adjournments) and apply enhanced oversight to these cases until risks are resolved. National guidance should set clear expectations for how high-risk cases are identified, escalated, monitored and recorded, ensuring that assurance activity is targeted where it has the greatest impact on preventing CTL failures.

2.39. We make four recommendations. The first three recommendations are specific and capable of being implemented quickly to effect immediate change. The fourth recommendation builds on those three recommendations and is aimed at long-term change requiring the CPS to develop and implement a new approach to CTL assurance.

2.40. The evidence from our inspection shows that the CPS must fundamentally change the way it assures CTL cases, focusing resource on identifying and addressing risk. Any new CTL assurance should include:

- introducing a consistent coaching and mentoring approach for recently appointed legal managers to help them identify, assess, and manage risk when overseeing CTL cases
- updating the CTL operational guidance to clearly define case management and CTL assurance responsibilities for all relevant legal and non-legal roles
- ensuring that all CPS Areas use Joint Operational Improvement Meetings (JOIMs) to review CTL performance, including high-risk cases, and to monitor adherence to escalation procedures. Discussions and actions must be recorded and tracked
- introducing a mandatory midpoint review for all Crown Court cases, which must identify any emerging risks to case progression, outstanding actions, or evidential gaps at a stage where timely remedial work can still be undertaken
- replacing weekly assurance reports (WARs) with a risk-led model that prioritises the early identification and active management of high-risk cases
- targeting assurance activity where the risk of delay is greatest, ensuring timely intervention to prevent CTL failures.

Recommendations, compliance issues and strengths

Recommendation 1

By 31 July 2026, the national custody time limit (CTL) working group should:

- review Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Area reports on Level 1 monthly assurance checks and CTL Assurance app completion to identify performance issues
- scrutinise Area performance and share best practice through Level 1 and Level 2 assurance processes. [Paragraph 5.43]

Recommendation 2

31 July 2026 to clarify the responsibilities of Area custody time limit (CTL) Champions as referenced in the national standards, including:

- a clear definition of the Area Strategic Champion role at Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor (DCCP) level, focused on improving CTL performance
- a clear definition of the Area Operational Champion role, including the required legal management level and the expectation to provide coaching and mentoring to support risk assessment and assurance. [Paragraph 5.47]

Recommendation 3

By 31 July 2026, to revise and publish the custody time limit (CTL) Level D aide memoire, including the CTL Casework Quality Monitoring version, to add detailed questions for threshold test cases.

These should require explicit consideration of risk factors that increase the likelihood of CTL failures, including issues relating to digital submissions, delays in digital forensic evidence, and decisions affecting uncharged offences that may impact case progression and a defendant's custody status. [Paragraph 6.24]

Recommendation 4

The CPS should use the findings from this inspection of CTL assurance systems to develop and implement a new approach to how it assesses and manages CTL assurance. The new approach should be a risk-led model, that prioritises the early identification and active management of high-risk cases. Assurance activity should be targeted where the risk of delay is greatest, ensuring timely intervention to prevent CTL failures.

The timescales for this recommendation are:

- by 30 September 2026, the CPS to have designed a new approach
- by 31 December 2026, the CPS to have implemented the new approach
- by 30 April 2027, the CPS will have carried out internal evaluation to assess whether the new approach has been successfully embedded. [Paragraph 8.45]

Compliance Issues

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must enforce escalation policies with their police partners. [Paragraph 8.15]

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must complete the -seven-day threshold test case review. [Paragraph 8.35]

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must use the custody time limit (CTL) Assurance app consistently and use data from the app to identify and address performance gaps. [Paragraph 8.54]

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must use data from Level 1 monthly assurance checks and the custody time limit (CTL) Assurance app to identify and address performance gaps. [Paragraph 8.60]

Strengths

National oversight of failures is thorough and fair

National Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Legal Assurance Team (LAT) reviews of custody time limit (CTL) failures were found to be rigorous, well-reasoned and constructive; they highlight systemic themes. [Paragraph 5.26]

3. Context

Context

3.1. Custody time limits (CTLs) are set out in the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985⁶ to ensure that defendants who are awaiting trial are not deprived of their liberty for longer than is reasonable. The CTL for trials in the magistrates' court is 56 days. For cases sent for trial in the Crown Court, the CTL is 182 days.

3.2. Responsibility for CTLs is shared by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS). HMCTS and the CPS have agreed a protocol⁷ for the effective handling of CTL cases in the magistrates' courts and the Crown Court which sets out both the means by which CTL cases are monitored by HMCTS and the CPS and also the arrangements for the listing of CTL trials. The protocol covers the situation where trials are listed outside of the CTL and also the arrangements for applications to extend the CTL, where it is not possible for the trial to be commenced within the CTL period.

3.3. Where it is expected that the trial will not be started or the case will not be finalised within the time limit, the CPS is required to make an application to extend the CTL expiry date in good time. Common reasons for such applications will include situations such as no court being available to deal with the trial, or the illness of a witness due to give evidence. The CPS is expected to prepare the prosecution diligently and expeditiously. If the CPS cannot show that they have acted with due diligence and expedition, then the application to extend the CTL will be refused and the defendant will be bailed.

3.4. A CTL failure can arise in two circumstances. Firstly, where no application is made to extend the CTL prior to expiry unless there has been a change which means that it is no longer appropriate to remand the defendant in custody. Secondly, where the court refuses to extend the CTL because the prosecution have not acted with due diligence and expedition. In either scenario, the situation is classed as a CTL failure. Such failures are treated seriously by the CPS as they can result in an increased danger of the defendant further offending, interfering with victims or witnesses, or absconding.

3.5. Where the court has refused to extend a CTL, the CPS Area or Casework Division with responsibility for the case will complete an investigation into the failure. The Area or Casework Division will then prepare a report to CPS Headquarters which will set out the circumstances of the failure and the steps

⁶[Section 22 Prosecution of Offences Act 1985](#) and also [The Prosecution of Offences \(Custody Time Limits\) Regulations 1987](#).

⁷[Protocol for the effective handling of custody time limit cases in the magistrates' court and the Crown Court between HM Courts & Tribunals Service and the Crown Prosecution Service | The Crown Prosecution Service](#)

taken by the Area to prevent a repetition of it. Legal teams based in CPS Headquarters consider the reports and then share learning with the relevant Area, reducing the risk of CTL failures going forward.

3.6. Each CPS Area must have a CTL strategic champion, who is a senior legal manager tasked with overseeing and ensuring the effective management of CTLs within the Area. The strategic champion is supported by CTL operational champions, who are drawn from both legal and operational delivery positions.

3.7. Given the importance of CTLs to maintaining public confidence in the CPS, we have conducted two inspections of the CPS in relation to CTLs in recent years. A first inspection was carried out in 2021 and then a follow-up inspection carried out in 2023.

3.8. Our first report published in December 2021 related to the management of CTL cases during the COVID-19 pandemic⁸, when courts were unable to hear trials and the growing backlog meant that cases were routinely adjourned. The focus of that inspection was on whether Areas had effective systems in place to ensure that applications to extend CTLs were made in all relevant cases. The inspection found that the CPS had effective arrangements for monitoring CTLs, which ensured that CTLs did not lapse because no application had been made. It also found that written applications to extend CTLs were completed to a very good standard.

3.9. The follow-up inspection published in November 2023⁹ examined the progress that the CPS had made in relation to three recommendations that were made in the 2021 report. We found that one of the recommendations had been implemented, but that the other two recommendations were not being implemented consistently. They related to the completion on the case management system (CMS) of a comprehensive case progression log and weekly reviews of actions taken on CTL cases in the 28 days leading up to the trial or expiry of the CTL.

3.10. The case progression log is a structured record of all events and actions throughout the lifetime of a CTL case, which provides an audit trail of activity on the case on CMS. The case progression log should also contain weekly updates during the final 28-day phase, detailing the reviews managers have conducted to ensure that CTL cases are actively managed.

3.11. The follow-up inspection made a single recommendation: that the CPS must embed the consistent use and updating of the CTL case progression log on CMS, including recording the 28-day weekly assurance reviews, and develop a

⁸ [HMCPSI - Crown Prosecution Service handling of custody time limits - December 2021](#)

⁹ [HMCPSI - Crown Prosecution Service handling of custody time limits follow up - November 2023](#)

system of assurance to evidence improvement and monitor compliance with CTL policies.

Caseload

3.12. Managing and maintaining CTLs is labour-intensive for legal managers, who are required to review individual cases for risk and address any case progression concerns. This workload is compounded by the overall volume of CTL cases, which places significant pressure on the CPS and the wider criminal justice system. Since the summer of 2025, CTL cases have remained at around 11,500, which is approximately 5.7% of the total CPS caseload of 200,000 cases. The continuing backlog, combined with rising numbers of serious sexual offences and domestic abuse cases, has kept CTL volumes at unprecedentedly high levels.

The increase in the number of CTL cases

Date	National CTL caseload
April 2020 (start of COVID-19 pandemic)	7,493
September 2020 (COVID-19 pandemic peak)	9,319
Week commencing 25 August 2025 (Highest number)	11,765
Week commencing 21 October 2025 (Week used in this inspection)	11,297
Week commencing 12 January 2026	11,411

3.13. In April 2020, at the point that COVID-19 lockdowns commenced, the CTL caseload stood at 7,493. September 2020 was the peak point of the pandemic period, when the CTL caseload reached the peak at 9,319. However, the number of CTL cases has not declined, instead increasing and remaining at historically unprecedented levels. The number of CTLs on 21 October 2025 was 11,297, which is 51% higher than pre-pandemic CTL numbers of April 2020 and 21% higher than the pandemic high point of September 2020. This has since increased further.

3.14. In addition, the complexity and challenge of preparing CTL cases, particularly Crown Court CTL cases, have both grown over recent years. This is most marked in cases involving serious sexual offences or offences involving domestic abuse. Digital evidence, in the form of mobile telephone, computer and social media downloads, all add to complexity, particularly when considering the need to minimise intrusion into the lives of victims and witnesses.

3.15. The court backlog varies at different Crown Court centres. Consequently, across a range of individual Crown Court centres, trials are routinely listed outside

the 182-day limit. The pressures of the high number of CTL cases on specific CPS Areas are considered in Chapter 7.

3.16. All of these pressures and challenges have led to an increase in cases where the court has decided that the CPS has not progressed cases with due diligence and expedition. This has consequently led to an increase in the number of cases where the court has refused to extend the CTL.

CTL failures

3.17. The table below sets out the number of CTL failures across the CPS for each fiscal year. The number of CTL failures increased after the COVID-19 pandemic ended. The highest number of CTL failures was in 2023-2024 when there were 42, but in the first three-quarters of 2025-2026 there have already been 43 recorded failures.

Fiscal year (1 April to 31 March)	Number of CTL failures
2019-2020	11
2020-2021	5
2021-2022	22
2022-2023	21
2023-2024	42
2024-2025	34
2025-2026 - Up to 31 December 2025 ¹⁰	43

3.18. The rise in CTL failures has created challenges for the CPS, in terms of how the organisation operates and in its workplace culture. Compliance with CTL requirements is regarded as a core element of professional standards and organisational integrity, and any failure carries reputational consequences. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on assurance processes. We heard during interviews that the determination to avoid CTL failures becomes all-encompassing. It is clear in some Areas that there is a culture where the avoidance of failure can, at times, take precedence over proactive case progression. A phrase that was

¹⁰ These figures are for 9 months, quarters 1 to 3 of 2025-26.

repeated to inspectors was that CTLs were ‘an industry’, taking up a large amount of lawyer and legal managers’ time.

Assurance

3.19. The CPS has three main mechanisms of assurance in relation to CTL cases: weekly assurance reports (WARs), the CTL Assurance app and a monthly dip sample of cases carried out by each Area.

3.20. The WAR is a document that sits outside the CMS system. The report contains:

- all new cases charged under the threshold test and sent to the Crown Court that week, where a defendant has been remanded into custody
- all cases where a defendant is in custody, which are within 28 days of the defendant’s trial or their CTL expiring
- all custody cases identified as posing a high risk to CPS of a CTL failure.

3.21. Legal managers are expected to set out in the WAR, against each case listed, an assessment of whether the case is being prosecuted with due diligence and expedition. Where there are issues in relation to case preparation, it should include the steps being taken to progress the case. This report is completed on a weekly basis by individual units within the Areas: magistrates’ courts casework, Crown Court casework, Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) casework and complex casework.

3.22. The CTL Assurance app is the second main means by which issues relating to the assurance of CTL cases are addressed. Where a concern arises relating to the handling of a case which has a CTL, any member of CPS staff identifying that issue should report it on the app. The issues which are expected to be identified relate mainly to case progression or systems that could impact on the management of that CTL case. Once a concern is raised on the CTL app, a manager should then consider the issue as either legal or operational and address the issue with the person responsible. The app can be used to provide reports that identify issues or trends in relation to the management of CTL cases.

3.23. From June 2024, the CPS has required Areas to complete monthly assurance checks on CTL cases. This was done through a monthly dip sample of individual CTL cases with three aspects to the checks. Firstly, an initial check on a sample of cases after the first remand into custody, checking that the initial tasks and processes following the remand into custody have been correctly completed. Secondly, ensuring that case progression complies with the national CTL standards, such as ensuring that correspondence to the police has a target date for

An inspection of the assurance systems for Custody Time Limits by CPS Areas

outstanding work and that when material is not received by that date it is correctly escalated with the police. Thirdly, and finally, checking that the completion of the case progression log is up to date and comprehensive.

4. Framework and Methodology

Framework and Methodology

The inspection framework

4.1. In line with our inspection methods¹¹, this inspection had an overarching question that allowed us to gather evidence to support our findings. The overarching question for this inspection was:

‘To what extent were Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) assurance processes for custody time limits (CTLs) consistently applied across Areas, and did they assist in progressing cases effectively and reduce the risk of CTL failures?’

4.2. As well as the high-level inspection question, we developed underlying inspection criteria to ensure that we could evaluate our evidence and findings. In this inspection, there were four criteria which related to different aspects of the system for assurance of custody time limits (CTLs). The four criteria were:

- Is the policy for the assurance of custody time limits (CTLs) well understood and applied?
- Are the processes for the management and assurance of custody time limits (CTLs) proportionate and effective in supporting compliance and oversight?
- To what extent is national Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) policy and guidance for the assurance of custody time limits (CTLs) applied consistently across Areas?
- How effectively does Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) national oversight support consistency, learning, and improvement in custody time limit (CTL) management across Areas?

4.3. Each criterion has sub-questions supporting the overall aim of the inspection. The full framework for this inspection is set out in annex A.

Methodology

4.4. We used a variety of methods to gather evidence to enable us to answer the inspection question.

4.5. The inspection question was focused on whether the CTL assurance processes were applied consistently and effectively. Early engagement with the

¹¹ [How we inspect – HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate](#)

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) at the scoping and planning stage process for this inspection indicated that there were differences between CPS Areas in how they completed their assurance of CTL cases. These differences were most marked in relation to the weekly assurance reports (WARs) that were completed by legal managers as part of the assurance process. We therefore decided to visit all 14 CPS Areas to assess the extent of the variation between Areas in the assurance process, and to assess whether those variations met or exceeded the national guidance.

4.6. CPS casework divisions were not included in the scope of the inspection because they have relatively low numbers of CTL cases, and in the last two years the casework divisions have had one CTL failure. We therefore concentrated our inspection activity on the 14 geographical CPS Areas given that is where the majority of CTL cases are dealt with and where the greatest risk lies.

4.7. Previous inspections that we have conducted in relation to CTLs have focused upon the management of CTL cases and adherence to processes and procedures set out in the operational guidance. The national CPS Operational Assurance (OA) team had recently conducted work which dealt with adherence to CTL processes and procedures. The scoping and planning process for this inspection showed that the CTL assurance process, conducted in the main by legal managers, was taking up a large proportion of staff time.

4.8. It was therefore decided that the focus of the inspection would be upon the effectiveness and proportionality of that assurance work rather than the adherence to the CTL Standard Operating Procedures¹², which had recently been considered by OA.

Document review

4.9. Inspectors examined documents requested from each CPS Area, which set out their policies and procedures relating to CTL assurance. We also received and considered the WARs from all Areas for the week commencing 14 July 2025, which were then used to identify cases to examine and discuss with Area legal managers in more detail during the on-site phase. Where they existed, we also considered evidence relating to Area CTL meetings and forums.

4.10. We examined documents requested from CPS Headquarters relating to national performance data, oversight, assurance and governance.

¹² CPS Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are formal instructions that set out how CPS staff should carry out key operational tasks to ensure consistency, efficiency, and compliance across the organisation. They provide step-by-step guidance on processes, though many are now being replaced by clearer and more comprehensive National Operating Models (NOMs). CTLs are still governed by a SOP.

On-site phase

4.11. The on-site phase of the inspection took place in October and November 2025 when we visited all 14 CPS Areas.

4.12. As the focus of the inspection was on the effectiveness of the CTL assurance process, our methodology included gathering evidence through close scrutiny and real-time observation. For each CPS Area, a small number of CTL cases were identified from the WARs for week commencing 14 July 2025 that were submitted by each Area. These cases came from magistrates' courts, Crown Court and Rape and Serious Sexual Offence (RASSO) casework teams¹³. We selected cases to observe that had posed particular issues and challenges, which enabled us to obtain evidence of how the assurance process was undertaken on difficult and challenging cases that were most at risk of resulting in a CTL failure. During the on-site phase of the inspection, those cases were analysed and discussed with the legal manager who had responsibility for that case.

4.13. Whilst on-site, we analysed with individual legal managers the CTL assurance of the cases they had assured, either for the week or the preceding week of our visit.

4.14. In each Area, we interviewed senior legal managers and legal and operational managers who were either strategic or operational leads.

4.15. The inspection team observed Area CTL forums and meetings in six of the 14 CPS Areas. We also interviewed national operational delivery and legal CTL leads.

The inspection team

4.16. This inspection was led by legal inspector Giles Bridge and supervised by senior legal inspector Colin Darroch. Giles was assisted by legal inspectors Daniel Caan and Asma Hopkinson. Ben Hayter provided the business support.

¹³ We did not include complex case unit CTL cases because of low numbers of CTL cases and failures.

5. National Assurance and Oversight of Custody Time Limits Casework

National Assurance and Oversight of Custody Time Limits Casework

5.1. All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas are fully accountable for managing and assuring their own custody time limit (CTL) caseload and are expected to implement national policy and standards. CPS Headquarters plays a crucial national role in setting the policy and standards and the assurance regime. Thereafter, it should challenge local practices that do not align with them and ensure consistency across all Areas. By providing oversight and facilitating the sharing of best practice, CPS Headquarters should identify discrepancies and align standards, promoting a more uniform approach to CTL assurance. This function is essential for maintaining high levels of performance and safeguarding the integrity of processes throughout the organisation.

Levels of assurance

5.2. The CPS has three different levels of assurance, similar to those used in many other large organisations: local operational assurance, functional oversight, and independent assurance. These principles apply across the work of the CPS.

- Level 1 assurance are those processes that individual CPS Areas are required to complete themselves to monitor and improve performance. Level 1 assurance takes three forms when related to CTLs:
 - weekly assurance reports
 - CTL Assurance app
 - Level 1 monthly assurance checks.
- Level 2 assurance are those processes completed by CPS national teams that scrutinise performance by Areas, thereby providing oversight. Level 2 assurance takes two forms when related to CTLs:
 - CTL failure case reviews.
 - Thematic reviews completed by the Operational Assurance (OA) or Legal Assurance Team (LAT).
- Level 3 assurance is external assurance which includes this inspection and report.

Level 1 assurance

5.3. Level 1 or first-line assurance takes place within CPS Areas or directorates. It provides assurance that CTL performance is monitored, risks are identified, managed, and addressed, and overall objectives are being achieved.

5.4. How those assurance checks are completed by individual CPS Areas is considered in more detail in the next chapter, where we look at each of the 14 Areas in turn.

Weekly assurance reports

5.5. Weekly assurance reports (WARs) are completed in each CPS Area by legal managers and submitted to their Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor (DCCP) for consideration on a weekly basis. A separate WAR is completed for each magistrates' court unit, Crown Court unit and Rape and Serious Sexual Offence (RASSO) unit within the Area. Within some units there will be more than one report, with separate reports for individual police forces or court centres.

5.6. There is a national template for the WAR, but that template has been subject to widespread variation across the 14 CPS Areas. Much of the data contained in the WAR is a duplication of material that is recorded on the CPS's case management system (CMS) and on the Case Progression Log (CPL).

5.7. The national process mandates that in the following instances, any case with a defendant subject to a CTL should be listed on the WAR:

- Crown Court cases with a defendant who is remanded in custody, where the threshold test has been applied and therefore subject to a CTL should be listed on the WAR when they first appear within that unit
- all cases where a defendant is in custody, which are within 28 days of their trial or their CTL expiring
- any additional high-risk CTL cases identified that are not listed elsewhere on the WAR.

5.8. In all these cases, the WAR should contain a review endorsed by the District Crown Prosecutor (DCP) with responsibility for that team. Usually, that will be the line manager of the reviewing lawyer, but in some Areas the whole report is completed by a single DCP. That review will detail any case progression and witness management issues identified. Where there are cases that cause concern regarding due diligence and expedition, these are highlighted and actions taken to address the concern are set out. Once completed, the WAR is certified by the DCP to confirm that national standards are being adhered to. Once completed, the report is forwarded to the unit head – typically the Senior District Crown Prosecutor (SDCP) – for review and approval, before being submitted to the DCCP for final consideration.

5.9. No two Areas use the same WAR template and we found even within Areas there are variations between different casework teams. In contrast to the CPL, the CPS has not provided any guidance as to what is required for individual entries or

given exemplars of good CTL assurance. We could see that variations of the WAR had been exported from one Area to another over time. Lack of national oversight and sharing of best practice has contributed to the extent of the variation that we witnessed. National oversight through the CTL forum would enable Areas to trial changes to the WAR, which could be properly assessed for impact and best practice then adopted consistently.

CTL Assurance app

5.10. The CTL Assurance app is the tool that CPS staff are expected to use to report casework issues that could impact a CTL. The purpose of the tool is to reduce the chances of a CTL failure by logging issues as they occur and taking early appropriate action to deal with the issue and prevent recurrence.

5.11. The issues that require reporting relate to categories including failures in accurately documenting court hearings, correctly calculating the CTL, updating CTL-related tasks within the CMS, ensuring effective case progression, and submitting timely and good quality applications to extend CTLs.

5.12. Reporting an issue on the app brings it to the attention of Area managers and thereby ensures that the issue is addressed and where appropriate is followed up with the member of staff responsible for the issue. All issues should be logged and appropriate action taken.

5.13. A common theme from our interviews across Areas was a lack of knowledge amongst legal managers about the CTL Assurance app and its purpose. We found there was a range in rates of reporting between and within CPS Areas. The app itself provides a list of the issues that should be reported, but many managers we interviewed were not aware of this user guidance and did not routinely use the app.

5.14. The majority of the managers we interviewed considered the app as having little practical use and thought that it actually led to a duplication of work for them. In some interviews, managers said that using the app meant that they were, 'just reporting an issue to themselves'. Many legal managers, including a significant number of senior staff, were unaware that a key function of the app is to record CTL issues, thus allowing the data to be monitored and analysed for trends and the identification of aspects that needed improvement.

5.15. Area administrators have access to detailed management information reports. The Operational and Legal Assurance Dashboard¹⁴ provides summary and trend analysis data at national and Area level. Our consideration of the data revealed that there were wide variations between Areas in reporting levels. In the

¹⁴ The dashboard provides data for CTL Assurance app issues reported: over time, issue and also by area.

first nine months of 2025-2026 there were 3,946 issues relating to CPS staff reported nationally, of which 42 were reported in Cymru-Wales and 26 for East Midlands. In the West Midlands Area, there were 778 issues relating to CPS staff reported¹⁵.

5.16. In addition, although the data is available and can be analysed, there is currently no consideration of this data at a national level. There is no national scrutiny or challenge of individual Areas as to what use they are making of the data to improve performance. Some Areas were utilising the data to monitor and improve performance. For example, Mersey-Cheshire considered the data at the CTL Board and identified training required for a small number of staff. We were told that that national scrutiny of Area performance would be considered by the national CTL forum going forwards. More consistent reporting of issues through the app would ensure that data could be used to identify trends, recurring issues, and systemic risks across units and Areas. Analysing the data at Area and national level would improve CTL assurance by increasing oversight, highlighting training needs, and strengthening the consistency of CTL management processes.

Monthly Level 1 assurance checks

5.17. These checks have been a mandatory requirement since June 2024 and are designed to provide assurance locally and nationally of compliance with the national standards for the management of CTLs. They also support recommendations made in our recent inspections, to assure the consistent use and updating of the CPL and to provide a system of assurance to evidence improvement and monitor compliance with CTL policies.

5.18. Level 1 monthly assurance checks are dip samples of CTL cases carried out within each individual Area to check compliance with the CTL standards and policies. Areas are required to dip sample 10% of cases after the initial court decision to remand into custody, to evidence that the initial post-remand tasks have been completed. In addition, Areas are required to sample ten cases 28 days prior to expiry of CTL or trial to monitor whether the CPL is comprehensive and complete or not. Areas are also required to check adherence to the national standards, such as complying with court orders on time, following the escalation policy and providing the police with target dates for action plans. These checks are done across all units in the Area, magistrates' court, Crown Court, RASSO, and complex case unit in proportion to the caseload of the unit, which is being done across all Areas.

¹⁵ The percentage figures are Cymru-Wales was responsible for 1.1% of all reports, East Midlands 0.7% and West Midlands 19.7%.

5.19. Issues relating to individual cases are addressed with the staff member responsible. The checks also enable trends and changes in performance to be identified, which the Area should then address. We consider how Areas utilise and act upon the data produced by the monthly checks in more detail in Chapter 7.

5.20. We saw limited evidence across a small number of Areas that the results of the monthly checks were being used to drive improvements on CTL compliance. Where this took place, it was done through the work of local CTL forums or boards. More often, Areas would note the figures without setting clear actions – that were also then assessed for impact – to address the issues.

5.21. Although there was a national CTL forum at the time of inspection, it had not met for 12 months and consequently there were limited systems in place to review and challenge Area performance or discrepancies regarding the CTL Assurance app and the monthly Level 1 assurance checks. Data relating to usage of the CTL Assurance app is included within reports produced to consider overall Area performance and is also reviewed at the national Performance and Assurance Board¹⁶.

5.22. At the time of writing, a new national CTL Oversight Board has been established. Introducing a requirement for Areas to report their outcomes on the CTL Assurance app and the Level 1 assurance checks to this board would introduce greater accountability by providing a benchmark to assess Area performance across the CPS. There would then be consistent national oversight of all CPS Areas.

5.23. This structured approach to reporting would also encourage individual Areas to actively identify challenges and put in place actions to address and enhance compliance and operational effectiveness. As a result, successful strategies and best practice could be more readily identified and disseminated organisation-wide, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Level 2 assurance

CTL failure reviews

5.24. The most frequent form of national Level 2 assurance in relation to Areas is through the case reviews completed by the LAT after each CTL failure.

5.25. For every potential CTL failure on a case, the relevant CPS Area is expected to complete a background report providing details of the circumstances. The Area

¹⁶ The CPS Performance and Assurance Board is a national board that reviews performance and assesses whether problems or risks are being properly addressed, using performance data and assurance information.

then submits it to the LAT, which completes further enquiries and submits an additional report detailing the reasons for the CTL failure to the Directors of Legal Service (DLS). The DLS then decide if the case should be recorded as a CTL failure, form a judgement on its causes and whether the Area is at fault for it. The Director of Legal Services then writes a letter to the Chief Crown Prosecutor (CCP) setting out their findings, the reason for the failure and any remedial action expected to improve performance on other CTL cases and reduce the risk of any further CTL failures. On inspection, we saw no evidence of any national assurance that the relevant actions had been taken or assessment of impact and neither was there consistent sharing of this across Areas.

5.26. As part of this inspection, we considered the two most recent CTL failure reports completed by the LAT for each of the 14 CPS Areas. The reports that we read clearly identified the causes of the failures and, where appropriate, agreed or disagreed with the Area reports. Where the LAT team disagreed with the Area report, clear reasons were provided to justify the different conclusions reached. It was clear that there was a high level of scrutiny applied and thought given to any additional actions required to prevent recurrence of a CTL failure.

5.27. The process allows the Area a strict three-week timetable to produce their report, which is adhered to. The LAT then have three weeks to produce their report for submission to the DLS. The DLS decision letters that we saw were provided to the Area in seven-to-eight weeks from submission of the report by the Area. The timescale allowed is reasonable and proximate and does not prevent Areas acting on their own findings whilst the DLS decision letter is awaited.

Strengths

National oversight of failures is thorough and fair

National Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Legal Assurance Team (LAT) reviews of custody time limit (CTL) failures were found to be rigorous, well-reasoned and constructive; they highlight systemic themes.

5.28. CTLs are essential safeguards to ensure defendants are not held in custody for excessive periods without their case being concluded at trial. Remand decisions are made for specific reasons, often to protect the public from further offending, and any lapse that results in a defendant being released on bail can therefore have serious consequences.

5.29. We found, however, that a strong fear of CTL failures persists within the CPS. Many staff described concerns not only about risks to the public but also about the perceived impact on their own performance, confidence and career. This has contributed to an over-reliance on assurance activity and, at times, has negatively influenced prosecutorial decision-making. This was most marked in the

activity of legal managers on the WAR, where work entries completed by colleagues were double checked and updates focused on detailing case progression rather than assessing and addressing risk in individual cases. This culture appears to stem from legacy approaches and is unhelpful. This culture is something the CPS will want to consider in any future changes to how it handles CTLs.

Thematic reviews

5.30. Thematic reviews tend to be carried out on an ad hoc basis and are completed by the LAT and OA within CPS Headquarters, with the intention of understanding and explaining CPS Area performance in relation to CTLs.

5.31. Given the marked increase in CTL failures over time, the LAT conducted a review of three CPS Areas that had shown a sharp increase in CTL failures over the last two years. The results of that review were that the increase in CTL failures could not be attributed to Area performance but rather related to individual decisions. We also did not identify individual Area performance as a factor impacting CTL failures.

5.32. OA performs a similar function to LAT but focuses on operational delivery effectiveness and efficiency, rather than legal decision-making.

5.33. In July 2025, OA completed a thematic review of the Level 1 monthly assurance checks for CTL cases. This review was completed in response to our 2023 follow-up inspection recommendation that the CPS ‘develop a system of assurance to evidence improvement and monitor compliance with CTL policies’. The review confirmed that CPS Areas were conducting monthly checks; however, it highlighted disparities in the individual CPS Areas’ assessment of whether CTL tasks had been properly completed. Following on from these findings in September 2025, OA provided additional guidance of the expected requirements of the monthly checks. This should help the Areas to improve consistency in their assessment of the CTL checks. If complied with, it will lead to improved compliance with the national standards for the management of CTLs and the earlier identification of issues within Areas, therefore preventing CTL failures. Given the timescales of our inspection, we were unable to assess if there was greater consistency across Areas in relation to the assessment of CTL tasks owing to the recently shared guidance.

5.34. The OA report did identify that the issue of consistency between Areas in completion of the CTL monitoring tasks would be assisted through automation of checks. Automatic updating of the CPL, which acts as the audit trail for CTL activities on CMS, would improve consistency and reduce workload for operational and legal staff. Work on this started in the summer of 2025 . We understand from our interviews with national OA staff that work on this project is ongoing and testing

is planned to take place when this report is published. This work has the potential to improve the quality of CTL assurance and reduce workload.

Governance

National CTL forum

5.35. The CPS had a national CTL forum, which consisted of representatives from CPS Areas and the specialist divisions together with the national leads. The last meeting of the forum was in December 2024. The forum had previously met on a quarterly basis. Staff changes and a delay in appointing a legal lead for the forum were given as the reasons for the failure to meet for a year. Given the rising volumes of CTL cases, the increasing volumes of CTL failures and the potentially serious consequences of them, the lack of national oversight for such a long period is unacceptable and has led to the disparate approaches we set out within this report.

5.36. During the inspection, the CPS was in the process of re-establishing national scrutiny. The Chief Crown Prosecutor of CPS South West had taken over the role as national lead for CTLs in late 2025. In January 2026, a national CTL Oversight Board was established with terms of reference. The CPS is now in the process of establishing a national CTL working group, to replace the previous national CTL forum. The new CTL working group is due to meet in April 2026 and will have representatives at DCCP level from all Areas and specialist divisions.

CTL failures recorded by quarter

2025	January to March	April to June	July to September	October to December
Number of CTL failures	10	16	18	9

5.37. It is important that there is strategic national oversight of CTLs, in order to challenge Areas and specialist divisions. When the national CTL working group commences meeting, it will need address a number of issues including the variation of practices between Areas, the ability to learn from CTL failures across the organisation, and the sharing of good practice.

5.38. We found that there is real variation in the way that individual CPS Areas carry out CTL assurance. The fact that the forum had not met for such a period is one of the reasons for this and has resulted in those variations in assurance processes increasing. In Chapter 7, we examine the additional structures and processes that different CPS Areas have implemented in addition to the national requirements to assure CTL cases.

5.39. The variation has also limited the ability of the CPS to learn from CTL failures and share good practice across and between CPS Areas. Our interviews with national leaders recognised this as a key issue.

5.40. The LAT produce a quarterly report which sets out a summary of recent CTL failures and any trends that have been identified. That report is then considered by CPS senior leaders at a national level. During our interviews, senior legal leaders across CPS Areas stated that the information relating to recent CTL failures across the CPS was not regularly shared with them and that this was a concern, as they were unable to benefit from the experiences of other Areas.

5.41. We found that the reasons for CTL failures are usually common across Areas and known to Area senior managers. The reasons are often late receipt and service of evidence or unused material and a failure to have escalated these issues with the police at an early stage and in a consistent manner, in accordance with agreed procedures. Essentially, this is a failure of case progression, contributed to by a lack of grip of the case and lack of oversight by the legal manager. Those factors were present in the CTL failure reports that we considered from CPS Areas; the themes from these failures should be shared with Areas to improve performance nationally.

5.42. When the national CTL forum was regularly meeting, the sharing of good practice and discussions of common reasons for failures was taking place and there were examples of the forum identifying issues of national concern that required action by Areas. An example of this was a briefing document produced by LAT about common issues relating to mobile telephones. Across CPS Areas, this document was felt to be very helpful as it had assisted in addressing the issue and working with police forces and other criminal justice partners such as the courts. Area representatives also felt that a quarterly report updating trends in recent failures would be useful.

5.43. From the CTL failure reports that we considered and also our interviews across all Areas, digital forensics and mobile telephones in particular continue to be an important factor in CTL failures, as they featured in 40% of the failure reports that we considered. Digital forensics pose issues in case progression of CTL cases more generally. Many of the difficult CTL cases that we discussed with individual legal managers when on-site involved digital forensics. CPS assurance processes at national level should continue to monitor these trends and communicate them to Areas, including the dissemination of any good practices identified in addressing such issues. The new national CTL working group has a significant role to play in this.

Recommendation 1

By 31 July 2026, the national custody time limit (CTL) working group should:

- review Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Area reports on Level 1 monthly assurance checks and CTL Assurance app completion to identify performance issues
- scrutinise Area performance and share best practice through Level 1 and Level 2 assurance processes. [Paragraph 5.43]

Allocating responsibility for CTL assurance at the right level

5.44. In January 2021, the role and responsibility documents for CTL Strategic Champions and Operational Champions were circulated. They have not been amended since. Each CPS Area is required to have people in these roles. They play a critical role in ensuring compliance with CTL policy, national standards, and local strategies. The Strategic Champion sets the direction for CTL management, oversees assurance processes, consults with criminal justice partners and reports performance to senior leadership. Operational Champions support this by conducting local assurance checks, coordinating audits, sharing updates, and acting as the first point of contact for CTL queries. Together, they form a vital part of the CTL assurance framework, promoting consistency, identifying risks and driving improvements.

5.45. The document states that the Strategic Champion is responsible for the ‘effective operation of the Area CTL strategy.’ There is no national guidance on what is expected of an Area CTL strategy, how consistency can be maintained with 14 individual Area strategies, or who is expected to fulfil the roles of CTL Strategic Champion. In our interview with the new national lead, it was made clear that the expectation is for the strategic champion to be a DCCP. For CTL operational champions, there is no outline as to who will fulfil the role, other than there will be at least one legal and one operational champion per Area.

5.46. Given the importance of CTLs to the CPS, the decision to ensure that the strategic champion in each area is a DCCP is appropriate. This ensures that CTL assurance is prioritised and that a CTL strategy is both drafted and implemented.

5.47. Given our findings outlined in Chapter 6, about issues with the confidence and ability of legal managers to assess and identify risk in CTLs, the role of legal CTL operational champions will also require review. A key part of this role is to coach and mentor colleagues in assessing and assuring risk. In several Areas there are legal CTL operational champions who already fulfil this to good effect, for example in the East of England and Mersey-Cheshire Areas.

Recommendation 2

By 31 July 2026, to clarify the responsibilities of Area custody time limit (CTL) Champions as referenced in the national standards, including:

- a clear definition of the Area Strategic Champion role at Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor (DCCP) level, focused on improving CTL performance
- a clear definition of the Area Operational Champion role, including the required legal management level and the expectation to provide coaching and mentoring to support risk assessment and assurance.

6. Policy – Knowledge, Application, and Consistency

Policy – Knowledge, Application, and Consistency

Overview

6.1. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has produced detailed legal guidance in relation to custody time limits (CTLs)¹⁷ which is supported by internal operational guidance. The legal guidance supports and guides prosecutors in applying legal principles relating to CTLs consistently and lawfully. The CTL operational guidance sets out procedures and processes for how casework should be managed to ensure that cases attracting a CTL are progressed in an efficient and timely manner and to a high standard. It also sets out, in part, how managers should assure themselves that cases attracting a CTL are being managed properly. The operational guidance aims to ensure that the national standards¹⁸ for the management of CTLs are maintained.

6.2. We found that staff understand their overarching role and responsibilities in relation to the management and assurance of CTL cases. However, we found a significant variation between Areas in the interpretation of key actions and requirements, and the consistency of implementation. We found differences in the levels of knowledge of, and confidence in, applying some aspects of the CTL guidance. In several interviews across a range of Areas, a proportion of legal managers were not aware of the detailed requirements of the Level D aide memoire.

6.3. One specific aspect in which we found significant variation between Areas was the seven-day reviews on threshold test cases. The review takes place on cases that are still subject to the threshold test and have been sent to the Crown Court. After the case has been sent to the Crown Court, the case will be transferred from the magistrates' courts unit to one of Crown Court, Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO), or complex casework units. A legal manager in the unit receiving the case must apply the threshold test criteria set out in the Level D aide memoire¹⁹. In London North and London South, the review was not consistently recorded; the only expectation was a conversation with the prosecutor. In other

¹⁷ [Custody Time Limits | The Crown Prosecution Service](#)

¹⁸ [National Standards for the Management of Custody Time limits - 2020 edition](#)

¹⁹ The Level D aide memoire provides legal managers with a structured set of questions to ensure CTL cases are progressing proactively, with timely action planning, effective liaison with police, and identification of risks such as digital forensics delays, uncharged co-defendants, or evidential gaps. It is designed to help managers demonstrate due diligence and expedition by testing whether a case is trial-ready, whether escalation has been used appropriately, and whether risk factors likely to lead to CTL failures have been properly identified and addressed.

Areas, such as East Midlands, we saw detailed entries that answered the specific questions set out in the aide memoire.

6.4. We did however find that managers exhibited a clear understanding of the importance of timely case progression, which is a vital element of the policy and legal guidance. This shared understanding, however, did not always translate into consistent practice, which helps explain the variation we observed in how the seven-day reviews were recorded and evidenced across Areas.

Clarity of the CTL policy

6.5. Managers viewed the guidance as being helpful to them in setting the overarching expectation but felt that aspects were unclear or had not kept up to date with the increasing complexity of CTL cases. The concerns raised by legal managers were concentrated on the Level D aide memoire, which was consistently described as unclear, outdated or not reflective of current operational challenges. The most common reason given was that the aide memoire provided a list of factors to consider but did not provide any assistance in relation to the identification and assessment of risks that could impact a CTL case. Managers struggled to use it as a tool to assess systemic risk factors, such as delays in receiving forensic evidence from digital devices such as phones or computers, additional charging decisions, and requests from the defence for the disclosure of additional material. All of these regularly impact CTLs.

6.6. This lack of clarity and an inconsistent approach between Areas represents a risk and is one of the central findings of this inspection. We have made a recommendation to revise it below.

Understanding of CTL policy

6.7. During this inspection we interviewed legal and operational managers at a variety of different levels, all of whom had an involvement in the process of assuring that CTL cases were handled correctly. Most managers that we interviewed demonstrated broad awareness of CTL policy, and several Areas – notably East of England, Mersey-Cheshire, and Thames and Chiltern – showed strong understanding of roles, responsibilities, and requirements. Staff in these Areas articulated expectations confidently, and senior managers confirmed that policy was generally well embedded.

6.8. However, the depth of understanding varied considerably. Particular areas of inconsistency included:

- the requirements and completion of seven-day reviews on cases where the threshold test had been applied. When a defendant has been initially remanded into custody and the threshold test has been applied rather than

the full Code test, CPS policy is that there should be a review of the case by a legal manager within seven days

- use of the Level D aide memoire, the suggested guide by which legal managers assess and assure CTL cases at crucial junctures of the case
- expectations for recording activity, especially within the Case Progression Log (CPL)²⁰.

6.9. Some Areas had identified knowledge gaps with their own staff that were significant enough to require additional CTL training, especially around CTL extensions, escalation, and the practical application of guidance. The South West Area delivered training for legal and operational staff after two CTL failures. The staff we interviewed indicated that the training had been helpful, and a knowledge check completed as part of the training confirmed improved knowledge levels. National CPS leads also noted that refresher training would be appropriate, given the critical importance of CTLs and would assist to reduce uneven knowledge levels.

6.10. In some Areas, workforce factors contributed to this variation in knowledge and confidence in managing CTL cases. Many Areas reported high turnover among lawyers and legal managers, with mixed levels of experience. The CPS induction training on CTLs was considered to be good. However, we identified consistent concerns about the limited experience of new legal managers, particularly in relation to Crown Court CTL cases. We observed limited confidence and clarity of knowledge in CTL management among some of the newly appointed legal managers we interviewed. Several of these less experienced legal managers told us that they did not fully understand national policy or assurance expectations. The majority of legal managers we interviewed were relatively experienced, so the numbers involved are comparatively small, but given the importance of CTLs and the potential consequences of CTL failures, it is incumbent upon the CPS to ensure that new legal managers are trained effectively and supported. A check that they have understood and are confident in their roles and responsibilities around CTL casework would also be beneficial.

6.11. Introducing a consistent coaching and mentoring approach would therefore help standardise understanding, build confidence, and ensure that newly appointed legal managers can reliably identify and manage CTL risk from the outset.

²⁰ A written record of case progression which is kept on the CMS record for the case, it is completed by all staff who carry out any action on the case which relates to the CTL.

Consistency in policy implementation

6.12. Despite the broadly similar understanding of CTL principles, practical implementation differed markedly between Areas. We saw inconsistent approaches in three categories.

Identification and monitoring of threshold test cases and the application of the full Code test to those cases as soon as appropriate

6.13. In each CPS Area, we identified two cases, most of which were Crown Court cases, that were within four weeks of the trial listing. We then interviewed the legal manager with responsibility for those cases. We found that the full Code test had not been applied to ten out of the 28 cases (35%) we examined. In seven Areas, the full Code test had been applied to both cases. In four Areas, the full Code test had only been applied to one of the two cases. In three Areas, the full Code test had not been applied to either of the cases. Our findings in relation to this were supported by a report completed by the CPS's legal assurance team considering the application of the full Code test to cases charged under the threshold test. That report also found that the full Code test had not been applied to 20% of the cases considered in their review. Late application of the full Code test means that the prosecution may not be able to establish that they have acted with due diligence and expedition.

Assessment of high-risk cases

6.14. There is no definition of what a high-risk CTL case is. The Level D aide memoire refers to "obvious risks," including co-defendants not yet charged, outstanding forensic or medical evidence, fitness to plead, or joinder issues that may affect progression within the CTLs. It also asks managers to determine whether a case is a "High Risk CTL," and whether it should remain in that category until the identified matters are resolved. However, these references are high-level prompts and do not provide practical guidance on how risk should be assessed, recorded, or applied consistently across Areas. This contributes to the variation observed in identifying and managing high-risk cases.

6.15. Areas including North East, Thames and Chiltern and London South highlighted that the criteria for keeping high-risk cases on the weekly assurance report (WAR) are unclear, resulting in inconsistent practice. To compensate for the lack of definition of a high-risk case, a number of Areas have implemented a traffic light system for assessing risk where they attach the colour red, amber and green to each case instead of identifying them as high-risk. There is no consistency between Areas as to what constitutes a case being graded as red, amber or green or given a particular risk rating.

6.16. As a result, managers often revert to individual judgement because the national guidance does not explain what constitutes 'high-risk' in practical,

case-handling terms, nor how these cases should be monitored across reporting cycles. Senior managers in several Areas reported that legal managers' lack of confidence often meant that they were too cautious and would unnecessarily class cases as being at high risk of failure. The consequence is that more cases than necessary are monitored, which dilutes the time taken on the cases that actually have a high risk of failure and increases the chance of such a failure occurring.

Completion and accuracy of case progression log entries

6.17. Despite national standards, and examples of good CPLs, compliance with the CPL remains inconsistent. The CPS's internal operational assurance review²¹ in relation to Area Level 1 assurance checks identified this as a continuing issue. All Area staff we interviewed described the CPL as duplicative or burdensome, which contributed to incomplete or inaccurate entries.

6.18. Poor CPL compliance undermines:

- early identification of issues
- quality of CTL extension applications
- confidence in Level 1 assurance
- managers' ability to identify risk.

6.19. Risks become hidden if recording is inaccurate, which leads to late escalations and weakened assurance activity. This is an issue that has been consistently identified in HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPIS) CTL inspections²² yet remains a live issue.

6.20. In some Areas, the CPL was used correctly to track risk, record delays, and outline actions to address risk. In others, the CPL was inconsistently completed or treated as an administrative burden. Several Areas – including Cymru/Wales, North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, and London South – reported missing threshold test reviews, incomplete CPL entries, or error rates that undermined assurance.

²¹ The review considered the Level 1 monthly assurance checks completed by CPS Areas between September and November 2024 and included an assessment of whether the CPL on cases were completed and up to date.

²² [CPS Handling of custody time limits follow-up inspection – HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate](#) from November 2023 which recommended: "By 31 December 2023, the Crown Prosecution Service must embed the consistent use and updating of the CTL case progression log, including recording the weekly assurance review on the case management system (CMS) in all cases, and by 31 March 2024, develop a system of assurance to evidence improvement and monitor compliance with CTL policies."

Adequacy of national assurance products

6.21. We were told by staff across Areas that key national assurance tools – the WAR and the Level D aide memoire – are unclear, outdated and insufficiently aligned with current operational risks.

6.22. The evidence from our consideration of cases where there has been a CTL failure and also from interviewing legal managers is that the most common risk on CTL cases comes from delays arising from obtaining digital or scientific forensic evidence, or material from third parties not directly involved in the criminal proceedings. There is no specific national guidance on how this risk should be assessed by a legal manager. The Level D aide memoire should address this in detail but does not, so when the WAR is completed the level of detail used in it is often insufficient. The result of that is that different Areas have adapted the WAR in different ways, resulting in inconsistent CTL assurance across the CPS. In Chapters 7 and 8, we identify the different ways that the form has been adapted by different Areas and set out the advantages and disadvantages of those adaptations.

6.23. As a result, many Areas have introduced local variations to the WAR or processes on the CPS's case management system (CMS) to compensate. An example of such a variation are the checks completed at the mid-way point on Crown Court cases at 90 or 100 days. While these approaches sought to improve performance, they contributed to inconsistency across the CPS.

6.24. As was acknowledged in our interviews with national leads, the Level D aide memoire needs to be redrafted. It is surprising, given this position, that no action had been taken to do so at the time of writing. Over recent years, the increase in complexity and size of CTL cases because of digital forensics and third-party material mean that the existing assurance processes do not assist in identifying those challenging cases that require detailed monitoring and assurance. The Level D aide memoire identifies these issues as challenges but is limited in the guidance it provides for how they ought to be addressed. In our view, the document needs to be reviewed and the guidance made clearer and linked to enhanced scrutiny and assurance of those cases that pose a higher risk of a CTL failure.

Recommendation 3

By 31 July 2026, to revise and publish the custody time limit (CTL) Level D aide memoire, including the CTL Casework Quality Monitoring version, to add detailed questions for threshold test cases. These should require explicit consideration of risk factors that increase the likelihood of CTL failures, including issues relating to digital submissions, delays in digital forensic evidence, and decisions affecting uncharged offences that may impact case progression and a defendant's custody status.

The need for early risk identification

6.25. Evidence from our interviews on-site and consideration of the WAR across all 14 Areas shows that when Areas undertake assurance earlier – at or shortly after the decision to remand into custody – case grip improves significantly. Clear and well-recorded threshold test reviews and early conferences with the police are particularly effective at identifying potential issues, especially where:

- early identification of high-risk cases then leads to targeted oversight of those cases
- disclosure problems are anticipated
- police responses are slow
- the case is complex or fast-moving.

6.26. Areas such as Wessex, Mersey-Cheshire, the South West and Yorkshire and Humberside demonstrated that embedding early discussions with the police, as well as structured escalation processes with the police where material is not provided on time, resulted in more proactive intervention and fewer problems with case progression. This enabled due diligence to be more easily demonstrated, leading to fewer CTL failures.

6.27. This evidence supports a shift in assurance to an earlier stage of the case, focused on:

- early identification of high-risk cases and targeted oversight of those cases
- timely, high-quality threshold test reviews
- early case-planning conferences with the police, particularly in RASSO cases involving digital forensics
- application of the full Code test as early as practicable.

Management versus assurance: confusion in roles

6.28. A consistent theme across Areas was the blurring of boundaries between CTL management and CTL assurance.

6.29. As a result of this, we found entries on the WAR that can act as commentary on case progression rather than as an assessment and assurance of risk. Many entries we saw provided a running update of actions on a case, which was a duplication of what should be contained within the CPL. Entries on the WAR

therefore often set out the actual case management or case progression actions rather than the assurance that the case was being progressed and the risk of a CTL failure was being managed effectively. There is no national guidance as to what is required in the update and who provides it. We observed a wide variation in the size and subject matter of entries on the WAR. Where operational delivery managers and legal managers were making entries, there was also duplication of case management matters such as procedural steps that had been taken. In one Area, a legal manager stated that they would check case procedure entries themselves in the CPS's CMS to ensure that the information was correct.

6.30. These issues were compounded by the limited clarity within national guidance as to who – be it a lawyer, operational delivery (OD) staff, legal manager or senior legal manager – holds responsibility for specific management and assurance functions. The CTL Operational Guidance and the National Standards for the Management of CTLs do not allocate tasks to roles. The national standards state that each Area must have a written system and that each task relating to CTLs must be assigned to a role. We found that only eight of the 14 Areas had such a written system. National allocation of responsibilities would reduce variation and ensure that core assurance functions are carried out consistently across all Areas. Updating the CTL operational guidance will clearly define case management and assurance responsibilities for all relevant legal and non-legal roles.

Effectiveness of ongoing remand review

6.31. Evidence from the WARs that we considered from all CPS Areas showed that the continuing review of reasons to justify a defendant being remanded into custody was often treated as a procedural formality rather than a meaningful, analytical exercise. Reviews were very often repetitive and administrative, reducing their usefulness as a safeguard and failing to reassess necessity or proportionality of the decision to remand the defendant in custody.

6.32. For example, in Cymru-Wales, legal managers had conducted a review of the Crown Court casework team's CTL cases and found that in about 5% of them, there was a clear need for a reassessment of whether there was continued justification for the necessity of a remand into custody, as this had not been done.

6.33. This needs to be reinforced through the new national groups; where a remand into custody is no longer justified, earlier and proactive identification of this and the bailing of the defendant would remove a cohort of cases from the assurance process. This would enable staff to focus their attention on the cases where defendants appropriately remained in custody.

National standards: issues with timeliness of assurance

6.34. CTL cases that have been charged under the threshold test and that have been sent to the Crown Court for hearing should be added to the WAR and reviewed within seven days of the case being transferred to the Crown Court. That review should be undertaken by a legal manager in the Crown Court team that received the case. If the case was charged under the full Code test or it was a case that remained in the magistrates' courts, it should not appear on the WAR at that initial point.

6.35. All cases, irrespective of venue, should appear on the WAR when there are 28 days until the expiry of the CTL or 28 days before the trial, whichever is earlier.

6.36. Several Areas, including London North, London South, North East, South West and Cymru-Wales, reported that the gap in the assurance process from the seven-day threshold test review to the 28-day pre-trial review point for cases in the Crown Court was not operationally realistic.

6.37. The length of time from cases appearing on the WAR shortly after the initial decision to remand, and 28 days before trial or expiry of the CTL, can be lengthy. This can result in a significant period where there is no assurance of the case from a CTL perspective. By the time the 28-day assurance check is carried out it is usually too late to address issues, such as chasing digital or forensic material in readiness for trial, and any application to extend is likely to be refused on the ground that the CPS would not be able to show due diligence and expedition in their handling of the case.

6.38. Areas such as South East, Thames and Chiltern, Mersey-Cheshire, and West Midlands have developed local processes for earlier risk identification. Managers in Areas such as North West and East Midlands told us that adherence to current assurance process, where cases are not again subject to scrutiny 28 days before trial or expiry of the CTL, often delayed meaningful action. In the North West, the legal managers we interviewed provided examples of cases where a trial readiness review of the case at 100 days had identified case progression issues that were then resolved in good time before the trial, which they were able to contrast with other cases before the 100 checks were brought in. Similarly, East of England and Wessex managers said national guidance is "too focused on procedure rather than strategy," and that it did not support the proactive management of the case from the outset.

6.39. In Chapter 7, we outline the different stages that Areas have individually implemented to address this perceived gap in the national assurance model. Many Areas have added a check at around the mid-point of a Crown Court CTL case, at 90 or 100 days. Those Areas that have added checks feel that they are of benefit.

However, no real analysis has been conducted by CPS nationally or at Area level, into the effectiveness of such checks in preventing CTL failures.

Future automation and guidance revision

6.40. At the time of writing, the CPS is exploring automation of some CTL processes relating to the CPL as a means of reducing duplication. Whilst it is unclear exactly what automation of CTL case progression looks like at present, it does have the potential to improve consistency, reduce duplication, and prompt key actions. Automation of the process will require updated national guidance to clarify:

- how automated steps fit within management and assurance
- what responsibilities remain with staff
- how automation supports early risk identification.

6.41. Automation must therefore be considered as part of a broader revision of CTL policy, guidance, and assurance frameworks.

Conclusion

6.42. Policy knowledge across the CPS is generally sound. However, its depth and application vary, primarily due to inconsistent refresher training, varying levels of experience, unclear assurance processes, and outdated national tools. Management and assurance are frequently conflated, weakening both functions. Areas have developed their own additional assurance processes to augment what they perceive as gaps in the national model, leading to increasingly inconsistent practices that require additional resource, the impact of which has not been properly assessed.

7. CPS Areas

CPS Areas

Summary of evidence from the 14 Crown Prosecution Service Areas

7.1. This chapter provides an overview of the key evidence collected from all 14 Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas. We drew evidence from several sources to ensure a thorough analysis:

- **National data on custody time limit caseloads**

The chapter incorporates national statistics of custody time limit (CTL) caseloads, providing an understanding of workload and case management across the CPS Areas

- **Documentation from individual Areas**

Documents received directly from each CPS Area have been reviewed. These documents offer Area-specific insights and outline the variation between Areas in CTL assurance

- **National CPS documentation**

The national guidance also includes documentation provided by CPS Headquarters, particularly relating to instances of CTL failures. This information assists in understanding challenges and identifying lessons learned from individual CTL failures

- **On-site evidence gathering**

During the on-site phase, we observed the CTL assurance process of legal managers and conducted interviews with a range of legal and operational managers. This evidence adds depth and context to the documentation and data.

7.2. Across all of our on-site visits, we were impressed at the levels of commitment demonstrated by managers, both legal and non-legal, who we interviewed. Each interviewee evidenced a strong appreciation of the importance attached to CTL management and assurance to the reputation of the CPS and the wider criminal justice system. The Area pages provide a summary of the work of CPS staff and outline how systems have been adapted across the CPS.

7.3. Together, these sources have been used to complete a page per Area. The page per Area sets out the number of CTL cases for each unit (magistrates' court unit, Crown Court unit, Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) unit and Complex Casework unit) in the Area and provides a short context relating to the CTL caseload of that Area.

7.4. The index page sets out the different aspects of the CTL systems and assurance processes through headings in the left-hand column. The right-hand

column of the index page provides a short explanation of the evidence relating to each heading on the Area pages.

7.5. The evidence relating to each Area has been summarised into one page per Area.

7.6. We explore the variation in assurance and practises between CPS Areas in Chapter 8.

Index page

National CPS figures ²³			
	National caseload at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	% of caseload
	Total 198,185	11,297	5.7%
	Magistrates unit 102,856	1,115	1.1%
	Crown Court unit 75,830	8,410	11.1%
	RASSO unit 12,754	1,417	11.1%
	Complex Case unit 6,745	355	5.3%
CTL caseload context	This section provides a short analysis of each Area’s CTL caseload. Is that caseload higher or lower than average? Do any Areas have an unusually high CTL caseload? Are there any other important factors for context.		
Police forces	This section looks at the number of police forces within the CPS Area. A larger number of police forces can be a complicating factor, especially if they have different processes and structures.		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	This section features a description of the WAR used by the Area and an outline of how it departs from the national form. We include a short analysis of the forms that we considered.		
Additional assurance checks	An outline of any additional assurance measures that the Area carries out in addition to those required in operational guidance.		
Area written system	This examines how the Area adopted the requirement that each Area has a written system which incorporates the national CTL standards.		
CTL strategy and governance	This section offers confirmation of the Area having a written CTL strategy and details of the governance structure for CTLs in the Area.		

²³ The national figures in the table here will also include the cases that are managed by CPS specialist divisions.

Regular CTL audits	Audits are a more detailed dip sample of CTL cases than the monthly Level 1 assurance. This section details whether the Area completes audits to check on compliance with the CTL operational guidance and any findings.
CTL Assurance app	This section details the level of use of the CTL Assurance app in the Area and the data used within the Area to improve performance.
CTL Board/forum	This section confirms if the Area has a separate CTL Board or forum and, if so, how that committee functions and involves strategic and operational CTL champions.
Two recent failures and lessons learned	A brief outline of two recent CTL failures in the Area, relating to CPS lack of due diligence. A description of the lessons learned, and consequent changes made to prevent repeats of a failure.
Key on-site findings	This section outlines the key findings from our on-site inspection of the Area.

7.7. Below we set out some context that will assist in understanding the variations between the Areas that we observed.

Cases returning to the WAR

7.8. The national standards for CTL assurance are that cases will appear on the report if they have or are:

- a CTL expiring in the next 28 days
- a trial date in the next 28 days
- threshold test CTL Crown Court cases transferred into the unit in the last seven days
- any other additional factors which make them high-risk cases.

7.9. For a number of Areas or units, and within Areas themselves, there are variations from these requirements. In those Areas, the cases return to the WAR earlier, because the Areas believe that doing so will improve assurance and allow more time to address case progression issues.

7.10. For example, in Cymru-Wales in the magistrates' unit, cases will return to the weekly assurance report (WAR) at 35 days prior to trial or expiry of the CTL. To set that out concisely in the Cymru-Wales page we have stated, 'magistrates' unit - cases return to WAR at 35 days.' Where other Areas have different variations, those have also been set out.

Additional assurance checks

7.11. In this section of the Area pages, we set out a summary of any additional assurance checks that the Area has introduced. Areas have brought in additional assurance checks at key points of a CTL case. For example, CPS South East have introduced a requirement that lawyers review case progression on all Crown Court cases at 100 days. In CPS East of England, a similar check takes place at 90 days. These checks take place roughly at the mid-way point in the 182-day Crown Court CTL.

7.12. Across a number of Areas, particularly in RASSO units, cases will remain on the WAR until the full Code test has been applied.

Acronyms used

7.13. A number of acronyms have also been used in the Area pages, an explanation for those acronyms is set out below:

ASB

Area Strategic Board is the senior governance forum within a CPS Area that oversees performance, assurance, operational priorities, and strategic decision-making.

CMP

Case Management Panel where the prosecutor and legal manager meet to review a specific case and agree actions that are required to effectively progress the case.

CQB

Casework Quality Board – the Area wide meeting of senior legal and Operational Delivery managers which consider the Area’s casework quality. It will receive reports from individual units and also other committees such as a CTL Board.

ECPC

Early Case Planning Conference these take place at an early stage of the case and will usually involve the prosecutor, legal manager, and the police. The meeting will discuss the case and steps needed to manage case progression and agree a timetable for submission of material to the CPS.

FCT

The prosecutor applies the full Code test from the Code for Crown Prosecutors to determine if both evidential and public interest requirements are met.

JOIM

Joint Operational Improvement Meeting a meeting with senior CPS and police managers to monitor performance and improve case building.

LCMP

Local Case Management Panel, a meeting attended by the prosecutor, their legal manager and a senior legal manager such as a Unit Head or Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor.

OD

Operational Delivery - the staff who support legal staff in preparing, assuring, and progressing cases. In a number of Areas, OD staff add a range of case progression tasks or milestones to the report.

RAG Rating

Red Amber Green ratings, based upon the traffic light system, are used across a number of Areas to assess CTL risk for individual cases.

SJOIM


Strategic Joint Operational Improvement Meeting is senior level counterpart to JOIM, providing higher level oversight, escalation and strategic decision-making on operational improvement issues.


SMT


Senior Management Team – in this context senior legal and OD managers within the Area.

TT


Threshold test cases charged on the threshold test and have not had the full Code test applied to them.

Cymru-Wales Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 1</p>	Caseload at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 6,602	527	8.0%
	Magistrates' unit 3,336	73	2.2%
	Crown Court unit 2,470	372	15.1%
	Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) unit 536	70	13.1%
	Complex Case unit 260	12	4.6%
CTL caseload context	Nationally, the highest proportion of caseload that are CTLs and high across all units in the Area. CTL trials generally listed within the CTL.		
Police forces	Dyfed-Powys, Gwent, South Wales, North Wales		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	WAR reports are shorter than in other Areas, with an emphasis on case progression. OD staff complete entries on magistrates' court relating to case progression. On RASSO and Complex Case unit cases, the prosecutor provides their own updates in addition to the legal manager.		
Additional assurance checks	Magistrates' court unit – cases return to WAR at 35 days, rather than 28 days. Crown Court unit – ECPC mandatory after first hearing. RASSO unit – all cases have an LCMP after the PTPH.		
Area written system	No Area written system. We were supplied with the role allocation for tasks relating to the management of CTLs.		
CTL strategy and governance	The Area has no CTL strategy.		
Regular CTL audits	Last audit completed in December 2023, which concentrated on process issues, individual Units to consider action. An audit was planned for December 2025.		
CTL Assurance app	Minimal use of CTL Assurance app. No analysis of results at Area level.		
CTL Board/forum	No separate CTL Board, CTL issues discussed at other boards and committees.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	The two failures related to lack of grip in dealing with and escalating mobile telephone evidence. One of the cases was a magistrates' court case, which is unusual. Magistrates' court cases are now subject to greater scrutiny and return to WAR at 35 days. Escalation procedures refreshed with police forces.		
Key on-site findings	ECPC on Crown Court unit and RASSO unit cases assisted in identifying those cases which required greater assurance. Legal managers spent considerably less time on the WAR than other Areas.		


East of England Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 6</p>	Caseload at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 14,505	651	4.5%
	Magistrates' unit 7,759	53	0.7%
	Crown Court unit 5,886	525	8.9%
	RASSO unit 643	59	9.2%
	Complex Case unit 217	14	6.5%
	CTL caseload context	Slightly lower live CTL caseload compared to the national average, except for the Complex Case unit which is marginally higher. Issues identified relating to consistency of escalation with the police.	
Police forces	Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk.		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	The WARs for Crown Court and RASSO units were amongst the most detailed and contained large amounts of narrative history. All RASSO cases remain on WAR throughout. High proportion of Crown Court cases assessed as high risk.		
Additional assurance checks	Cases return to WAR at 30 days. All cases in Crown Court have a 90-day trial readiness check completed by a prosecutor and checked by a legal manager.		
Area written system	Yes. Comprehensive policy which clearly set out roles and responsibilities of staff.		
CTL strategy and governance	No strategy, but the CTL Area forum maintains an updated action log which addressed issues such as Level 1 monthly assurance.		
Regular CTL audits	The RASSO unit had an audit in May 2025, which covered all cases. Audits scheduled in Q4 for Crown Court and Magistrates' units.		
CTL Assurance app	Efforts to increase the numbers of issues reported on the app in 2025-26. The data was then considered at Area CTL forum.		
CTL Board/forum	Area CTL forum meets bi-monthly and is chaired by the DCCP, who is Strategic Champion, with representatives of all units. Operational champions are used to monitor and improve performance on Level 1 assurance checks.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Included cases on Crown Court and RASSO units, where the escalation process was not complied with and CTL assurance process did not identify risks. Audit completed of all RASSO CTL cases and compliance with the escalation policy was addressed internally and with the police.		
Key on-site findings	Work with police on escalation process had reduced Stage 2 and 3 escalations. Legal managers were risk averse leading to large numbers of cases remaining on WAR.		


East Midlands Area			
	Caseload at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 12,377	731	5.9%
	Magistrates' unit 5,600	79	1.4%
	Crown Court unit 5,230	558	10.7%
	RASSO unit 217	1,204	7.1%
Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 1	Complex Case unit 217	9	2.6%
CTL caseload context	Number of CTL cases broadly in line with national levels; lower in Complex Case/RASSO units. Five police forces impacts consistency of escalation.		
Police forces	Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire.		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	WAR completed geographically within Units by police force with one legal manager per force, to assist in consistency in escalation by Area. Reports are detailed and lengthy and are structured but narrative-heavy which may obscure key risks. Operational delivery staff provide updates.		
Additional assurance checks	Magistrates' court unit cases return to the report at 42 days, rather than 28. Crown Court cases consistently use a Red/Amber/Green (RAG) rating to identify level of risk. TT RASSO cases all remain on WAR until FCT applied.		
Area written system	Comprehensive written system aligned with national policy.		
CTL strategy and governance	Formal CTL strategy prepared for the inspection. The DCCP is Strategic Champion, Operational Champions in Units.		
Regular CTL audits	No recent CTL audits undertaken.		
CTL Assurance app	Minimal use of CTL Assurance app.		
CTL Board/forum	There is no Area CTL forum. Instead, CTL issues are considered at unit and Area governance boards.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Two failures on the Crown Court unit were linked to delays in escalating and progressing forensic and digital evidence. An action plan was introduced to strengthen early case management.		
Key on-site findings	Improved identification of high-risk cases. Strengthened Disclosure Management Document use in Crown Court. Moves to structure WAR around two key questions on each case: what is the current risk and how can it be mitigated.		


An inspection of the assurance systems for Custody Time Limits by CPS Areas


London North Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 6</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25 Total 16,888	No. of CTLs 1,160	CTLs as % of caseload 6.9%
	Magistrates' unit 7,058	90	1.3%
	Crown Court unit 9,514	980	10.3%
	RASSO unit RASSO unit is London South	n/a	n/a
	Complex Case unit 315	90	28.6%
	CTL caseload context	The CTL caseload for Crown Court and magistrates' court units is in line with the national average. The overall CTL rate is increased by Complex Case unit CTL cases which are focused on homicide.	
Police forces	Metropolitan Police Service		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	RAG is rating applied to all cases with guidance to identify risk level. Large number of case progression related questions completed by OD managers and then legal managers. No TT review entry on WAR, legal manager only confirms meeting with prosecutor.		
Additional assurance checks	Senior legal managers dip sample to check that TT meetings have taken place. Where risk is identified using RAG rating, there are mandated meetings with legal managers of increasing seniority.		
Area written system	No		
CTL strategy and governance	No CTL strategy, but there is an Area CTL action plan reviewed quarterly and also CTL action logs for individual units.		
Regular CTL audits	No, last audit in 2021, though the Area was looking to complete a peer review with another Area.		
CTL Assurance app	CTL Assurance app usage and reporting is in line with proportion of CTL caseload. Data from the app is considered at CTL Board and Assurance Group.		
CTL Board/forum	CTL Board – SMT level meets quarterly. CTL Assurance Group comprising operational champions meets monthly. Performance in relation to action plan, Level 1 monthly dip samples, CTL Assurance app scrutinised		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Both on the Crown Court Unit and caused by police not supplying the material evidence and inadequate grip by prosecutor when escalating.		
Key on-site findings	TT review meetings between prosecutor and legal manager not taking place consistently. New Crown Court Unit lawyers are allocated to a mini team for specific CTL support and mentoring from one legal manager.		

An inspection of the assurance systems for Custody Time Limits by CPS Areas


London South Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 6</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 16,843	1,306	7.8%
	Magistrates unit 6,666	85	1.3%
	Crown Court unit 7,726	820	10.6%
	RASSO unit 2,018	359	17.8%
	Complex Case unit 433	42	9.7%
CTL caseload context	Higher than average CTL caseload. Highest proportion of RASSO CTL cases of any Area. Complex Case unit has high CTL caseload. Cases across London (North and South) regularly listed outside the 182-day CTL.		
Police forces	Metropolitan Police Service, City of London		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	Mixture of templates across court centres on Crown Court Unit, key dates and stages added to template. RASSO unit has a different template and more consistent use of RAG rating. Limited TT reviews in Crown Court and RASSO Units.		
Additional assurance checks	RASSO cases remain on WAR if trial outside of CTL and FCT not yet applied. Magistrates Court Unit- mandate an early conversation between prosecutor and legal manager.		
Area written system	No – Area stated they operate a system in line with national policy.		
CTL strategy and governance	Strategy sets out governance and roles, no objectives set out. CTL forum does have an Action Plan - monitored quarterly.		
Regular CTL audits	Audit completed in 2025, across all units. Clear actions identified with linked Action Plan for all units in the Area.		
CTL Assurance app	App reporting in line with caseload but increasing over recent quarters and subject to scrutiny at CTL forum. Case progression and updating systems: most frequent issues. Marked increase in reporting in Q1 25-26.		
CTL Board/forum	CTL forum hold monthly meetings with unit managers – who present on key issues, such as ensuring the FCT is applied. Area work with police to identify and prioritise top 10 CTL risks.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Both on Crown Court Unit and related to late provision of unused material/evidence by police. Lack of grip and case strategy to challenge defence. CTL forum actioned issues in relation to reviews and escalation policy.		
Key on-site findings	High numbers of cases and trials outside CTL have led to high CTL workloads. RAG ratings used to identify high risk cases, which are identified to police.		


Mersey-Cheshire Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 0</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25 Total 8,738	No. of CTLs 408	CTLs as % of caseload 4.7%
	Magistrates unit 5,563	41	0.7%
	Crown Court unit 2,533	300	11.8%
	RASSO unit 436	54	12.4%
	Complex Case unit 206	13	6.3%
	CTL caseload context	Broadly in line with national average as % of caseload. Good working relationships with police relating to CTLs - improving the escalation process has been the focus of joint work.	
Police forces	Cheshire, Merseyside		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	WAR amended to contain key case milestones, completed by OD and legal managers. Clear guidance to identify high risk cases on Crown Court Unit, includes cases where FCT not yet applied. RAG rating on RASSO and magistrates court units applied but not on Crown Court.		
Additional assurance checks	CTL tracking spreadsheet for all Crown Court cases. Magistrates' court and RASSO cases return to WAR at 42 days, instead of 28 days before trial or expiry of the CTL. RASSO – 90-day review on all cases.		
Area written system	Yes – published 2024 to be reviewed 2026. Clear outline of staff roles and aligns with national policy.		
CTL strategy and governance	No written strategy, but clear governance through visible DCCP strategic champion, CTL Board and Area Casework Quality Board.		
Regular CTL audits	Last audit completed 2022, next due 2026. Area decided that assurance systems reduce need for more frequent audits.		
CTL Assurance app	Level of reporting in line with caseload. Area has created a report which monitors performance and trends in reports. CTL training delivered and focused on staff where issues had been identified.		
CTL Board/forum	Meets quarterly with clear actions, including consideration of CTL Assurance app and Level 1 Monthly Assurance. Actions are then agreed.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Crown Court and RASSO cases, issues arose related to identification and progression of lines of enquiry. The escalation policy was refreshed, and the RASSO WAR was amended to assist in identifying risk.		
Key on-site findings	Variation between units in additional assurance checks is related to differential risks identified within units. OD staff used to support assurance process and maintain a log of CTL cases.		


North East Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 2</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 9,604	611	6.4%
	Magistrates unit 5,083	77	1.5%
	Crown Court unit 2,533	457	13.1%
	RASSO unit 755	61	8.1%
	Complex Case unit 266	16	6%
	CTL caseload context	Above national average for all units apart from RASSO.	
Police forces	Cleveland, Durham, Northumbria		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	Crown Court and RASSO WAR followed national template. Magistrates court unit departed from template with a brief update. Shortest reports across all CPS Areas.		
Additional assurance checks	All Crown Court CTLs subject to 90-day check and discussed at meetings between lawyer and manager. Crown Court Unit all joint enterprise cases remain on WAR until all co-accused charged. Same applies to DA cases with outstanding RASSO allegations awaiting a decision on charge.		
Area written system	No Area written system – follow national policy.		
CTL strategy and governance	No CTL Strategy. CTL managers forum replaced by CTL Board during inspection. Clear Terms of Reference agreed. DCCP – Strategic Champion.		
Regular CTL audits	Bi-annual peer review of 35 cases, which focuses on process rather than grip. Audit identified good performance and areas to improve, such as escalation.		
CTL Assurance app	Relatively low levels of reports on the app, most of which relate to provision of outcomes of court hearings. No analysis by the Area.		
CTL Board/forum	CTL Board created during inspection period. Level 1 Assurance to be addressed by CTL Board		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	A RASSO case where outstanding issues relating to mobile telephones were not properly escalated. Crown Court case where late defence disclosure requests were not subjected to proper scrutiny by the prosecutor. As a result, the escalation policy is being reviewed and refreshed across all forces.		
Key on-site findings	Following CTL failures, escalation policy in process of being revised and agreed with police forces so it applies consistently across units. Reviews at 90 days had improved emphasis on grip		


North West Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 5</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 23,761	1,176	4.9%
	Magistrates unit 14,856	177	1.3%
	Crown Court unit 7,067	847	12.0%
	RASSO unit 1,313	121	9.2%
	Complex Case unit 525	31	5.9%
CTL caseload context	High number of CTL cases. CTL caseload is in line with national average apart from RASSO, which is slightly below. CTL cases in Greater Manchester are routinely listed outside CTL.		
Police forces	Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	All units use similar form, with case progression questions added to the national template. RAG rating also applied across units. Only most recent update is included in the WAR, not entries from previous weeks.		
Additional assurance checks	All Crown Court cases have 100-day check on CMS and are discussed at monthly 121 with legal manager. High risk cases – such as co-accused charged late – remain on WAR until Unit Head satisfied risk is being managed.		
Area written system	No written system, follow national SOP guidance, Area acknowledged that system needed to be reviewed.		
CTL strategy and governance	No CTL strategy. DCCP is strategic champion. CTL Board reports to Casework Quality Board.		
Regular CTL audits	Regular peer review of 40 cases, including assessment of grip. Performance compared over time and actions identified by CTL Board.		
CTL Assurance app	Level of reporting in line with national caseload. Data considered at CTL Board		
CTL Board/forum	Meets quarterly with clear action log and areas for improvement identified. Level 1 Assurance followed up with Unit Head dip sampling on issues identified.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Crown Court and RASSO cases both had issues relating to disclosure of material following late submission of material by police and failure to escalate. Lack of grip and failure to review when required. Escalation and need for significant event reviews identified as requiring improvement.		
Key on-site findings	The Area focus on assurance at earlier stage of cases to identify high risk cases and review at 100 days have improved assurance. Focusing WAR on current risk has reduced burden upon legal managers.		

An inspection of the assurance systems for Custody Time Limits by CPS Areas


South East Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 3</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 15,749	674	4.3%
	Magistrates unit 8,294	61	0.7%
	Crown Court unit 6,439	510	7.9%
	RASSO unit 864	89	10.3%
	Complex Case unit 152	14	9.2%
CTL caseload context	CTLs as a proportion of caseload are below the national average apart from Complex Casework Unit. Some court centres listing trials outside CTL.		
Police forces	Kent, Surrey, Sussex		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	WAR is consistent across units, with detailed case progression questions to be completed by OD and legal manager. RAG rating applied to all cases with clear criteria to assess risk. Reports are detailed with chronological entries.		
Additional assurance checks	Crown Court – 100-day review completed on CMS. RASSO – 100-day CMP between prosecutor and legal manager and minutes from the meeting then sent to police.		
Area written system	No comprehensive written system. Expectations of 100-day checks provided for Crown Court and RASSO units.		
CTL strategy and governance	No CTL Strategy, however, a detailed Action Plan similar to a strategy was adopted in December 2025. CTL Board reports to ASB and CQB. DCCP is strategic champion.		
Regular CTL audits	Audit completed 2025 of all CTL cases. It identified variations in CTL assurance performance between the units. Best practice between units then shared. Audit informed Area CTL Action Plan.		
CTL Assurance app	Significant increase in reporting over last year. This is a response to CTL Board focusing on the issue.		
CTL Board/forum	CTL Board with clear Terms of Reference. Board considers CTL Assurance app and Level 1 Assurance dip samples consistently.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Two most recent failures, Crown Court – relating to mobile telephone evidence, lack of grip and late disclosure. Result – the introduction of 100-day checks across Area and sharing of CTL case lists with police.		
Key on-site findings	Concerns that WAR too long and take up too much legal manager time. 100-day checks felt to have been positive and well received by lawyers.		


South West Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 3</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25 Total 8,790	No. of CTLs 420	CTLs as % of caseload 4.8%
	Magistrates unit 4,989	36	0.7%
	Crown Court unit 2,764	305	11.0%
	RASSO unit 870	73	8.4%
	Complex Case unit 167	6	3.6%
	CTL caseload context	CTL caseload slightly lower than national average, except for Crown Court Unit. At particular court centres trials are regularly listed outside the CTL from the start.	
Police forces	Avon and Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, Gloucestershire		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	Magistrates' court unit- detailed template WAR mirrors South East. Crown Court Unit and RASSO shifted to less detailed WAR. Template for TT review which follows aide memoire.		
Additional assurance checks	All Crown Court cases remain on WAR until Unit Head agrees they can be removed. RASSO ECPC held and cases return to WAR 35 days before trial/expiry. Risk assessment of all cases.		
Area written system	Written system but now apply national SOP.		
CTL strategy and governance	No strategy, but Area has detailed Action Plan with clear and specific objectives. DCCP is strategic champion.		
Regular CTL audits	CTL Audit in 2025, which was combined with IQA process and focused upon grip and case reviews. Fed into Area CTL Action Plan.		
CTL Assurance app	Reporting levels remain low, with only a brief increase after managers received reminders from the strategic champion to utilise the app.		
CTL Board/forum	CTL Board meets quarterly. Terms of reference revised. Action Plan focus of meeting. At the last meeting, the CTL Assurance app was demonstrated to promote use.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	RASSO and magistrates court failures. RASSO lack of grip relating to digital device that was a line of enquiry. Magistrates court case from out of Area, where OD staff did not update.		
Key on-site findings	Shifting focus of assurance to early on in case, has felt to have improved assurance, but not noticeably reduced time taken. CTL Training to OD and legal staff had improved confidence.		

Thames and Chiltern Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 3</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25 Total 10,707	No. of CTLs 587	CTLs as % of caseload 5.5%
	Magistrates unit 4,976	53	1.1%
	Crown Court unit 4,914	460	9.4%
	RASSO unit 639	62	9.7%
	Complex Case unit 178	12	6.7%
	CTL caseload context		
Police forces			Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)			Crown Court and RASSO units have the same format, with case progression questions embedded in the template which the manager must answer. Magistrates Unit fewer case progression questions. RAG ratings across all units. Detailed narrative in WAR across all units.
Additional assurance checks			Crown Court and RASSO cases remain on report until FCT applied which is a departure from the national system. National Level D aide memoire has been amended by Area.
Area written system			No written system detailing roles and responsibilities. Clear written outline of extra requirement of additions to Level D aide memoire.
CTL strategy and governance			No CTL Strategy. Strategic champion feeds from CTL forum to Area governance.
Regular CTL audits			In 2023 identified issues of instructions to counsel, including CTL and target date in correspondence to police. Which have been focus of work by Area.
CTL Assurance app			CTL Assurance app reporting high given share of national caseload.
CTL Board/forum			CTL forum meets monthly and is attended by all legal managers and OD managers. Action Log and Level 1 Assurance considered on month-by-month basis.
Two most recent failures and lessons learned			Crown Court and Magistrates Unit cases. Issues related to instruction and service of expert evidence and disclosure relating to mobile phone. Training focused upon defence statements to Magistrates Unit.
Key on-site findings			Legal managers felt that WAR too long, but recognised it was appropriate to focus on cases at an early stage. Aide memoire amendments felt to be helpful to legal managers.

Wessex Area		
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 3</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs
	Total 9,227	400
	Magistrates unit 6,230	34
	Crown Court unit 2,362	307
	RASSO unit 639	53
	Complex Case unit 161	6
CTL caseload context	CTL caseload broadly in line with national average. Positive relationships with police forces.	
Police forces	Dorset, Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Wiltshire	
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	No variation to national form – limited additional case progression questions.	
Additional assurance checks	Crown Court and RASSO cases have ECPC within 10 days of remand. Where FCT cannot be applied before PTPH then LCMP held. RASSO Unit cases return to log at 56 days prior to trial or expiry of the CTL. They also have an LCMP prior to trial.	
Area written system	No Area written system.	
CTL strategy and governance	No CTL Strategy and CTL issues considered at Area Boards.	
Regular CTL audits	No Audit – but in May 2025 all legal managers reviewed all CTL cases in meetings with individual prosecutors.	
CTL Assurance app	Low level of reporting and no consideration of data by the Area.	
CTL Board/forum	No CTL Board. The Area Legal Leadership forum provides updates to legal managers at bi-monthly meeting.	
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Crown Court and RASSO cases where the correct escalation procedures were not followed following late provision of material. On RASSO cases LCMP to take place prior to trial on all cases and CTL cases to be a standing item at RASSO JOIM.	
Key on-site findings	Previously each individual report had been completed by one legal manager across the Crown Court unit. Now legal managers complete entries on the WAR for their own prosecutors' cases only leading to improved assurance quality and reduced time required to complete the WAR.	

An inspection of the assurance systems for Custody Time Limits by CPS Areas

West Midlands Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 7</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25 Total 23,978	No. of CTLs 1,243	CTLs as % of caseload 5.2%
	Magistrates unit 13,336	111	0.8%
	Crown Court unit 8,018	922	11.5%
	RASSO unit 1,597	171	10.7%
	Complex Case unit 1,027	39	3.8%
	CTL caseload context	CTL caseload in line with national average. Some court centres listing outside of CTL. Five police forces is a challenge in obtaining consistency of escalation.	
Police forces	Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Mercia, West Midlands, British Transport Police		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	The WARs are the longest and most detailed, with additional case progression entries added to the template. TT cases remain on log until post sending review completed.		
Additional assurance checks	All Crown Court cases return to WAR at 90 days until Unit Head states can be removed. RASSO cases return to WAR at 42 days prior to trial or expiry of CTL, rather than 28 days.		
Area written system	Detailed written system which sets out roles and responsibilities.		
CTL strategy and governance	No CTL Strategy. CTL Board reports to Area Strategic Board and CQB. Strategic champion is SDCP.		
Regular CTL audits	No audits but dip sampling completed in Summer 2025, identified issues to address which were followed up in Autumn 2025. Improvement found and new priorities set.		
CTL Assurance app	Highest Area for reporting issues. The app is used by Crown Court legal managers responsible for WAR to report issues to the legal manager with responsibility for prosecutor.		
CTL Board/forum	CTL Board meets bi-monthly, with Action Log including monitoring of Level 1 Assurance Regular CTL surgeries led by Operational Champions within units share knowledge and answer questions from prosecutors and OD staff.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Both Crown Court cases with issues relating to escalation: digital device and additional offences. Area then used the JOIM and CTL Board address issues with police.		
Key on-site findings	CTL assurance taking up to 2 days' time for Crown Court Unit legal managers. Positive work ongoing to ensure consistency in escalation process through police attending CTL Board.		

Yorkshire and Humberside Area			
 <p>Total number of CTL failures in 2025 and 2026 - 2</p>	Case Load at 21/10/25	No. of CTLs	CTLs as % of caseload
	Total 17,118	1,298	7.6%
	Magistrates unit 9,110	145	1.6%
	Crown Court unit 6,281	983	15.7%
	RASSO unit 1,404	160	11.4%
	Complex Case unit 323	10	3.1%
CTL caseload context	One of the highest CTL caseloads nationally; nationally highest Crown Court Unit CTL as % of caseload pressure; Police digital forensic unit delays are significant.		
Police forces	Humberside, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire		
Weekly Assurance Reports (WAR)	The report follows the national templates with lengthy narrative entries. Narrative volume risks obscuring key risks. Risk summaries of key risk cases provided via weekly certificates to DCCPs.		
Additional assurance checks	RASSO unit: detailed TT review and mandatory ECPC after first hearing. Crown Court unit: legal manager assessments using TT aide memoire, enhanced digital forensics process and review by prosecutor at 90 days. Magistrates court unit: reviewing prosecutor and police OIC have case conversations prior to trial.		
Area written system	Clear written system aligned with national policy.		
CTL strategy and governance	No standalone strategy; CTL Board sets improvement actions. Governance via SMT led CTL Board.		
Regular CTL audits	Peer review audit in July 2025 led to CTL Action Plan.		
CTL Assurance app	Limited use of CTL Assurance app; mainly for external counsel issues. Issues are considered at CTL Board and CTL forum.		
CTL Board/forum	SMT led CTL Board maintains Action Log. The CTL forum comprising operational champions across Units monitors performance.		
Two most recent failures and lessons learned	Failures linked to mobile phone evidence in Crown Court Unit and RASSO. New police digital forensic unit ²⁴ liaison and monitoring procedures implemented.		
Key on-site findings	Performance monitoring tied to CTL Board. Digital forensics have been identified as a key pressure point. Early-stage risk management where risks identified.		

²⁴ Digital forensics unit, a specialist unit within police forces which deals with the downloading and analysis of digital forensics such as mobile telephones and computers.

8. Area Variations

Area Variations

Causes of variations between Areas

8.1. There is wide variation between Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas in how they assure custody time limit (CTL) cases. The individual Area pages in the last chapter set out a summary of the key differences. The variations have arisen in three main ways.

8.2. Gaps in the national policies and guidance and a more recent lack of oversight at a national level is a key factor. The most prominent example of this is the wide variation in the use of the CTL Assurance app between Areas. Across almost all of the 14 CPS Areas, we found that managers had little knowledge of the role and purpose of the app. Managers were not aware of the wider function of the app to enable them to identify Area-wide issues affecting CTL assurance that could then be addressed.

8.3. Following a CTL failure in an Area, different processes and approaches may be implemented, leading to variations between Areas as highlighted in Chapter 7. For example, following on from CTL failures, a number of Areas have introduced a case progression check to CTL assurance at the mid-point of the CTL on Crown Court cases. Such checks are at 90 or 100 days of the 182-day CTL and check on trial readiness. If the check reveals issues related to trial readiness, then there is sufficient time to remedy them before the trial.

8.4. Areas respond to the challenge of increasingly complex casework by piloting and assessing new approaches. Although we heard during our visits that it was generally thought that the new approaches were attempting to enhance assurance processes, there is little evidence of a systematic evaluation within Areas of the changes they introduce. Nationally, CPS Headquarters has had a minimal role in reviewing Area differences and sharing effective practices for wider use.

Variation in Area CTL caseload

8.5. While CTL caseloads fluctuate between Areas, they remain generally stable within each Area over time.

8.6. A snapshot of national and Area CTL caseloads was taken during the week commencing 21 October 2025.

CTLs by Area, week commencing 21 October 2025		
Area	Number of CTL cases	CTLs % of total caseload
Cymru-Wales	527	8.0%
East of England	651	4.5%
East Midlands	731	5.9%
London North	1,160	6.9%
London South	1,306	7.8%
Mersey-Cheshire	408	4.7%
North East	611	6.4%
North West	1,176	4.9%
South East	674	4.3%
South West	420	4.8%
Thames and Chiltern	587	5.5%
Wessex	400	4.3%
West Midlands	1,243	5.2%
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,298	7.6%
National ²⁵	11,297	5.7%

8.7. The South East Area held the lowest percentage of CTL cases at 4.3% of its whole caseload, while Wales had the highest at 8%. Within Areas, there were also variations in the type of CTL cases between the different volume crime units operated by the CPS. London South recorded the largest percentage of CTL cases within its Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) unit²⁶, representing 17.9% of its workload. In Yorkshire and Humberside, the Crown Court unit CTL cases were 15.7% of its workload, which was the highest percentage for Crown Court units across the CPS. This inspection does not investigate the causes behind these variations, which could stem from differences in case characteristics, seriousness of offending, or court decisions regarding custody and bail.

8.8. The continuing high caseload of CTL cases places significant demands on CPS Areas. These cases require considerably more timely attention from both prosecutors and managers to ensure the cases are brought to trial within the CTLs, in comparison with cases involving defendants released on bail where often the trial dates are more distant. Additionally, disparities in court backlogs add to the challenge of managing CTL cases, particularly when such cases are frequently

²⁵ The national figure includes central casework divisions.

²⁶ The unit is a pan London unit with all the RASSO cases from across the CPS London North and London South Areas.

scheduled beyond the statutory time limits due to backlog issues at specific court centres. London North, London South, and the South East were Areas we found with the most significant adverse impact by backlogs. In these instances, the CPS must apply to extend the CTL, even when delays are directly attributable to the court backlog.

CTL failures

8.9. We reviewed CTL failure rates by Area over time and assessed whether Area performance influenced the occurrence of such failures. There was observable variation in CTL failures across different Areas. However, CTL failures represent an exceptionally small proportion of the total caseload.

8.10. New CTL cases are regularly added as courts remand defendants into custody. Others are removed as cases proceed to trial or the CTL period ends, for example, when a defendant enters acceptable guilty pleas. Between 1 April 2025 and 31 December 2025, there were 43 CTL failures recorded across the CPS. This figure reflects a significant increase compared to historical data, as detailed in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, CTL failures continue to constitute less than half a percent of the overall CTL case volume as at any given time, there are at least 11,000 active CTL cases.

8.11. In response to the increase in CTL failures, the Legal Assurance Team (LAT) assessed CPS Areas with a marked increase in recent failures. The analysis focused on the three latest CTL failures in an Area to determine whether there were any systemic factors. LAT identified none.

8.12. We considered the Area and LAT reports for the two most recent CTL failures for all 14 CPS Areas and similarly concluded that these failures were not the result of individual deficiency in the respective Area assurance systems. Rather, we identified themes that contributed to the failures.

8.13. A clear theme was insufficient escalation when critical evidence or materials were not provided by the police, and inadequate articulation of reasonable lines of enquiry, with particular regard to mobile phone evidence. These issues were apparent across all CPS Areas and related to early casework grip.

8.14. Finally, LAT prepares a quarterly report for the Directors of Legal Service (DLS), which reviews all CTL failures across the CPS to monitor performance variations and pinpoint underlying causes. The conclusions of these reports to date have reflected those we found as set out above.

Variation in adherence to escalation policy

8.15. We found considerable inconsistency in the procedures for escalating requests to obtain evidence and materials from the police and compliance with those procedures across the CPS Areas. This inconsistency is a critical factor influencing performance in preparing CTL cases. Evidence from CTL audits, Level 1 monthly assurance and on-site interviews across Areas demonstrates that while escalation procedures are broadly understood, their application is often dependent on local culture or managerial preference rather than a consistent adherence to national policy. Several Areas reported a reluctance among prosecutors to escalate concerns in order to preserve relationships with the police, with some legal managers informally resolving matters themselves rather than applying the structured escalation process. For example, in London North, a legal manager viewed it positively that a lawyer “rarely escalates” because he preferred to intervene personally with the police. Similar patterns were observed in East Midlands, where prosecutors were reported as, “sitting on issues” to avoid causing friction with police partners.

Compliance Issues

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must enforce escalation policies with their police partners.

8.16. Despite these challenges, several Areas demonstrated positive practice in managing police escalation issues through structured governance. Mersey-Cheshire, London South, and South East made effective use of CTL Boards to review performance, track escalation issues, and monitor compliance. The East of England provided a notable example of real-time sharing of escalation information with the police, which was subsequently examined at a Joint Operational Improvement Meeting (JOIM) and Strategic Joint Operational Improvement Meeting (SJOIM) meeting, ensuring that police-related delays receive timely scrutiny. London South identified and shared top ten CTL risk cases with the police to ensure that those cases were prioritised and escalation policies were followed through. North East had strengthened escalation processes reinforced through JOIM discussions, enabling improved handling of high-risk CTL cases.

8.17. These examples demonstrate that JOIM and SJOIM governance structures can provide consistent oversight, promote accountability with police partners, and ensure systematic monitoring of high-risk CTL cases. In future, all CPS Areas should use JOIMs to review CTL performance, including in high-risk cases and in monitoring adherence to escalation procedures. Discussions and actions agreed during these meetings must be recorded and tracked.

Variation in Level 1 assurance processes

a) Weekly Assurance Reports and additional assurance checks

8.18. In Chapter 7 we set out a summary of our findings detailing how each of the 14 CPS Areas have structured the Weekly Assurance Reports (WARs). The WAR is the main mechanism via which CTL cases are assured by legal managers. We also set out the additional assurance checks that Areas have implemented in relation to CTL cases.

8.19. Across CPS Areas, there is significant variation in how WARs are designed, completed, and used within the wider assurance system. These differences are not superficial; they shape how case risk is identified, how grip is maintained, and how much time legal managers must devote to assurance each week. Although the national form sets out a basic framework, in practice, Areas have developed markedly different approaches, often in response to local pressures, differing caseloads, or historic practice. Some of these adaptations are proportionate and justified, but others serve to dilute the intended purpose of the WAR, resulting in a form that simply details administrative case progression.

Weekly Assurance Report formats

8.20. One of the clearest themes emerging from the evidence is the level of inconsistency in WAR design and use across CPS Areas. While the national template is intended to create uniformity – by ensuring that all Areas focus on identifying risk and assuring grip – its use varies substantially. In some Areas, the WAR has expanded far beyond its original scope, while in others it has been deliberately compressed to ensure that legal managers concentrate on the key assurance questions.

8.21. In several Areas, particularly East of England, Thames and Chiltern, and Yorkshire and Humberside, the WAR has developed into a highly detailed and narrative-heavy document. These WARs contain substantial historical descriptions of how the case has progressed, usually on a weekly basis, set out in multiple paragraphs. Managers completing these reports describe them as burdensome, and this is borne out in our evidence: some WAR entries are several pages long per case, leading to reports that can be over 200 pages long in total.

8.22. These narrative-heavy formats often obscure rather than illuminate the current risk, burying the core CTL assurance questions within long blocks of text. In East of England, for example, the WAR includes such extensive narrative that managers acknowledged how key risks can be lost, and that the process can lead to cases remaining on the WAR due to risk aversion rather than a genuine

assurance need. The intention of the WAR, to provide a clear assurance mechanism, is diminished when the document becomes a chronological case file, duplicating work already recorded on the CPS's case management system (CMS).

8.23. By contrast, other Areas have adopted a very different approach. In Cymru-Wales and North East, the WAR is notably shorter than in any other Area, providing brief updates that focus on the essential assurance questions. However, recent failures in the North East have caused senior leadership to review the format of the WAR.

8.24. In the North West, a conscious redesign of the WAR has led to the removal of cumulative narrative altogether. Only the most recent update is recorded, and entries centre on current risk and proposed mitigation. Managers in this Area reported that the redesigned format has reduced duplication and enabled them to spend time scrutinising risk rather than revisiting historical information. This illustrates that concise WAR formats can strengthen rather than weaken assurance when they are focused on the correct purpose: identifying present risk and required action rather than documenting case history.

8.25. Some Areas, including Wessex and London South, maintain different WAR formats across their units, reflecting differences in local leadership approach rather than CTL risk profile. Units within the same Area using different templates can create inconsistency in expectations and standards across units and can complicate governance. However, this flexibility has consequences for standardisation and accountability. For example, London South and London North do not consistently record the seven-day threshold test reviews on the WAR at all, instead relying on informal conversations between prosecutor and manager. Where key assurance steps are not formally recorded, identifying systemic issues or demonstrating due diligence becomes more difficult.

8.26. A fourth group of Areas – South East, London North and West Midlands – has adopted a hybrid model: extensive case progression questions are embedded into the WAR, often completed by operational delivery (OD) staff before legal managers add their entries. Their WARs contain multiple sections requiring updates on witnesses, disclosure, police action, or trial preparation milestones. While many of these questions reflect genuine risk factors for CTLs, the breadth of the template still leads to the WAR becoming predominantly an administrative tracking tool rather than an assurance document. This can create delay and a feeling of a never-ending process that those we spoke to said can sap morale.

8.27. These forms must be completed on a weekly basis and owing to this format legal managers were not receiving the WAR from OD staff often until Wednesday afternoon. West Midlands legal managers reported that they were then spending up to two full days from Wednesday completing the report, often with detailed case

progression details overshadowing the assurance focus. The final assurance was not then being undertaken by the Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor (DCCP) until Monday of the following week, by which time the following week's WAR had started again.

8.28. Our findings show that when WARs become extensive multi-page templates requiring a large volume of data entry, the weekly assurance document risks becoming mechanistic and less sensitive to professional judgement. By the time that the final assurance report is considered by senior Area leaders, the information is likely to be out of date.

8.29. The extent of difference in WAR format and completion across CPS Areas demonstrates why national leaders expressed concern about the extent of variation we reported to them. Many of the changes made by Areas have not been assessed for impact and whether they result in improved assurance; instead they serve only as a 'comfort blanket' for legal managers and raise questions about whether assurance activity is proportionate and effective.

Thresholds for returning cases to the WAR

8.30. Differences between Areas extend beyond format and into the criteria governing when cases return to the WAR. National guidance states that cases should appear on the report in three ways if:

- i) the CTL expires or a trial is listed within 28 days
- ii) if it is a case which has had the threshold test applied and has been transferred into the unit within seven days
- iii) if it is a case identified as high risk as several Areas apply different thresholds.

8.31. In Cymru-Wales, for example, magistrates' courts cases return to the WAR at 35 days prior to a CTL expiring or a trial listing, reflecting the Area's view that earlier review strengthens grip. This was introduced following a local CTL failure that followed the failure to receive mobile telephone evidence in a timely manner. East of England returns cases at 30 days. In Wessex, RASSO cases return at 56 days, but in Thames and Chiltern and Mersey-Cheshire RASSO cases return at 42 days. These extended return periods are intended to provide additional time for managers to identify risk and address evidential issues.

8.32. Under the national guidance, threshold test cases would normally be removed from the WAR after their first appearance in it. However, in some Areas there is a trend of keeping cases on the WAR until the full Code test is applied. This practice is found in Thames and Chiltern, East of England and South West. In some units, particularly RASSO, the rationale is that these cases are high risk, complex,

and often reliant on outstanding digital evidence. As such, remaining on the WAR is seen as providing necessary oversight by legal managers until the evidential position is clear. In London South, due to their volume of RASSO cases being CTL cases, the Area operates a further slight variation where only threshold test cases listed outside of the CTL remain on the WAR until the full Code test is applied. The variation reflects differing approaches to proportionality, though in Areas where cases remain on WAR for extended periods, managers reported challenges distinguishing genuinely risky cases from routine ones.

Additional Area assurance checks

8.33. Many Areas have also developed additional mid-case checks that sit alongside the WAR. The most common of these are 90-day and 100-day reviews following charge, introduced in recognition of the fact that many CTL failures nationally have arisen from late escalation of digital forensics, mobile phone downloads, and third-party material. Areas such as South East and North West have implemented 100-day reviews across Crown Court units. East of England and Yorkshire and Humberside apply 90-day reviews, with legal managers required to check that trial readiness is progressing as expected. Evidence suggests these checks have improved case grip in Areas with local police delays, though they also increase the workload for prosecutors and managers. In the South East Area, we were told that prosecutors and legal managers felt that these checks were beneficial and had been received positively.

Threshold test reviews and compliance with national standards

8.34. One aspect where non-compliance with national standards is clear relates to the seven-day threshold test review requirement. National guidance requires that threshold test Crown Court cases transferred into a unit must be reviewed within seven days and endorsed on the WAR. Our evidence shows that South East, London North, and London South were not consistently carrying out this review. In London South and London North, the threshold test review was often replaced by an informal “conversation,” with no documented review on the WAR. In South East, resourcing pressures and high custody workloads have led to inconsistent compliance with the threshold test requirement.

8.35. This is a significant divergence from national expectations and has implications for early case grip, particularly in Areas where CTL failures have occurred due to late evidential escalation.

Compliance Issues

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must complete the seven-day threshold test case review.

Alignment with national standards

8.36. When considering whether variations align with national standards, the evidence reveals a mixed picture. Most Areas at least meet the national minimum requirement in their recorded assurance processes, but several exceed expectations by introducing additional checks and extended monitoring intervals. While these enhancements can strengthen grip, they also introduce additional burden and reduce consistency nationally. In other Areas, such as London North and South East, key elements of the Level D aide memoire are not recorded consistently, particularly around threshold test checks. Thames and Chiltern has amended elements of the aide memoire, raising questions about whether the national tool is being applied as intended. The existence of bespoke local templates and enhancements shows that many Areas are seeking to resolve local risks, but the extent of variation suggests the need for clearer national standards to avoid divergence that undermines comparability. National leaders were clear that while local adaptations may be necessary, variations that reduce performance below national standards or require excessive resources should be avoided.

Proportionality of assurance activity

8.37. The proportionality of assurance varies widely. In West Midlands, the length and complexity of the WAR mean that legal managers can spend up to two full days each week completing it. In contrast, Wales and North East spend significantly less time, due to shorter formats and streamlined assurance processes. The discrepancy in workload raises concerns about whether the assurance model is sustainable and proportionate to risk. However, some RASSO units with lower CTL volumes maintain highly detailed WAR entries because of risk aversion rather than evidence-based need. This divergence suggests that legal manager resource is not being deployed proportionately or consistently across the CPS.

8.38. Differences between units within Areas also illustrates issues of proportionality. RASSO units are consistently more detailed in their assurance entries than Crown Court units, reflecting the heightened risks associated with these cases. On 21 October 2025, magistrates' courts unit cases accounted for 11% of the national CTL caseload. For Crown Court unit cases it was 74.4% while the RASSO units were 12.5% of the CTL caseload. We considered 28 CTL failures, two per Area, however those failures had occurred over the course of several years. Of those 28 cases, three (11%) were magistrates' court unit cases, 18 (64%) were Crown Court unit cases and seven (25%) were RASSO unit cases.

8.39. RASSO cases are more likely to remain on the WAR until the full Code test is applied, and additional meetings – such as Local Case Management Panels

(LCMPs) and Early Case Planning Conferences (ECPCs)²⁷ – are more frequent. While some of this reflects legitimate risk, it also leads to a significantly more detailed CTL assurance workload for RASSO legal managers, even in Areas with relatively small volumes of cases. Whether this level of scrutiny is proportionate or sustainable is variable; in some Areas it enhances assurance, in others it risks over-engineering the process.

The case for earlier and more targeted assurance

8.40. We found that the evidence supports a shift of assurance activity to earlier in the case life cycle. Here, it can have a positive impact on being able to grip issues early and thereby demonstrate due diligence and expedition, should an application to extend CTLs become necessary later in the case. National leaders highlighted that risks associated with threshold test decisions, late escalation and inconsistent police performance are best managed at the earliest possible stage.

8.41. The evidence does not demonstrate a relationship between the volume of assurance activity undertaken by an Area and improved CTL outcomes. Areas that produced extended, narrative-heavy WARs did not exhibit stronger grip or fewer CTL failures than those operating shorter, risk-focused formats. This indicates that the current weekly assurance model has developed in ways that are not proportionate to its impact. In many Areas, assurance activity has expanded to record case history rather than to assess whether risk to CTL cases is being identified and addressed at the earliest point.

8.42. Where assurance models were more effective, they placed emphasis on early visibility of risk rather than on repeated weekly reporting. Well-structured threshold test reviews, early engagement with the police, and locally developed mid-point checks all supported earlier identification of evidential or procedural issues. In contrast, lengthy WARs often duplicated material recorded on CMS and diverted managerial time away from active case management. As a result, the ability of managers to identify genuinely high-risk cases was reduced.

8.43. There is a need to re-set expectations for weekly assurance. The purpose of the WAR is to provide assurance on risk and case progression, not to record a running narrative of case activity, the purpose for which CMS exists. A clearer national expectation would assist in ensuring that weekly assurance activity is focused on identifying risk and clarifying the actions required to manage that risk, rather than reproducing information available elsewhere. National consistency in the use of the report would also reduce the extent of unnecessary divergence in practice between Areas.

²⁷ Local Case Management Panel – which involve legal managers and the prosecutor to consider case progression – and Early Case Planning Conferences, which involve the prosecutor, police officer and legal manager agree lines of enquiry and actions to prepare the case.

8.44. Evidence from Areas that had implemented a mid-point review demonstrates that an earlier assurance point provides a meaningful opportunity to identify case progression risks at a stage where remedial action remains possible. In a number of Areas, these checks led to action on outstanding digital evidence, expert reports, or disclosure issues, enabling cases to progress in accordance with CTL requirements. Although approaches varied, their introduction reflected a shared recognition that the current national assurance gap between the seven-day review and the 28-day check immediately prior to trial or expiry is too long. Introducing a mandatory mid-point review would provide a more structured national safeguard.

8.45. Taken together, the findings indicate that assurance activity needs to shift from a process-heavy weekly cycle to a nationally consistent, risk-led approach that supports early identification and active management of high-risk cases. This will require national direction on the purpose, format and use of the WAR, aligned with a mandatory mid-point review for Crown Court CTL cases. This would support greater consistency, ensure that assurance activity is proportionate, and better target managerial time on the cases where the risk is greatest.

Recommendation 4

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) should use the findings from this inspection of custody time limit (CTL) assurance systems to develop and implement a new approach to how it assesses and manages CTL assurance. The new approach should be a risk-led model, that prioritises the early identification and active management of high-risk cases. Assurance activity should be targeted where the risk of delay is greatest, ensuring timely intervention to prevent CTL failures.

The timescales for this recommendation are:

- by 30 September 2026, the CPS to have designed a new approach
- by 31 December 2026, the CPS to have implemented the new approach
- by 30 April 2027, the CPS will have carried out internal evaluation to assess whether the new approach has been successfully embedded.

b) CTL Assurance app

8.46. The use of the CTL Assurance app varies markedly across CPS Areas. This variation is driven by a combination of cultural, structural, and operational factors. The app has the potential to identify CTL risks or issues relating to individual cases and to assess performance across the Area. The value of the app depends heavily on how Areas choose to use it and, in many cases, whether they use it at all. Three broad themes emerge from the evidence: perceptions of usefulness, patterns of local assurance practice, and internal consistency within individual Areas.

CTL Assurance app Issues registered 1 April 2025 to 31 December 2025 ²⁸		
Area	Number of issues registered	% of total number of issues registered
Cymru-Wales	42	1.1%
East of England	260	6.5%
East Midlands	26	0.7%
London North	468	11.9%
London South	289	7.3%
Mersey-Cheshire	138	3.5%
North East	132	3.3%
North West	350	8.9%
South East	699	17.7%
South West	56	1.4%
Thames and Chiltern	410	10.4%
Wessex	74	1.9%
West Midlands	778	19.7%
Yorkshire and Humberside	224	5.7%
National	3,946	100%

Perceived usefulness and local managerial practice

8.47. A key factor of variation is how managers in each Area perceive the relevance and utility of the app. In several Areas, we were told that the app simply duplicates existing assurance processes, particularly the WAR. Areas such as East Midlands, North East, and Wessex report very low usage, with managers stating that the app adds little value and that “issues” are subjective with limited guidance on when an issue needs to be reported. In some other Areas – London South, South East, and North West – usage has increased only after reminders from senior leaders. We noted an increase in reporting across the entire CPS after the announcement of this inspection, indicating that reporting is not embedded as part of routine business. The South East recorded the most marked and sustained increase in use of the app, registering 699 issues in the first three quarters of this year, compared with 255 in the year 2024-25.

Variation in reporting by purpose and issue-type

8.48. An additional contributor to inconsistency is that various Areas utilise the app to report fundamentally distinct categories of issues only. In several Areas, the app is used predominantly for issues related to advocacy, rather than case

²⁸ Issues registered on the app relating to CPS staff. This does not include issues registered which relate to external advocates.

progression failings. Mersey-Cheshire largely uses the app to capture advocacy concerns, such as failures to announce CTLs in court, while Yorkshire and Humberside also report primarily advocacy-related matters, particularly external counsel performance. Other Areas use it for a broader range of concerns, including case progression, digital forensics delays, or timely service of evidence.

8.49. In Thames and Chiltern, the pattern of reporting diverges again: high reporting volumes exist, but most entries come from OD staff, not from legal managers. This results in a different type of data, which is related to case progression, rather than risk driven legal assurance. The issues identified by the app, mean different things in different Areas, limiting the ability to draw meaningful national comparisons.

Inconsistent use within Areas

8.50. Even within the same Area, usage can vary significantly between units. This is particularly pronounced in West Midlands, where the Crown Court unit uses the app extensively, but the RASSO unit makes little or no use of it. The explanation is cultural and structural: in RASSO, legal managers prefer to address issues directly with their prosecutors rather than record them. In contrast, the Crown Court unit relies on the app because the weekly assurance process is completed by a legal manager who is not the prosecutor's line manager, meaning the app becomes necessary to ensure the actual manager is alerted to emerging CTL risks.

Limited use and value of data for performance improvement

8.51. Evidence supporting the use of app data to drive improvement remains limited across most Areas. This is perhaps not surprising in view of the inconsistent approach to using it and therefore the value of the data it can produce. Even in regions with higher reporting rates, such as West Midlands and South East, opportunities to analyse trends and identify systemic issues are not fully utilised. In Areas with robust governance, such as CTL Boards, app data is generally reviewed but often holds a secondary position compared to WAR findings or audit outcomes.

8.52. Few Areas consistently incorporate app outputs into strategic assurance processes. Mersey-Cheshire, London North, London South, and East of England provide clear examples of examining app trends within CTL Boards to identify training needs and review case progression practices. In London North, individual units work to address issues of particular concern. Mersey-Cheshire has introduced a customised report to track app trends in relation to issues that are registered on the app. The CTL Board has found the report helpful and has resulted in CTL training targeted at staff where appropriate needs had been identified. These instances highlight the advantages of structured app data analysis when integrated into governance frameworks.

8.53. A clearer expectation is needed for CTL Boards to use app reporting systematically to drive improvement. Boards should routinely review app completion rates, analyse emerging trends, and consider whether issues identified through the app indicate training needs, procedural weaknesses, or systemic risks. To strengthen national oversight, Areas should report their app completion performance and key findings to the national CTL working group. This would enable the CPS to monitor performance more consistently, identify good practice within and across Areas, and intervene early where recurring issues or gaps in assurance are emerging.

8.54. National CPS interviewees have noted that whilst the app offers significant potential for operational insight and assurance, its success depends on purposeful integration into local governance and assurance structures. They highlighted that without clear expectations and leadership endorsement, usage tends to be inconsistent and valuable learning opportunities may be missed. This perspective aligns with the evidence gathered across Areas: stronger governance leads to more meaningful and consistent app use.

Compliance Issues

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must use the custody time limit (CTL) Assurance app consistently and use data from the app to identify and address performance gaps.

c) Level 1 assurance monthly assurance checks

8.55. The inspection found significant variation between CPS Areas in how Level 1 monthly assurance checks were understood, prioritised, and applied. The national purpose of Level 1 checks is clear; they provide an assessment of whether key CTL processes have been completed correctly and in line with national standards. However, Areas adopted markedly different approaches as to how the results were used to drive improvement. These differences had a direct impact on the consistency of assurance across the CPS.

8.56. Across the 14 Areas, the extent to which Level 1 checks were embedded as a meaningful assurance mechanism varied from being well structured and routinely scrutinised to being largely procedural and inconsistently completed. In several Areas, the checks were used proactively to identify weaknesses in compliance with CTL standards. Areas such as East of England, Mersey-Cheshire, and South East had established clear governance arrangements in which the findings were fed into Area level CTL Boards. In these Areas, operational CTL champions monitored the outcomes, while issues identified in the dip samples prompted follow up activity, training, or changes to process. In East of England, CTL legal operational champions provided feedback to other legal managers on the performance of the unit as a whole. By way of example, the checks identified that

failure to escalate with the police was an issue, which was then subject of a concerted action across the Area. This subsequently improved police compliance and reduced the number of escalations over a six-month period.

8.57. Some Areas incorporated the findings from these checks into Area CTL action logs to be monitored and drive performance improvement.

8.58. Where Areas had higher levels of CTL risk or a recent history of failures, such as London South, Yorkshire and Humberside, or the West Midlands, Level 1 checks were more embedded in CTL governance activity and provided a structured means of monitoring performance. The London North CTL assurance group identified priorities for units to work on and then report back to the group on progress. The North West CTL Board, when considering the Level 1 assurance checks, recognised that the compliance with a range of the CTL requirements remained an issue. The issues identified were the setting of target dates for the police, compliance with court orders and completion of the Case Progression Log (CPL). The response of the Board was a short period of targeted work requiring senior legal managers to dip sample an additional ten cases a week during a six-week period to try to drive improvement.

8.59. In contrast, Areas with limited CTL governance, such as Wessex and the North East, tended to treat Level 1 checks as administrative tasks rather than a core assurance function. Managers reported that the checks had limited impact on performance improvement. The newly created CTL forum in the North East has identified that this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

8.60. Overall, while the Level 1 monthly assurance checks were introduced to support consistent application of national CTL standards, the variation in how Areas understood, completed, and followed up the checks limited their effectiveness as a national assurance tool. Areas that treated Level 1 checks as a meaningful part of their CTL governance demonstrated clearer oversight, earlier identification of risk, and more structured corrective action. Other Areas, where the checks were less embedded or inconsistently used, did not achieve the same level of assurance, and important opportunities to strengthen performance were not always taken.

Compliance Issues

All Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Areas must use data from Level 1 monthly assurance checks and the custody time limit (CTL) Assurance app to identify and address performance gaps.

Governance and Area CTL champions

8.61. National CTL leads expressed the clear view that a prescriptive national model for Area CTL governance would neither be proportionate nor effective. Areas vary in size, resourcing, geographical spread, and operational pressures. It was recognised that the imposition of uniform governance structures may not improve performance. Instead, the national expectation is that Areas should be accountable for the quality of their own CTL assurance, selecting governance frameworks suited to local conditions while ensuring that core requirements of scrutiny, reporting, and escalation are met.

8.62. The national position therefore emphasises outcome-focused flexibility, with Areas expected to demonstrate grip, consistency, and learning, regardless of the specific structures through which these are achieved.

8.63. We observed a wide spectrum of governance models, demonstrating both diversity of approach and differing levels of maturity.

8.64. Thames and Chiltern's CTL forum was open to all legal and operational delivery managers, creating a wide platform for information sharing. However, this inclusivity had the effect of diluting strategic focus, with the forum tending towards operational discussion rather than targeted performance oversight. Although attendance levels were high, the group's broad remit and limited prioritisation of thematic risks reduced its effectiveness as a strategic governance mechanism.

8.65. In contrast, the West Midlands adopted a highly structured governance model, comprising a CTL Board supported by consistent leadership from strategic and operational champions. A distinctive feature of this Area's approach was regular engagement with police forces, who attended CTL Board meetings to contribute to joint problem-solving and escalation discussions. This collaborative governance structure enabled the West Midlands Area to identify cross-agency issues at an early stage and to agree shared solutions, reinforcing both assurance and partnership working.

8.66. Yorkshire and Humberside operated one of the most developed governance frameworks. A senior management level CTL Board provided strategic oversight, agreed policy direction, and reviewed performance against Area wide objectives. This was supplemented by a wider Area CTL forum, consisting of operational leads from all units. The forum was responsible for disseminating learning, monitoring progress against an action log, and ensuring consistent practice across the Area. This two-tier structure supported both strategic coherence and operational implementation.

8.67. London North also adopted a tiered model involving a quarterly CTL Board and a monthly assurance group comprised of operational champions. This

structure enabled systematic consideration of CTL performance, clear tracking of actions, and a degree of strategic coherence across units.

8.68. In East Midlands, CTLs' assurance was routinely considered at unit boards and escalated to the Area Strategic Board. Senior managers viewed this arrangement as proportionate and effective. This position aligns with the national expectation that governance should be efficient, proportionate, and outcome-driven, rather than structurally uniform.

8.69. Several smaller Areas indicated that separate CTL governance structures were unnecessary, provided that existing forums afforded adequate scrutiny. In both Cymru-Wales and Wessex, governance arrangements were less formalised. CTL matters were addressed within broader Area boards rather than through dedicated CTL forums. Champions were present but their roles tended to be more advisory than strategic, resulting in limited visibility of CTL issues, which was an issue that was recognised by the North East. During the inspection, the North East introduced a CTL Board to replace less formal governance arrangements. This reflected a move towards greater structure and clearer allocation of responsibilities, following concerns identified through internal peer reviews.

8.70. Variation in governance is expected and appropriate, and the divergence observed between Areas has a material impact on the quality and consistency of CTL assurance. The most effective governance models, irrespective of format, are characterised by clear senior accountability, well defined roles for champions, and regular structured scrutiny. Where such features were absent or underdeveloped, assurance was weaker, visibility was reduced, and the risk of inconsistent practice was greater.

Strategic and Operational Champions

8.71. Across CPS Areas, the Strategic CTL Champion role is located at senior leadership level. Eight Areas have appointed a DCCP for this role, ensuring CTL responsibility is held at an appropriate level given its organisational priority. For the other six Areas, the Strategic Champion was a Senior District Crown Prosecutor.

8.72. We interviewed strategic and operational champions across a range of Areas. Traditionally, the role of operational champion was to be a source of knowledge and advice. The operational champions we spoke to recognised that their role had changed and that they now provided the operational link between strategic priorities and frontline assurance. They recognised that their role was to improve performance and put into effect the Area CTL strategy or action plan. In some Areas, however, responsibilities were understood informally or exercised inconsistently, limiting their effectiveness. This was more often the case in Areas such as Wales-Cymru and Wessex, which did not have CTL forums.

Annex A

Inspection Framework

Inspection question

To what extent were Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) assurance processes for Custody Time Limits (CTLs) consistently applied across Areas, and did they assist in progressing cases effectively and reduce the risk of CTL failures?

Inspection criteria

1. Policy

Is the CTL policy for the assurance of CTLs well understood and applied?

- I. Do staff understand their roles and responsibilities under the policy?
- II. Is the CTL policy applied consistently across Areas?

2. Management and Assurance

Are the processes for the management and assurance of CTLs proportionate and effective in supporting compliance and oversight?

- I. Is time spent on CTL assurance proportionate and effective?
- II. How well do Area assurance processes contribute to identifying and managing CTL risks?
- III. Have lessons learned, from CTL failures and near misses, led to sustained improvements in CTL management?
- IV. Is the role of Area CTL champion clearly defined and understood?
- V. Are CTL Champions proactive in identifying risks and implementing mitigation strategies?

3. Variation

To what extent is national CPS policy and guidance for the assurance of CTLs applied consistently across Areas?

- I. What explains the variation in reporting on the CTL Assurance app across Areas?
- II. What factors contribute to differences in CTL failure rates between Areas?
- III. How do CTL assurance practices differ across Areas, and are these differences justified?
- IV. Are identified differences aligned with national standards?
- V. Are variations in practice proportionate to the level of CTL risk in each Area?

4. National

How effectively does CPS national oversight support consistency, learning, and improvement in CTL management across Areas?

An inspection of the assurance systems for Custody Time Limits by CPS Areas

- I. Are mechanisms in place to consistently identify and share good practice across Areas?
- II. How effectively does national CPS scrutinise Area performance and provide constructive challenge?
- III. Is learning from CTL failures or near misses embedded into national policy or guidance?
- IV. How does national oversight contribute to reducing variation and improving CTL outcomes?

Annex B

Glossary

Area

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) is divided into 14 geographical Areas across England and Wales. Each Area is led by a Chief Crown Prosecutor, supported by an Area Head of Operations.

Area Strategic Board (ASB)

The senior governance forum within a CPS Area that oversees performance, assurance, operational priorities, and strategic decision-making.

Case Management Panel (CMP)

Where the prosecutor and legal manager meet to review a specific case, the case strategy and agree actions that are required to effectively progress the case.

Case Management System (CMS)

An IT system for case management used by the CPS, which records most of the details of cases and provides management information and data. Through links with police systems, the CMS receives electronic case material that has replaced paper files.

Casework Quality Board (CQB)

The Area-wide meeting of senior legal and operational delivery managers which consider the Area's casework quality. It will receive reports from individual units and also other committees such as a CTL Board.

Casework units

Teams responsible for prosecuting different categories of criminal cases, such as the magistrates' court unit, Crown Court unit, Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) unit and Complex Casework unit. Each manages its own CTL caseload, progressing cases in line with national standards, and ensuring that risks to timely and effective case progression are identified and addressed within their specialist area.

Chief Crown Prosecutor (CCP)

Each of the 14 CPS Areas has a CCP who runs the Area with the Area Business Manager. The CCP is the most senior legal manager at CPS Area level and is responsible for the legal aspects in the Area, such as quality of legal decision-making, case progression, and working with stakeholders, communities, and the public to deliver quality casework.

Code for Crown Prosecutors ('the Code')

A public document, issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions, that sets out the framework for prosecution decision-making. Cases should proceed to charge only if there is sufficient evidence against a suspect to provide a realistic prospect of conviction and it is in the public interest to prosecute.

Crown Court

The court which deals with graver allegations of criminal offences, such as murder, rape, and serious assaults. Some allegations can be heard at either the Crown Court or the magistrates' courts.

Custody Time Limit (CTL)

The CTL is the length of time that a defendant can be kept in custody awaiting trial. It can be extended by the court in certain circumstances. The CTL for cases in the Crown Court is 182 days and for the magistrates' court it is 56 days.

CTL Case Progression Log

A document used by the CPS to track the progress of cases where a defendant is held in custody before trial. The log helps ensure that cases are progressed efficiently and that defendants are not held in custody longer than legally permitted. The CPS is expected to maintain these logs and update them regularly with case details, actions taken, and review dates.

CTL Failure

When the court refuses to extend a CTL on the grounds that the prosecution has not acted with the necessary due diligence and expedition, or when no valid application is made to extend the CTL before its expiry date.

CTL Operational Champion

A legal or operational manager who provides the operational link between the CTL Strategic Champion and casework units. They will provide advice and assistance to staff, carry out local assurance checks and coordinate audits.

CTL Strategic Champion

The senior legal manager in each CPS Area - normally a Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor (DCCP) - responsible for setting the Area's strategic direction for CTLs, overseeing compliance with national CTL policy and standards, ensuring effective governance and escalation arrangements, and monitoring performance to improve CTL outcomes.

Defendant

Someone accused of and charged with or convicted of a criminal offence.

Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor (DCCP)

Second-in-command to the Chief Crown Prosecutor (see above) for legal aspects of managing a CPS Area.

Directors of Legal Services

Senior CPS leaders who are accountable for the quality and oversight of casework across CPS Areas, Central Casework Divisions, and the Proceeds of Crime Service, supported by a specialist legal team.

Domestic abuse

The cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse is “any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass but is not limited to psychological; physical; sexual; financial; and emotional.”

Early Case Planning Conference (ECPC)

These take place at an early stage of the case and will usually involve the prosecutor, legal manager, and the police. The meeting will discuss the case strategy and steps needed to manage case progression and agree a timetable for submission of material to the CPS.

Full Code test

A method by which a prosecutor decides whether to bring a prosecution, based on the Code for Crown Prosecutors. A prosecution must only start or continue when the case has passed both stages of the full Code test: the evidential stage, followed by the public interest stage. The full Code test should be applied when all outstanding reasonable lines of inquiry have been pursued - or before the investigation being completed, if the prosecutor is satisfied that any further evidence or material is unlikely to affect the application of the full Code test, whether in favour of or against a prosecution.

His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS)

An organisation responsible for the administration of criminal, civil and family courts and tribunals in England and Wales.

Joint Operational Improvement Meeting (JOIM)

The formal CPS–police partnership forum used to identify and resolve operational case progression issues, analyse joint performance, and drive continuous improvement, with actions monitored through a shared plan and agreed actions.

Legal Assurance Team (LAT)

The national CPS team responsible for providing independent second line legal assurance, including reviewing all CTL failures, producing legal assurance reports, conducting thematic casework reviews, analysing dip sampling data, and identifying systemic issues to support consistency, learning and improved casework quality across CPS Areas.

Legal manager

There are two main grades of legal manager.

A District Crown Prosecutor (DCP) is a lawyer who leads and manages the day-to-day activities of prosecutors and advocates. They are responsible for the assurance of CTL cases.

A Senior District Crown Prosecutor (SDCP) holds a senior legal role with responsibility for managing a casework unit and will be responsible for the assurance of CTL cases across the unit.

Local Case Management Panels (LCMPs)

A forum within a CPS Area that has a key role in overseeing complex, high risk or sensitive cases. It ensures consistent decision-making, supports prosecutors, and manages referrals to specialist units. Attended by the prosecutor, their legal manager and a senior legal manager such as a Unit Head or Deputy Chief Crown Prosecutor.

Magistrates court

The court that is the first tier of the criminal courts where lay magistrates or a District Judge make early decisions on bail, custody, and case management, and in CTL cases are responsible for setting and overseeing the initial custody time limits before a case progresses.

National standards for the management of custody time limits

A document which sets out the mandatory CPS requirements for managing and assuring CTL cases. It sets out the requirement that Areas maintain a comprehensive written Area CTL system, assigning responsibilities to specific roles, and ensuring that all staff follow consistent national procedures to prevent CTL failures.

Operational Assurance (OA)

The team responsible for delivering independent second line operational assurance across the CPS. OA also oversees first line assurance activity and coordinated third line assurance: monitoring delivery of recommendations including those from HMCPSI. OA provides guidance, data, and analysis to strengthen compliance, governance, and operational performance.

Operational delivery

The staff who support legal staff in preparing, assuring, and progressing cases.

Prosecutor

For CTL cases this is a Senior Crown Prosecutor (SCP) with responsibility for managing, reviewing, and progressing individual CTL cases. They will be responsible for reviews applying the full Code test or threshold test as required and ensuring case progression actions are completed in line with national CTL policy and Area assurance processes.

RAG rating

Red, Amber Green ratings, based upon the traffic light system, are used across a number of Areas to assess CTL risk for individual cases.

Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO)

Allegations of rape and other serious sexual offences perpetrated against men, women, or children. In the CPS, the prosecution of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) cases is undertaken separately from other cases, in RASSO units or teams.

Strategic Joint Operational Improvement Meeting (SJOIM)

The senior level counterpart to the JOIM, providing higher level oversight, escalation and strategic decision-making on operational improvement issues.

Threshold test

Applied where the case is serious, there are substantial grounds to object to bail, and further key evidence is expected. Once applied, the case must be kept under review and the full Code test applied as soon as reasonably practicable.

Unused material

Material collected by the police during an investigation, but which is not being used as evidence in any prosecution. The prosecutor must consider whether to disclose it to the defendant.

Weekly Assurance Report (WAR)

A document completed each week by CPS managers to check all CTL cases that are 28 days from trial or expiry of the CTL. It confirms that cases are being properly progressed and any risks of a CTL failure are identified early. The report also includes an initial assessment of all threshold test cases that have been transferred into a Crown Court unit within the past seven days, to ensure they are being actively reviewed and appropriately managed.

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