



Delays upset magistrate

By **GABRIEL WINGATE-PEARSE**

A NEWCASTLE magistrate has criticised the lack of resources holding up the progress of drug-related criminal matters in the local court.

His attack followed a request for another lengthy adjournment in a case involving serious allegations of drug manufacture at Warners Bay.

"It's been four days short of a year since the matter was first mentioned," magistrate Robert Stone said.

"The court notes it is an entirely unacceptable delay."

It was not a criticism of anybody in the department of the Director of Public Prosecutions, he said.

However, he nonetheless urged the department's staff to "try and do their best" with the resources they had.

"It is a matter which, for the purposes of obtaining justice and the speedy and quick resolution of matters, is causing huge delays, which ultimately comes back to the

courts as a criticism as to why the courts are not dealing with matters expeditiously," Mr Stone said in open court.

"I would dearly love the government to take notice of the delays being caused."

Sources say there is just one person currently qualified and employed by the State Government to perform the type of analysis required and that there are other matters being similarly delayed.

A senior prosecutor said it was an ongoing issue because of the number of matters involving illicit drugs, but he also said a delay of 12 months seemed "extraordinary" in a matter carrying a maximum penalty of 15 years in jail.

A spokeswoman for the NSW Forensic Analytical and Science Service, run by NSW Health, said increased demand and "several large police seizures had put pressure on processing times".

The service had been working

collaboratively with police, the Department of Attorney General and Justice, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutors, the Office of the Chief Magistrate, and the Ministry of Police and Emergency Services to address the issues, she said. Initiatives introduced so far included a new "presumptive testing certificate" to speed up the analysis and processing of cases involving smaller amounts of drugs in cases where that was "in issue", reducing the number of cases requiring full analysis.

"In addition, staffing has been increased and resources diverted to help improve processing times," she said. There were several scientists working in the area of drug manufacturing-related analysis and the service was training more scientists to enhance capacity.

The office of the Director of Public Prosecutions declined to comment.