



District Court of New Zealand
Te Kōti-ā-Rohe o Aotearoa

2024

ANNUAL **REPORT**



Contents

Foreword	3	Te Ao Mārama	23
Report of the Chief District Court Judge	5	Timely access to justice	29
Report of the Principal Family Court Judge	9	The Young Adult List	33
Report of the Principal Youth Court Judge	12	Meet our new judges	35
Report of the National Executive Judge	15	Connecting with the community	37
What we look like	17	Alternative courtroom layouts	40
What our courts do	18	Meet our Family Court associates	42
Who we are	21	Community magistrates	43
District Court workload	22	Judicial justices of the peace	44
		Building for the future	45
		Where to find out more	47

Foreword

Welcome to the 2024 annual report for the District Court of New Zealand | Te Kōti ā Rohe o Aotearoa. It is a snapshot of what our judicial officers have been doing in our 59 courthouses and hearing centres around the country.



Chief Judge Heemi Taumaunu.

The District Court is the largest court in Australasia and that is reflected in the volume and breadth of our activities.

In this report you will gain insights into judicial officers' work serving their communities.

After introductions from me, providing an overview of the court, and from Principal Family Court Judge Jacquelyn Moran and Principal Youth Court Judge Ida Malosi on their jurisdictions, we will update you on the progress we are making with our judicially led Enhancing Justice for All initiative, called Te Ao Mārama.

There is also an update on the significant progress made in 2024 to achieve timelier access to justice, work fundamental to Te Ao Mārama and its success.

There are other items about Family Court associates, community magistrates and judicial justices of the peace and artist impressions of the new Papakura and Whanganui buildings given funding go-ahead in 2024.

At the end of the report are links to pages on our website that provide more key statistics and the names of the court's judicial officers.

I hope you find this annual report informative and it increases your understanding of the work of the District Court.

Heemi Taumaunu
Chief District Court Judge



Report of the Chief District Court Judge

Judge Heemi Taumaunu

Early in 2024, I set three priorities for the work of the District Court. They were to enhance the quality of justice (referred to as the Te Ao Mārama initiative), to improve timely access to justice and to increase levels of judicial wellbeing (in particular by addressing workload pressures on judicial officers). Later in the year, I set a fourth priority: to support the design and introduction of a new digital case management system called Te Au Reka.



Chief Judge Heemi Taumaunu at the Waitangi Day celebrations at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds. Image: Kristin Edge

I set these priorities as part of my statutory obligations to ensure the orderly and efficient conduct of the business of the court. They helped to provide our court with a useful road map as we navigated an extremely busy and challenging year. Much of my work and that of the judicial leadership of our court relates to these priorities and we made significant progress across each of them, as well as managing the daily business of the biggest court in Australasia.

The year saw the historic introduction of a new judicial officer to the family division of the District Court, with the swearing in of six Family Court associates. FCAs can pick up some of the work of a Family Court judge, particularly in the early stages of proceedings. You can read more about them in Principal Family Court Judge Jacquelyn Moran's report on pages 9–11 and see them on page 42.

We also swore in eight new District Court judges in 2024. Excitement and a deep sense of responsibility were common experiences for the newly appointed judicial officers at their swearing-in ceremonies. All of them have brought rich backgrounds and diverse skills and experiences to their new roles in our court.

Sadly, in March, the court suffered a blow with the deaths of three of our judicial whānau in one week: Judge Bernadette Farnan from Invercargill District Court, Acting Warranted Judge Jocelyn Munro from Rotorua District Court and former judge Philip Recordon from Manukau District Court. The outpouring of public regard for them encapsulated the important role they had played in their communities.

We made significant progress during 2024 in understanding the barriers to timely access to justice in our court and putting in place multi-pronged initiatives for improvement. You can read more about these on pages 29–32.

A milestone was publishing in June a Timely Access to Justice Protocol. It sets out a timeliness standard and category-based timeframes for most cases to progress from first appearance to disposal, with the aim of striking the right balance between aspirational objectives and operational realities.

I wish to acknowledge former National Executive Judge Russell Collins’s assistance on timeliness initiatives, in particular shepherding the wide consultation process for the Bail Application Scheduling Framework published in 2024 and the Case Review Best Practice Guidelines finalised in 2025, as well as his work with executive judges to develop local timeliness plans. You can read more in his report on pages 15 and 16.

Our judicial leadership team (me, the two Principal Judges and the National Executive Judge) and executive judges worked closely on the range of timely justice initiatives with the Ministry of Justice and court staff in particular. We engaged in regular justice sector-wide meetings focused on improving timely access to justice.

In July, the final report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care was released. It has profound implications for the work of the District Court, whether directly, through recommended legislative changes or in recommendations for other parts of the care and protection and justice systems. It was pleasing to note Recommendation 25 that the Government should support and invest in judicially led initiatives such as Te Ao Mārama that recognise and address the harm caused by abuse and neglect in care.

Te Ao Mārama is about enhancing justice for everyone who comes to the District Court. Timely access to justice is fundamental to the initiative, so these two priorities are closely entwined.

Our Te Ao Mārama Best Practice Framework, released to judicial officers at the end of 2023, was in January shared with court staff, lawyers, other justice sector stakeholders, iwi and community groups. It sets out in concrete terms Te Ao Mārama principles and practices.

Te Ao Mārama made significant progress throughout 2024, both in the eight court locations with targeted extra funding and support from the Ministry of Justice and elsewhere around the country. You can read more about this progress later in this report.

The District Court is now producing its judicial rosters and schedules well in advance. This helps scheduling hearing dates for cases in the future.

I acknowledge the high workload, stresses and demands of the job of a judicial officer but believe it is uniquely rewarding work, particularly as we seek to transform the way our court operates.

Looking ahead, our fourth priority, Te Au Reka, stands to have a big impact in 2025 and beyond, with the Family Court the first to adopt the new digital case management system. In the short term, it will be challenging as we take judicial time out of court to support the design, implementation and development of the system and also for training. But we expect it to pay dividends in the medium term as it delivers a more efficient system for managing the caseload of our courts.

Thank you to the many people who assisted the District Court in 2024. I note the period of restructuring in the Ministry of Justice and the commitment to supporting the work of the court in times of uncertainty. Thank you, too, to the community organisations and iwi-based organisations contributing to Te Ao Mārama and other court programmes across the country.



66

In July, the final report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care was released. It has profound implications for the work of the District Court, whether directly, through recommended legislative changes or in recommendations for other parts of the care and protection and justice systems."



The Family Court is, in a way, a snapshot of society and the issues facing New Zealanders. We see people through all of life's stages, and often at the hardest points of those stages.

In recent years, the issues facing those who come to the Family Court have grown in complexity.

These issues include the aftermath of a global pandemic, increases in family and sexual violence, increases in significant mental health and addiction issues, reduced job and housing security, and the effects of the rising cost of living.

Despite these challenges, the Family Court achieved some major milestones in 2024.

In June, we welcomed Kirsty Swadling to our bench. Judge Swadling is sitting in Waitākere.

We also saw perhaps the most significant injection of judicial resource into our court

in its history, with the first tranche of a brand new judicial role being sworn in.

As a result of the efforts of these six Family Court associates, we saw the proportion of total judge time spent in hearings increase and time spent in conferences decrease.

FCAs, all experienced Family Court lawyers before being appointed, are doing a lot of work in the early stages of proceedings but the range of work they do is wide. They use their skill and knowledge to identify and understand the dynamics of a case and help triage it towards the most effective pathway, whether appropriate interventions away from court or a full hearing.

Report of the Principal Family Court Judge

Judge Jacquelyn Moran

Judges are being freed up to focus on progressing casework, helping individuals and whānau get the right service or response early, with the intention of increasing timeliness and reducing backlog.

Following the amendments made by the Family Court (Supporting Children in Court) Legislation Act 2021, a small number of Child Specialists in Family Dispute Resolution have been appointed.

I am pleased with the calibre and experience of the people appointed to these roles.

I am also optimistic that having independent experts engaging with children to present their views in a genuine and constructive manner will change the direction of many proceedings in a meaningful way and make a significant and positive impact.

“

Judges are being freed up to focus on progressing casework, helping individuals and whānau get the right service or response early, with the intention of increasing timeliness and reducing backlog.”

Another example of the innovation and continuous improvement work in the Family Court was the roll-out of the Family Court Efficiency Tools, which were developed in-house working with judges and court staff to help ensure we have the right resources in the right place at the right time and improve consistency across courts.

The Family Court will be the first to roll out Te Au Reka, the new digital case management system that will revolutionise the capturing, processing and sharing of information.

It is intended to move courts and tribunals away from manually intensive, paper-based processes to a modern environment where participants can engage online, and to improve effectiveness overall.



The Family Court will be the first to roll out Te Au Reka, the new digital case management system that will revolutionise the capturing, processing and sharing of information."

For example, the aim is for Family Court applications to be able to be filed, paid for and tracked online with all parties having a complete, clear, secure and up to date picture of the relevant information.

This will mean a new way of working, so we are collaborating closely with the Ministry of Justice to ensure everyone has a say in how it will operate best across the board ahead of going live in 2026.

A particular highlight of the year was the Family Court Triennial Conference in Christchurch. It is always a valuable and productive time for our judicial officers to be able to gather in person to learn, discuss and engage.

Guest presenters spoke with passion and insight on a wide range of topics, all of which helped us increase our awareness and understanding of some of the issues that affect our court and the people who come before it.



Report of the Principal Youth Court Judge

Judge Ida Malosi

A tiny percentage of our children and young people end up in the youth justice system. The Ministry of Justice's Youth Justice Indicators report for the 12 months until 30 June 2024 showed Police proceeded against 0.75% of children (aged 10 to 13 at the alleged offence date) and 2.5% of young people (aged 14 to 17).

The Youth Court is reserved for the most serious of these cases and offenders with the most complex needs. Most children and young people proceeded against are managed outside the formal justice system. Only 10% of children and 29% of young people proceeded against were referred to a family group conference or directly to the Youth Court. That is 10% of 0.75% and 29% of 2.5%.

I do not wish to downplay the significance of these numbers. Every offence committed by a child or young person is an offence too many, causing harm in the lives of victims, families and offenders themselves. But the numbers need to be put into perspective: in 2024, 99.25% of children and 97.5% of young people went about

their lives without ever interacting with the youth justice system.

Another less-appreciated part of the youth justice story is that active Youth Court cases dropped steadily during the year, down to 873 as at 31 December. This compared with a post-COVID high of 1,126 active cases in September 2023 and represented a 12% reduction from five years earlier.

The challenge for Youth Court judges and the youth justice sector agencies and community organisations we depend on is to maintain this trend. That isn't easy. Different parts of the youth justice sector are under pressure. And young people are facing tough times, with



66

The innovative practices we have pioneered since being established in 1989 are now shaping the wider District Court's Te Ao Mārama – Enhancing Justice for All initiative and are an inspiration for other countries' youth justice systems and practitioners".

deepening poverty and desperate measures to survive. This on top of all the other things we are familiar with in the Youth Court, including intergenerational trauma, mental health issues and neurodisabilities.

But I am confident our judges and youth justice sector colleagues are up to the task. Day in and day out, I see them rise steadfastly to the occasion and achieve significant successes with young New Zealanders. Their tireless commitment to doing the best they can for the young people before the Youth Court, along with their victims, is something to be proud of. In some cases – as a result of the hard work by judges, by the agencies and other organisations the court depends on, and of course by the young people themselves – the outcomes are lifechanging.

It is a source of pride for the Youth Court that the innovative practices we have pioneered since being established in 1989 are now shaping the wider District Court's Te Ao Mārama – Enhancing Justice for All initiative and are an inspiration for other countries' youth justice systems and practitioners.

But we are under no illusions ours is a perfect system. Like any system, we need to constantly ensure we are fit for purpose no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in as time goes on. We know, for instance, we could engage better with victims and better encourage their increased participation in family group conferences and court processes.

During the 12 months until 30 June 2024, the rate of Māori children proceeded against dropped slightly by 4%, whereas the rate for Māori young people was stable. Nonetheless, Māori remained more likely to be proceeded against compared with the total population: 1.75% of children compared with 0.75% for the total population and 5.22% of young people compared with 2.5%.



Despite significant improvements over the past decade, Māori continue to be vastly overrepresented in the youth justice system and that remains one of our most unyielding challenges, as it is in the adult sector".

Despite significant improvements over the past decade, there is still a long way to go. Māori continue to be vastly overrepresented in the youth justice system and that remains one of our most unyielding challenges, as it is in the adult sector.

During 2024, Youth Court judges followed closely the Military-Style Academies for Young Serious Offenders pilot to understand and prepare for what implementing the new legislation for them will require. We also considered the implications for us of the findings and recommendations in the final report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, which was released in July.

During the year, eight judges received new Youth Court designations to sit in Kaikohe, North Shore, Manukau, Rotorua, Whanganui, Nelson and Invercargill, and former Chief Children's Commissioner Judge Frances Eivers returned to sit in the Youth Court in Manukau.

It was a privilege to lead a hard-working and committed team of judges, with a special mention for the extra contribution from those who sit on the Principal Youth Court Judge Advisory Group and provided me with invaluable advice and support.

Working closely with Police, Oranga Tamariki and other agencies, including the Ministry of Justice, is essential to the successful operation

of the Youth Court, and I met and received valuable briefings from them regularly throughout the year.

Our court relies heavily on information and support from a wide range of people I would like to acknowledge, including Youth Court staff, Police Youth Aid officers, social workers, youth advocates, lay advocates, youth workers, mentors, youth forensic nurses, clinicians, education officers, communication assistants and a host of expert report writers.

I would also like to acknowledge the increasing role played by community organisations up and down the country. One of the highlights of the year for me was visiting as many as I could to meet some of the people who run them and the young people who benefit from them.

Some of these organisations are youth-led and the young people in them often bring to their work valuable lived experience of the issues involved. I have been bringing into my own work more of the voice of these young people, because it is for young people that the Youth Court is here.

It is also here for victims, enabling them to explain to offenders the consequences of their actions and to see offenders being held accountable. The exchanges that take place as a result of this participation can sometimes be transformative for victims and offenders alike.

Report of the National Executive Judge

Judge Russell Collins



The National Executive Judge supports the Chief District Court Judge, Principal Family Court Judge and Principal Youth Court Judge in their administrative and other duties. The NEJ also provides legal, operational and strategic policy advice to the Chief Judge and Principal Judges.

In 2024, much of my work was sharply focused on initiatives to improve timely access to justice. I took the opportunity to sit in court at regular intervals during the year to provide additional judicial resource where needed and to get firsthand local experience of the functioning of the court and the timeliness challenges and solutions.

The court's 19 executive judges have a leadership role in their region, and we worked together to tackle our significant case backlog and improve access to justice. Several initiatives were explored and tested in courts in Auckland, including best practice for case reviews, so cases are in the best possible shape for their next scheduled hearing date, and judge-alone trial readiness, so cases proceed on the day they are scheduled or are resolved sooner.

We continued to explore other areas to be more efficient and make better use of resources. One of these was a bail application scheduling framework, which aims to ensure events for bail and electronically monitored bail cases are scheduled when defendants and their counsel indicate all matters are satisfied and ready for a hearing. Another was a backlog reduction strategy, which was developed and tested in Auckland District Court before wider distribution.

These initiatives, as well as local innovations, were included in regional timeliness plans we asked each executive judge to develop for their courts.

I want to acknowledge the support and collaboration shown by all our judges that enabled me to perform as National Executive Judge. I also want to thank the superb Ministry of Justice teams working on timeliness initiatives with absolute commitment to the task.

I completed my term as National Executive Judge at Easter 2025 and returned to Hawke's Bay to be based at Napier District Court. Judge James Johnston from Porirua District Court has taken over as National Executive Judge.

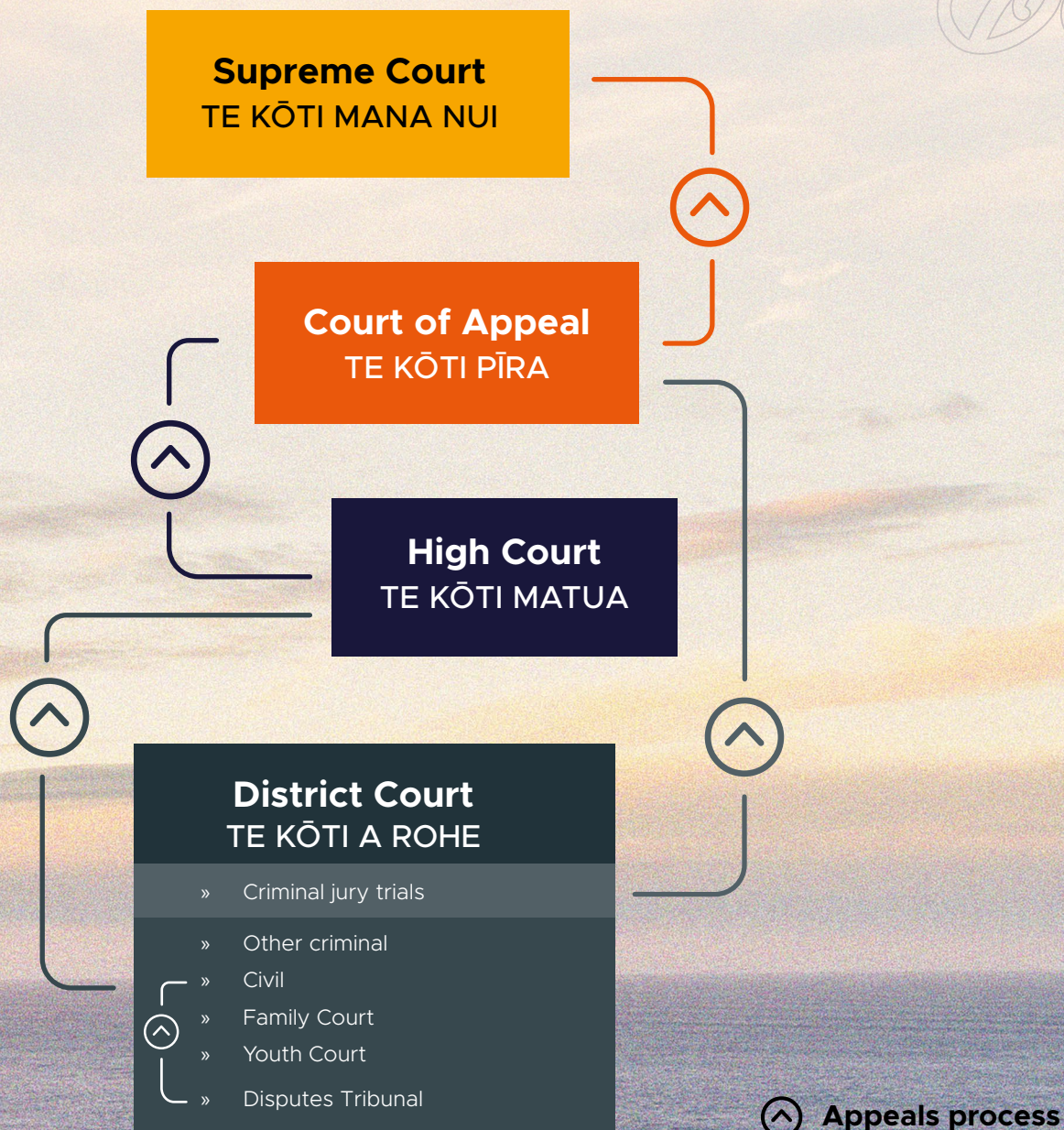


66

A backlog reduction strategy was developed and tested in Auckland District Court before wider distribution."

What we look like

Our structure and place in the wider court system





What our courts do

CRIMINAL COURT | TE KŌTI TAIHARA

The District Court is the primary court where criminal cases begin. Every person charged with a criminal offence makes their first appearance in the District Court, even if their case is ultimately heard in the High Court. Many defendants go through the entire justice process in the District Court, from first appearance until sentencing if they are convicted, whether they plead guilty or not guilty.

Criminal cases are categorised according to the crime with which the defendant is charged. This includes cases across the full spectrum of complexity and seriousness:

- » Category 1 or 2 crimes: For less serious crimes, the only trial option is a judge-alone trial. Depending on the nature of the crime, the case will be heard either by a judge, community magistrate or judicial justice of the peace. There will be no jury.
- » Category 3 crimes: For these, there is a choice of a judge-alone trial or a jury trial within the District Court.
- » Category 4 crimes: For these, there will be a jury trial in the High Court.


Jury trials

All New Zealanders have a right to choose trial by jury if they are charged with a serious offence punishable by two or more years in prison. This right is protected by the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990.

Jury trials are an important aspect of the criminal justice system. Members of the jury are the factfinders in a case, determining whether guilt has been proved beyond reasonable doubt. Sitting on a jury allows members of the public to participate in the court process and be directly involved in the administration of justice and the rule of law.

Each jury is comprised of 12 New Zealanders selected at random. Generally, to reach a decision, all members of the jury must agree. However, there are certain cases where a decision may be reached with the agreement of 11 jurors. If jurors return a guilty verdict, a judge will then sentence the offender.

Most jury trials in New Zealand are heard in the District Court.



The Family Court hears applications under more than 30 statutes, which reflect the wide range of issues and problems affecting the lives of families, and where it may be asked or required to assist or adjudicate in a dispute.

FAMILY COURT | TE KŌTI WHĀNAU

The Family Court is the second busiest part of the District Court after the criminal jurisdiction. The Family Court Act was passed in 1980, introducing a new forum to deal with what were seen as inherently family matters, including dissolution of marriage, disputes over relationship property and the care of children. As society has changed over the past 45 years, so has the court's jurisdiction. Nowadays, its responsibilities include family violence matters, compulsory mental health and addiction treatment, civil unions and minors seeking to marry.

The Family Court hears applications under more than 30 statutes, which reflect the wide range of issues and problems affecting the lives of families, and where it may be asked or required to assist or adjudicate in a dispute. These issues range from adoption, surrogacy, guardianship, child abduction and state care and protection to wills and estates, and protecting the personal and property rights of the vulnerable and elderly.

The court values the ability of parties to resolve their own matters too, and counselling, conciliation and mediation are an integral part of its work. Such a wide jurisdiction means around 60,000 Family Court applications are filed each year.

YOUTH COURT | TE KŌTI TAIOHI

The Youth Court is a specialist division of the District Court. It deals primarily with offending by young people aged 14–17 years, except for some serious offending by 17-year-olds that is transferred automatically to the adult criminal division of the District Court. In certain circumstances, the Youth Court also deals with serious offending by children aged 12–13 years.

The Youth Court is not just the District Court for young people. It has all the hallmarks of a 'solution-focused' court, centred on rehabilitation, wraparound support, addressing the underlying causes of offending, and diversion away from court.

A team of dedicated specialists assist young people to actively engage and participate in proceedings. Only 20–30% of Police apprehensions come before the Youth Court. These involve serious offending by young people with complex needs.

A unique feature of the Youth Court process is the family group conference, which involves a gathering of the young person, their family, victims, Police Youth Aid, the young person's youth advocate (lawyer) and other professionals. The parties establish a plan to address the offending and underlying causes, provide for victims' interests and help the young person to take responsibility for their actions.

Not all Youth Court proceedings occur in a traditional courtroom. Te Kōti Rangatahi | Rangatahi Courts and Pasifika Courts are held at marae or a community venue and Māori or Pasifika customs and cultural practices are used as part of the court process. There are 16 Te Kōti Rangatahi nationwide and two Pasifika Courts based in Auckland. These courts were established to address the overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika in the youth justice system.

CIVIL COURT | TE KŌTI HIWHIRI

In its civil jurisdiction, the District Court resolves disputes between individuals and/or organisations. Someone who feels they have been wronged may bring a claim and, if successful, be awarded a remedy such as compensation.

The District Court can hear claims up to a value of \$350,000. Examples of common claims include contractual disputes (where one party has not performed their obligations under an agreement), negligence (such as where services have not been provided with reasonable skill) and restraining orders (where a person is seeking an order to prevent harassment).

The District Court does not have jurisdiction to hear disputes regarding the recovery of land (with some exceptions), interpretation of wills or judicial review.

Examples of common claims include contractual disputes (where one party has not performed their obligations under an agreement), negligence (such as where services have not been provided with reasonable skill) and restraining orders (where a person is seeking an order to prevent harassment).

Who we are

Our judicial officers as at 31 December 2024

JUDGES

175 judges, excluding the Chief District Court Judge, Principal Family Court Judge, Principal Youth Court Judge and National Executive Judge. Our judges include the Chief Coroner, nine Environment Court judges and three judges working full-time in other roles. While every judge can preside over minor criminal matters, many specialise in particular aspects of the court: jury trials, family, youth, civil or ACC appeals. The Environment Court is not part of the District Court, but all Environment Court judges are District Court judges.

ACTING WARRANTED JUDGES

31 acting warranted judges, who sit throughout the country as required or in non-judicial roles. They are part-time and have retired from a full-time judging role. Judges must retire at the age of 70 but can be appointed for up to five more years on acting warrants.

FAMILY COURT ASSOCIATES

6 Family Court associates, a new role, with the first tranche appointed in March. They can do some of the work of Family Court judges, including decisions at the early stages of proceedings, and so help reduce delays experienced by court participants.

COMMUNITY MAGISTRATES

17 community magistrates and **2** acting warranted community magistrates, part-time judicial officers who preside over a wide range of less serious cases in our criminal jurisdiction. They can deal with offences punishable by a fine of up to \$40,000 and can sentence offenders who plead guilty to an offence punishable by up to three months' imprisonment.

JUDICIAL JUSTICES OF THE PEACE

More than **180** judicial justices of the peace, who hear minor cases and can impose fines and some driving penalties (such as a licence disqualification). They can also preside over initial appearances, bail applications and requests for remands and adjournments.

REGISTRARS

About **950** registrars and deputy registrars, who perform a wide range of administrative functions and can also perform some judicial functions.

REFEREES

59 referees, who hear cases in the Disputes Tribunal, which is part of the District Court.

District Court workload

at a glance

(Figures have been rounded)

NEW WORK

(12 months ending 31 December 2024)

107,710	Criminal cases
61,890	Family Court applications
3,978	Youth Court cases
29,147	Civil cases

ACTIVE WORKLOAD

(as at 31 December 2024)

37,686	Criminal cases
26,796	Family Court applications
873	Youth Court cases
14,099	Civil cases

RESOLUTIONS

(12 months ending 31 December 2024)

109,723	Criminal cases
61,447	Family Court applications
4,060	Youth Court cases
28,380	Civil cases

GLOSSARY

NEW WORK: new cases and applications that flow into courts.

RESOLUTIONS: disposal of cases and applications.

ACTIVE WORKLOAD: number of cases or applications on hand at the end of the reporting period that have not been resolved.



Te Ao Mārama

Our judicially led initiative
to improve the quality of
justice we deliver




Judge Ophir Cassidy, left, from Waitākere District Court chats to, from left, marae manager Shane White, kaumātua Sir Pita Sharples and kuia Pat Wikaira during a Te Kōti Rangatahi sitting at Hoani Waititi Marae in Auckland. Image: Erica Sinclair

The District Court's Te Ao Mārama – Enhancing Justice for All initiative made significant progress in 2024.

Te Ao Mārama literally means the world of light and signals a more enlightened approach to justice in the District Court. Judicially led, the initiative is improving the quality of justice we deliver. It sees the District Court work with iwi, other community organisations and justice sector agencies to address the root causes of offending. Te Ao Mārama helps ensure all court participants, including victims and families, can understand and better take part in the cases that relate to them.

Te Ao Mārama benefits everyone who attends the District Court, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, abilities, who they are or where they are from. It responds to local needs with local solutions and reflects the communities it serves. Timely access to justice is a central feature of the initiative and it draws on proven ways to reduce offending.

In July, the final report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care recommended the Government support and invest in judicially led initiatives such as Te Ao Mārama that recognise and address the harm caused by abuse and neglect in care.



Te Ao Mārama is especially
focused on supporting children
and families at greatest risk
when engaging with the family
and criminal justice systems.

Te Ao Mārama incorporates eight best practices
that can be used in any of our 59 courthouses
and hearing centres around the country:

- » Enhancing connections with local communities (see page 37)
- » Improving the quality of information judicial officers get to inform their decisions
- » Improving processes for victims and complainants
- » Encouraging people to feel heard in the courtroom
- » Establishing alternative courtroom layouts (see page 40)
- » Using plain language
- » Toning down formalities
- » Adopting ‘solution-focused’ judging – ie asking “what has happened to this person to bring them to this point in their life?” and then addressing those causes. This applies only to offenders whose crime carries a maximum potential sentence of no more than two years’ imprisonment and for whom community sentencing is therefore an option.



A Te Ao Mārama hui in Hawke's Bay for iwi and other community organisations and justice sector stakeholders.

Any District Court location can – where it is appropriate for its community and it is able to do so – also introduce one or more of new or existing specialist courts and ‘lists’ (hearing types) that support Te Ao Mārama approaches. Dedicated lists enable efficiencies by gathering similar cases together into a morning, afternoon or day of hearings.

Te Ao Mārama is especially focused on supporting children and families at greatest risk when engaging with the family and criminal justice systems. It has significant potential to reduce the number of children in care, the number of children who offend in the medium term, and the number of young people who enter the adult criminal jurisdiction in the longer term – all contributing to a long-term enduring reduction in offending and reoffending and the costs of crime.

Although Te Ao Mārama is a nationwide initiative, the Ministry of Justice is providing targeted funding and support in eight locations: Kaitāia, Kaikohe, Whangārei, Hamilton and Huntly, Tauranga, Gisborne, Napier and Hastings.

In these locations, judges, court managers and Te Ao Mārama programme team members have engaged with iwi and other community organisations about local priorities, including to fund and develop wraparound services that support court participants, such as offenders and whānau, in addressing any factors that underly behaviour.

We are working with Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust (Kaitāia), Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services (Kaikohe), Tai Timu Tai Pari (Whangārei), Taku Waahi Tupu Charitable Trust (Hamilton and Huntly), Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Ranginui (Tauranga), Te Rūnanga o Tūrangānui a Kiwa (Gisborne) and Ngāti Kahungunu Iwi Inc (Napier and Hastings).

In 2024, Tai Timu Tai Pari started the test-and-learn phase of a support service focused on the criminal Family Violence Court in Whangārei, with full implementation in 2025. Test-and-learn phases for wraparound services in the seven other funded locations are happening in 2025 too.


There are many examples of Te Ao Mārama approaches now occurring, with judicial officers who use them confirming the transformative effect they can have on their courtrooms and the people in them.

In Whangārei, a Family Court Care and Protection List was established in July 2024, followed in August by a new Young Adult List focused on driving-related offences with no identifiable victims (see page 33). A focus on family violence was planned for 2025.

In Kaitiāia and Kaikohe, judges looked at a Family Court Care and Protection List and Young Adult List for 2025. Napier judges considered a Family Court Care and Protection List, a Family Court Family Violence List, a Young Adult List and Te Kōti Rangatahi, and Hastings considered a Family Court Care and Protection List, a Family Court Family Violence List and a Young Adult List. Gisborne looked at a Criminal Procedure (Mentally Impaired Persons) List. Priorities for Tauranga and Hamilton and Huntly were also being developed.

After releasing it to judges at the end of 2023, in January the Chief District Court Judge shared more widely a Te Ao Mārama Best Practice Framework developed with judges, Ministry of Justice staff, justice sector stakeholders and leaders of the legal profession. The framework is an easy-to-read guide to what Te Ao Mārama might look like around the country and how to implement it.

During the year, court staff in the eight funded locations engaged in a 12-week 'learning journey' to help them think about and discuss the why, what and how of Te Ao Mārama. Local court management teams also completed a series of leadership workshops to help them focus on leading and embedding changes required in Te Ao Mārama locations.



Both education programmes will be extended online to other court locations.

We also prepared nationally consistent resources to support judicial officers and staff to implement Te Ao Mārama around the country, with more resources to follow.

There are many examples of Te Ao Mārama approaches now occurring around the country, with judicial officers who use them confirming the transformative effect they can have on their courtrooms and the people in them. You can read about different aspects of this initiative in the following pages.

DISCOVER MORE:

[WWW.DISTRICTCOURTS.GOV.T.NZ/
TE-AO-MARAMA](http://WWW.DISTRICTCOURTS.GOV.T.NZ/TE-AO-MARAMA)



66

After releasing it to judges at the end of 2023, in January the Chief District Court Judge shared more widely a Te Ao Mārama Best Practice Framework, an easy-to-read guide to what Te Ao Mārama might look like around the country and how to implement it.



Timely access to justice

The Chief District Court Judge has numerous statutory responsibilities, including rostering judicial officers to courts, scheduling cases to be heard by them and ensuring the orderly and efficient conduct of the business of the court. There was a determined effort across the District Court in 2024 to improve timely access to justice. We have made significant progress and it continues to be one of our highest priorities.

From work at local courthouses to get a better understanding of cases in backlog to the support of the wider justice sector on a range of initiatives, it has been an impressive collective effort.

Reducing backlogs and improving timeliness is a complex matter that will take time and requires constant assessment of approaches, resource allocation and sector alignment.

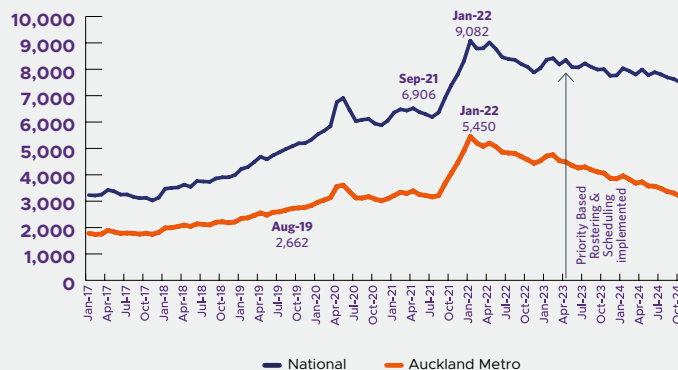
A holistic view of timely access to justice includes throughput (or the total active caseload in the court), backlogs and progress against our timeliness standard. One measure on its own tells only a partial story.

In 2024, the District Court cleared more cases than came in, with the active caseload dropping by 3% nationally. In the Auckland Metro region, the total active caseload dropped by 9% over the year.



Backlogs also dropped. The backlog of criminal cases waiting to be heard in the District Court had been growing steeply every year since 2015. Behind the statistics is a human story of unacceptable delay for victims, families and defendants, of lives put on hold while they await their 'day in court'.

ACTIVE DISTRICT COURT CRIMINAL CASES IN BACKLOG



Glossary: A case is considered to be in backlog when the time it has taken since it began exceeds the applicable timeframe, known as the timely access to justice threshold. These thresholds vary depending on the type of case and its assigned trial track. Timely access to justice is improved by a reduction in the number of active cases in backlog. This graph shows the number of active cases in backlog at a given point in time (the last day of the calendar month).

In 2024, the District Court cleared more cases than came in, with the active caseload dropping by 3% nationally. In the Auckland Metro region, the total active caseload dropped by 9% over the year.



*In an approach led by Judge David Clark, seated, the average age of civil cases disposed of in our Auckland Metro courts dropped by 10% in 2024.
Image: Leon Rose*

In May 2023, the District Court introduced priority-based rostering and scheduling. This means rostering as many judicial officers as possible to preside over courts in locations with the largest caseloads and backlogs. At that time, in the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns and extreme weather events, half of all criminal backlog cases were in the six Auckland Metro courts, so that is where more of the judicial resource went.

Nationally, across all jurisdictions in the District Court, the backlog of cases dropped by 9% since the implementation of priority-based rostering and scheduling (from 21,028 to 19,202). In the criminal jurisdiction over the same period, backlog dropped by 10% (from 8,350 to 7,508). That was the lowest recorded criminal backlog since October 2021.

In the Auckland Metro courts, there was a 24% drop in the criminal backlog during 2024, bringing the criminal backlog back to pre-COVID February 2020 levels. These results are impressive. Behind the figures will be many stories of victims and complainants able to get their lives back on track now the court matter has been dealt with.

The third important plank is our timely access to justice standard and thresholds and the various measures put in place in response. In June 2024, the Chief Judge published a Timely Access to Justice Protocol, setting a standard of 90% of criminal cases to be disposed of within category-based timeliness thresholds. The thresholds set out realistic timeframes for most cases to progress from first appearance to disposal within each category and seek to strike the right balance between aspirational objectives and operational realities. The thresholds need to reflect the time it takes for a criminal case to proceed through each stage, including a not guilty plea through to trial, and for fair trial rights to be upheld.

If a case is not disposed of within the prescribed threshold, it joins the backlog. So there is a balance to be struck in terms of focus and effort between ensuring current cases are dealt with in a timely manner (and avoid going into backlog) and continuing to pay attention to the backlog. Backlog cases need to be resolved, even though their resolution does not count towards meeting the timeliness standard because they are already beyond the timeliness thresholds.

The protocol recognises achieving timely access to justice in the District Court will depend on a concerted and coordinated justice system response. The protocol also represents a call to action across the justice system for all stakeholders to identify and address areas where there is room for improved performance.

In 2024, the timeliness measure for the criminal jurisdiction in the District Court was 81% against the timely access to justice standard. The court is grateful for the cross-sector initiatives begun

in 2024 to lift overall system performance and thereby help the court towards achieving the 90% standard.

Work began on timely access to justice measures for the Family Court and continues in 2025.

In 2024, executive judges developed local timeliness plans for their courts across all jurisdictions and that approach is being built on in 2025.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE CIVIL JURISDICTION IN AUCKLAND

The Auckland Metro courts have a largely centralised model for defended cases in the civil jurisdiction, managed by a team at Auckland District Court, while undefended civil cases from across the country are mostly dealt with by the central registry in Wellington.

As the courts emerged out of COVID-19 in 2022, a concentrated effort began to improve the effectiveness of the civil jurisdiction and to respond to the findings of the judiciary's Improving Access to Civil Justice report. In the Auckland Metro courts, this work became a joint effort by the judiciary and court staff, led on the judicial side by Judge David Clark.

At its heart was a deliberate case management approach where the judiciary and staff collaborated to address aged cases in the Auckland Metro courts. It saw the average age of cases disposed of in the courts drop by 10% in 2024.

The work included a raft of actions to improve performance and the court experience. A weekly civil duty judge was assigned, who also presided over the scheduled list courts, with one judge generally allocated to long-cause matters and another hearing cases in other Auckland Metro courts or assigned to additional long-cause work.

With judicial rosters and schedules now prepared about nine months in advance, cases were able to get a scheduled date more easily than previously, reducing delays. Cases such as digital harm, harassment, injunctive relief and defended summary judgments were also able to be prioritised. Further benefits included more robust case management, with additional events more easily scheduled to check on progress or move cases on to another stage.

Judge Clark developed a civil protocol, which in 2024 was made available to other court locations as they developed their timeliness plans.

The Young Adult List

Whangārei is the latest New Zealand community to benefit from a targeted approach to handling 18- to 25-year-olds facing criminal charges.

First piloted in Porirua in 2020, then adopted in Gisborne and Hamilton too, the Young Adult List was launched in Whangārei in August 2024 as part of the Te Ao Mārama initiative.

Court ‘lists’ group together types of hearing and the Young Adult List takes its lead from the Youth Court division of the District Court, which has long recognised the specific challenges the justice system presents for children aged 12 to 13 and young people aged 14 to 17.

“Young and often neurodiverse people don’t just mature overnight when they turn 18, which is why the Young Adult List was established along similar principles to the Youth Court and is now being expanded under Te Ao Mārama,” says Judge Greg Davis. Judge Davis is executive judge at Whangārei District

Court, its Youth Court judge and co-lead of the new Young Adult List alongside Judge Gene Tomlinson.

The Young Adult List emphasises the importance of solution-focused judging, which means identifying the root causes of a young adult’s offending and connecting them to interventions to address those causes, so they are less likely to reoffend.

The list creates an environment that lessens formalities and legal jargon and supports young adults to meaningfully participate in and understand each stage of the court process.

Whangārei’s Young Adult List is focusing in the first instance on driving-related cases where there is no identifiable victim.

The new Young Adult List at Whangārei District Court is focused on driving-related cases with no identifiable victim.

Image: Leonie Zettl/Unsplash



This is because a young adult's involvement with the District Court can often begin with driving-related offences. Targeted interventions, such as those provided by the Howard League Driving Programme, which is supporting the Whangārei Young Adult List, are a good opportunity to prevent further, longer-term contact with the justice system.

The Howard League attends the Whangārei Young Adult List hearings, where it liaises with offenders and offers services such as helping those driving without a licence to get one and training drivers to be safer on the road. It helps with the costs and practicalities of getting a licence, including lessons, tests and providing a vehicle.

In 2024, the Ministry of Justice released a video to improve understanding of the Young Adult List. It includes experiences, stories and perspectives from three District Court judges, court staff, the mother of a Young Adult List participant, a victim advisor, a lawyer and a Police prosecutor.

66

Young and often neurodiverse people don't just mature overnight when they turn 18, which is why the Young Adult List was established along similar principles to the Youth Court and is now being expanded under Te Ao Mārama"

VIEW VIDEO AND DISCOVER MORE:
[WWW.JUSTICE.GOV.TZ/COURTS/
CRIMINAL/YOUNG-ADULT-LIST](https://www.justice.govt.nz/courts/criminal/young-adult-list)

Meet our new judges

Pictured during their induction week in September are, from left, new judges Peter Davey, Kirsty Swadling, Luke Radich, Jo Wickliffe, Paul Murray, Jacqui Clark and Mark Williams.



Judge Rebecca Guthrie from Waitākere District Court was our last judge to be sworn in during 2024.

How does it feel to be the ‘new kid’ on the block?

It feels surreal but also exciting and exhausting in equal parts. I feel enormously grateful to the judges I observed during my training for generously sharing their time, wisdom and insight with me, as well as their really practical advice.

Judge Rebecca Guthrie at her swearing in wearing the traditional Māori cloak her grandfather has on in the painting behind her.
Image: Jamie Troughton/Dscribe Media



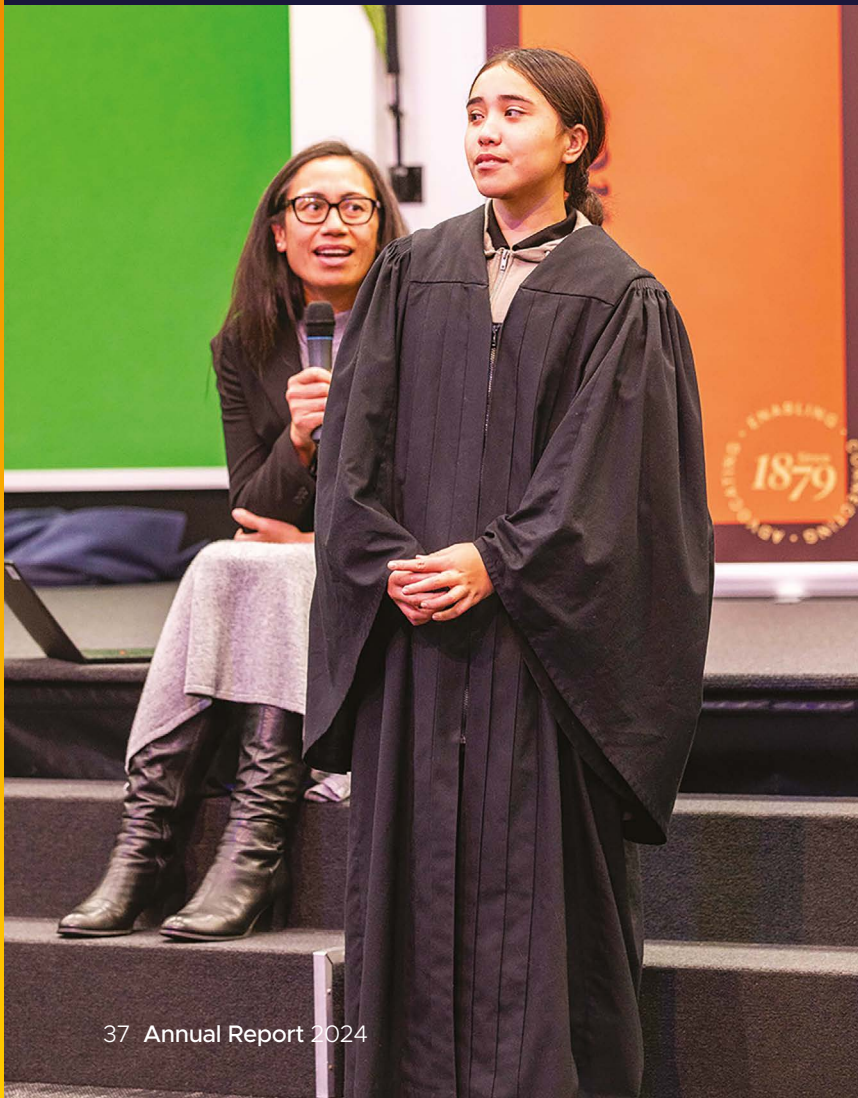
Judge Jill Moss from Palmerston North District Court was sworn in on 2 June 1995 and is our longest-serving judge.

What, from your perspective today, would you tell the Judge Moss sitting for the first time in 1995?

Keep smiling. Be optimistic, persistent, humane, kind and prompt. Be careful and accurate. Always be creative and curious about the best way to fit law into ever-changing family structures. These skills and characteristics will strengthen you. Honour the tradition and privilege of the weighty public responsibility of being a judge.

Connecting with the community

An essential element of Te Ao Mārama is a close connection between the court and the community it serves. Here are some examples from 2024.



LEFT:

Judge Soana Moala from Manukau District Court was guest speaker at Manurewa Intermediate School in South Auckland, where about 300 girls and the women who inspired them staged a Girls' Night Out.

Judge Moala's theme was the power of women and the potential of every girl in the room. She shared her story and the difficulties she faced as a Tongan girl who arrived in New Zealand at the age of 10, speaking no English. The Law Association of New Zealand's *LawNews* magazine reported: "The highlight of the evening came when Judge Moala invited one of the girls to come forward and wear her judge's gown. It was a special moment which drove home the point that the law (and other similar careers) is open to everyone." Image: *LawNews*

RIGHT:

Auckland District Court hosted a Family Violence Court education and lunch-sharing session, where various organisations, including stopping violence programme providers, set up desks, complete with banners and pamphlets, advising judicial officers, court staff and fellow organisations about what they do.



BELOW:

Improving people's understanding of the District Court and how we operate is important to us. In August, Judge Melinda Broek from Rotorua District Court presided over two mock hearings involving Year 11, 12 and 13 Rotorua Girls' High students. The students also learned about the roles in the court process of a judge, lawyer, court staff, Police, security and media.





LEFT:

There was a strong community presence for the dawn ceremony at North Shore District Court to mark the end of weathertightness remediation that began in 2022. Attendees went through the courthouse touching walls and other parts of the building as part of the ceremony.

RIGHT:

Christchurch judges used their community day to create a closer relationship with the Salvation Army in the city, which provides numerous social services used by many people who appear regularly in the District Court. As well as learning more about the Salvation Army and its services, the judges cooked a Christmas lunch for 80 service users and did the washing up afterwards.



Alternative courtroom layouts

Establishing alternative courtroom layouts to make it easier for parties to engage is one of the eight approaches recommended in the Te Ao Mārama Best Practice Framework after their success in specialist courts.

Alternative layouts aren't possible in every courtroom, for financial, technical and other practical reasons, and aren't suitable for all hearings, because of the need to ensure everyone's safety, always a priority.

But where they are used, they can transform the atmosphere of a hearing.

Options include a boardroom-style table formation (as in the Matariki Court and Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Court), a 'horseshoe'-style formation (as in Te Kōti Rangatahi and many Youth Court locations) or simply the judicial officer sitting at the registrar's rather than judge's bench (as in the New Beginnings Court and many Youth Court locations).

Judge Haamiora Raumati is the Te Ao Mārama lead judge at Gisborne District Court, where courtrooms one and three offer a boardroom, horseshoe or traditional layout. The horseshoe has been used, where appropriate, in the Family Harm Intervention Court since 2020 and the Young Adult List since it was established in 2022. It is also used in the Youth Court.

The layout allows for an environment that provides for "clear communication, interaction and, more importantly, participation by all in a



Judge La-Verne King presiding in the seven-sided alternative courtroom layout at Whangārei District Court.

safe and secure manner”, says Judge Raumati.

Eye contact, open discussion and community involvement have been highlighted in feedback, he says, adding: “It has been my observation that our alternative layout has encouraged connection, respect and positive change.”

Throughout 2024, new forms of alternative layout were tested in the Family Court in Whangārei and Kaikohe.

“In providing a solution best suited to the north, the Te Tai Tokerau Family Court judges opted not for the standard horseshoe or boardroom-style table layouts used in some other parts of the District Court, but instead for five-sided and seven-sided layouts,” says Judge La-Verne King, Te Ao Mārama lead judge in the Family Court at Whangārei District Court.

This layout lets everyone sit alongside each other in a safe way, to encourage participation and the sharing of good quality information.

This enables the judge to give a decision or to make directions to meaningfully progress to the next step.

The alternative layouts are set to be the default for Family Court hearings in Northland, apart from those involving family violence or where there are insurmountable security issues around high-tension cases.

In feedback, participants in the alternative layouts said they felt less intimidated with the judge on the same level and having everyone alongside each other. They also felt reassured having wider whānau close to them at a stressful time, which contributed to an increased feeling of calm.

“It felt like a hui rather than a scary court thing,” said one participant. “I like that the judge is sitting with us,” said another. “It feels like she is trying to work with us.”



Meet our **Family Court associates**

The first six holders of this new judicial role were, from left, Mark Tolich, Rebecca Murphy, Johan Niemand, Rachel Lohrey, Johanna Robertson and Sonya Singh.

Meet our community magistrates

Attendees at the 2024 Community Magistrates Annual Conferences, from left, Lesley Jensen, Philippa King, Brenda Midson, Ngaire Mascelle, Shaun Cole, Lavinia Nathan, Lauolefale Lemalu (front row), Fenella Thomas, Sherida Cooper, Janet Holmes, Kaye Davies, Russell Bagley, Carla na Nagara, Rosemary Fitzpatrick, Jodie Winterburn (middle row), Sarah Steele, Sally O'Brien and Elder Robati (back row). CMs Terence Bourke and Joanna Sihamu were absent.



Judicial justices of the peace

Specially trained JJPs have sat in the District Court since 2007.

The Royal Federation of New Zealand Justices' Associations, which manages the training, education and provision of JJPs, celebrated its centenary in 2024.

More than 180 JJPs sit in the District Court, presiding over about 35,000 hearings a year, and they are essential to our operations, helping us to maintain our flow of cases and alleviating pressure on other judicial officers.

The role of justice of the peace dates back to 1814 in New Zealand and before that to 1361 in England.

When New Zealand's first JP, Thomas Kendall, arrived in Russell, at the time dubbed the "hell-hole of the Pacific", he was expected to play the role of policeman as well as judge.

Another duty JPs have shed is that of 'reading the Riot Act'. Once, this was not just a phrase but an actual thing. If there was an unruly crowd considered to be rioting, a JP was expected to front up to it and read the act to disperse it.

The judicial duties of JPs have waxed and waned over the years. Until 2007, they were expected to adjudicate in the District Court if their local court registrar summoned them to do so. Since 2007, with specially trained JJPs to do that, other JPs have concentrated on duties such as witnessing signatures and issuing and certifying documents.

Building for the future

Artist impressions of the Papakura and Whanganui courthouses given funding go-ahead in 2024.



A number of small to major property maintenance and construction projects are under way at any one time.

Current projects include increasing the capacity of Manukau District Court, with new courtrooms, better facilities for victims and other improvements.

There are significant seismic strengthening projects at Auckland District Court and Wellington District Court and a new courthouse is being built in Tauranga.

In 2024, funding was approved for new courthouses in Papakura and Whanganui.





Where to find out more

We hope you have found our 2024 annual report informative. If you would like to know more, here are some links to our website.

Our judges: www.districtcourts.govt.nz/about-the-courts/the-district-court-judiciary/the-judges

Our other judicial officers: <https://www.districtcourts.govt.nz/about-the-courts/the-district-court-judiciary/other-judicial-officers>

Our latest statistics: <https://www.districtcourts.govt.nz/reports-publications-and-statistics/statistics>

Our previous annual reports: <https://www.districtcourts.govt.nz/reports-publications-and-statistics/district-court-annual-reports/new-annual-report-content-page-2>



District Court of New Zealand
Te Kōti-ā-Rohe o Aotearoa