



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

Annual report 2025

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Image: Rawhitiroa Photography

» Foreword

Welcome to the 2025 annual report of the District Court of New Zealand | Te Kōti ā Rohe o Aotearoa. We are the largest court in Australasia and the following pages provide you with a snapshot that reflects the volume and breadth of our activities.

You will find sections on the progress we are making with our timely access to justice and Te Ao Mārama – Enhancing Justice for All initiatives. When people experience delay in cases proceeding through the District Court there is a human toll. For many, their lives will remain on hold until their case is finished. Our timely access initiative is reducing those delays. It works in tandem with Te Ao Mārama, which aims to ensure everyone, including victims, witnesses and whānau, can understand and better take part in the cases that relate to them.

Another section of the report looks at our progress in developing a new digital case and court management system, Te Au Reka.

Elsewhere, Principal Family Court Judge Jacquelyn Moran, Principal Youth Court Judge

Ida Malosi, National Executive Judge James Johnston and I discuss different aspects of the conduct of the business of the District Court.

There are graphs and tables to show the workload of the court. And there are examples of how we stay connected with other parts of the justice system and with the people of New Zealand through open justice and our contacts with the communities we serve.

We introduce you to the judicial officers who joined us in 2025 and acknowledge those who left. We also describe some of the specialist courts we operate.

First, to better understand later sections, learn more about the principles that guide our court, what our functions are, our different types of judicial officer, our locations around the country, and where we fit within the wider court system.

I hope you find our report informative and it provides you with a useful insight into the District Court of New Zealand. ■

Heemi Taumaunu
Chief District Court Judge

» First principles

The constitutional place of the District Court

New Zealand has three branches of government: the legislature (Parliament), the executive (Cabinet and ministers outside Cabinet) and the judiciary. The judiciary is headed by the Chief Justice and encompasses all judicial officers, including those in the District Court.

The three branches operate alongside, but independently from, each other – this is the principle of the separation of powers. The judiciary’s independence from the other branches is critical to it being able to play its constitutional role of administering justice and in so doing upholding the rule of law.

Not only is the judiciary independent from other branches of government, its judicial officers are independent from each other. They must be free to determine each case consistent with the law, based on the evidence in front of them. The judicial oath is a commitment to this: “I will do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of New Zealand, without fear or favour, affection or ill will.”

The legislation under which courts operate places on the judiciary the responsibility for the orderly and efficient conduct of the business of the courts. In this, it is supported by the Ministry of Justice, which is accountable to Parliament for the expenditure needed to run the courts.

This means the judiciary and the Ministry share responsibility for delivering justice through the courts. A statement of principles agreed by the Chief Justice and the Secretary for Justice sets out the responsibilities of each, as well as shared responsibilities, and how this works in practice within constitutional boundaries.

The District Court is part of the judicial branch and the main way New Zealanders

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The judiciary’s independence from the other branches of government is critical.

interact with the justice system. As the country’s busiest court, with locations throughout the country, it hears the majority of adult criminal, family, youth and civil matters. The effective functioning of the court relies on open communication between the judiciary and the executive branch (through the Ministry of Justice) and respect for each’s responsibilities and constraints.

The District Court is led by the Chief District Court Judge, who, together with the Principal Family Court Judge, Principal Youth Court Judge and National Executive Judge, oversees the operation of the court.

Te Whare o Ngā Kaihautū Waka o te Kōti a Rohe o Aotearoa – known as Te Whare – is the te reo Māori name for the Chief District Court Judge’s Chambers. Staff there provide administrative, advisory, operational and strategic support to the court leadership. ■



» What we do

Our jurisdictions and their functions

Adult criminal court | Te Kōti Taihara

The District Court is the main court where adult criminal cases begin. Anyone charged with a criminal offence makes their first appearance in the District Court, even if their case is ultimately heard in the High Court. Most 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 offences** – for less serious offences the only trial option is a judge-alone trial. Depending on the nature of the offence, either a judge, community magistrate or judicial justice of the peace will hear the case. There will be no jury.
- **Category 3 offences** – for these offences there is a choice of a judge-alone trial or a jury trial within the District Court.
- **Category 4 offences** – for these offences 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. The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 protects this right.

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 take place in the District Court.

Family Court | Te Kōti Whānau

The Family Court is the second busiest part of the District Court after the adult criminal court. The Family Court Act 1980 introduced a new forum to deal with what were seen as inherently family matters, including dissolution of marriage, disputes over relationship property and care of children.

As society has changed since 1980, 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 laws, which reflect the wide range of issues and problems affecting the lives of families. It also may be asked or required to assist or adjudicate in a dispute.



Anyone charged with an offence makes their first appearance in the District Court.



Matters 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 a key part of its work.

Youth Court | Te Kōti Taiohi

The Youth Court deals mainly with cases involving young people aged 14–17 years, except for some serious cases involving 17-year-olds that are transferred automatically to the adult criminal court. In certain circumstances, the Youth Court also deals with serious cases involving children aged 12–13 years.

The Youth Court is 'solution-focused' and centred on rehabilitation, wraparound support, addressing the underlying causes of offending and where possible diversion away from court.

A team of dedicated specialists help children and young people actively engage and participate in proceedings. Only 20–30% of police apprehensions come before the Youth Court. Most of those proceeded against are managed outside the formal justice system through 'alternative action' by police.

Cases that reach the court involve serious charges and children and young people with complex needs. A unique feature is the family group conference, which involves a gathering of the child or young person, their family, victim(s), Police Youth Aid, the child or young person's Youth Advocate (lawyer) and other professionals. The parties establish a plan to address offending and underlying causes, provide for victims' interests and help offenders take responsibility for their actions.

Not all Youth Court proceedings take place in a traditional courtroom. Rangatahi Court | Te Kōti Rangatahi and Pasifika Court hearings are held at a marae or community venue and Māori or Pasifika cultural practices are used. There are 16 Rangatahi Courts 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 our civil court, we resolve disputes between individuals and/or organisations. Someone who thinks they have been wronged may bring a claim and if successful be awarded a remedy such as compensation.

Our civil court can hear claims up to a value of \$350,000. 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).

We do not have jurisdiction to hear disputes regarding the recovery of land (with some exceptions), interpretation of wills or judicial review. ■



Judge Ophir Cassidy, marae manager Shane White and kaumātua Sir Pita Sharples at Te Kōti Rangatahi at Hoani Waititi Marae in Auckland.

Image: Erica Sinclair

» Who we are

Our judicial officers as of 31 December 2025*

Judges

180 judges, including the Chief District Court Judge, Principal Family Court Judge, Principal Youth Court Judge and National Executive Judge. While every judge can preside over minor criminal matters, many specialise in particular aspects of the court, such as jury trials, Family Court, Youth Court, civil court, ACC appeals and the Alcohol Regulatory and Licensing Authority. The Environment Court is not part of the District Court, but all eight Environment Court judges are District Court judges. Our judges also include the Chief Coroner and the Chair of the Immigration and Protection Tribunal.

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 aged 70 but can be appointed for up to five more years on acting warrants.

Family Court associates

13 Family Court associates, a position introduced in 2024. They provide an essential role in the Family Court, presiding over the early stages of proceedings and working closely with judges with a focus on early intervention and resolution of issues.

Community magistrates

17 community magistrates and one acting warranted community magistrate, 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 people who plead guilty to an offence punishable by up to three months' imprisonment. Under legislation announced

in 2025, there will be three more community magistrates, they will be able to take guilty pleas for all offences except those reserved for the High Court, and they will manage a wider range of cases, including some trials and ordering pre-sentence reports for judges.

Judicial justices of the peace

181 judicial justices of the peace, who hear minor cases and can impose fines and some driving penalties. They can also preside over initial appearances, bail applications and requests for remands and adjournments.

Registrars

1000 (approximately) registrars and deputy registrars, who can perform some judicial functions in addition to their administrative ones.

Referees

65 referees, who hear cases in the Disputes Tribunal, which is part of the District Court. Legislation announced in 2025 and passed in 2026 has increased the jurisdictional limit of the tribunal from \$30,000 to \$60,000. ■

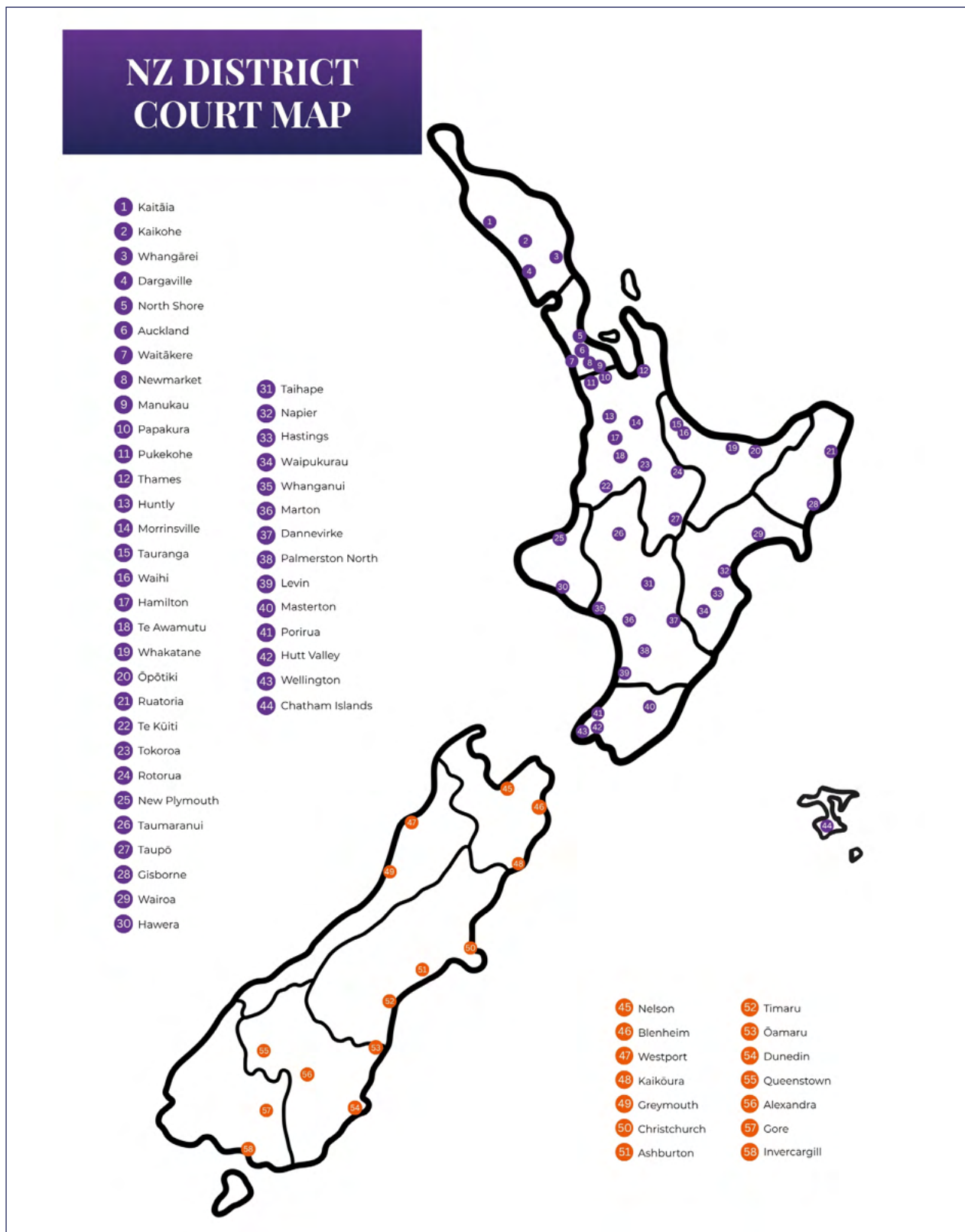
*The numbers here vary throughout the year.



Judges Evangelos (Barney) Thomas and Belinda Pidwell.

» Where we are

Our 58 locations around the country



» Our place in the court system

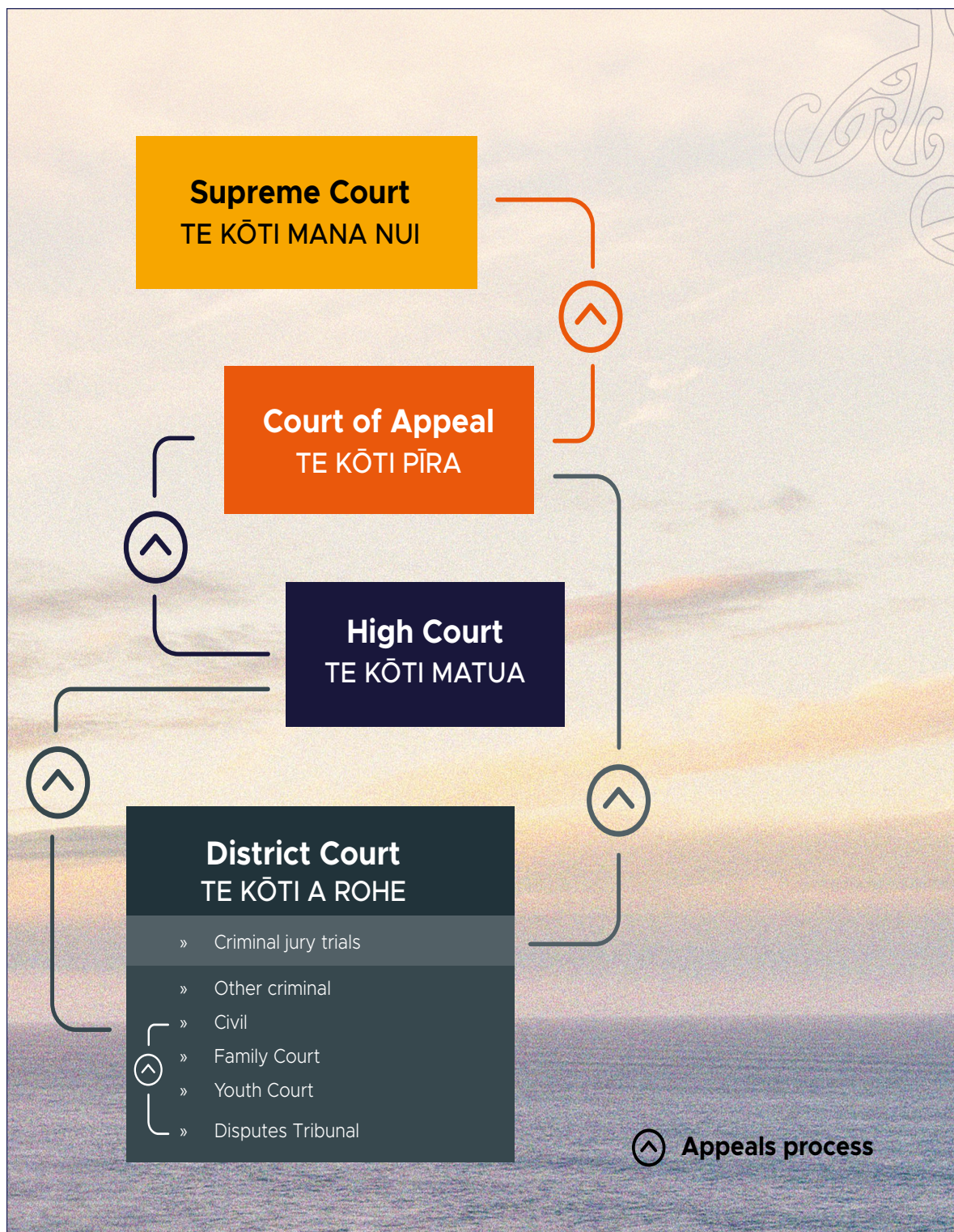




Image: Stephen A'Court Photography

» Report of Chief District Court Judge Heemi Taumaunu

Stand outside any of the 58 District Court locations in cities and towns around New Zealand and you will see a constant movement of people, among them victims, defendants and families. Within the court, judicial officers work with registry and court staff, the legal profession and others in the justice sector such as New Zealand Police and Corrections, as well as community organisations that support case participants. My statutory responsibility is the orderly and efficient conduct of the business of the court and I acknowledge the part these many different people play to that end.

We have four overarching priorities for the District Court: timely access to justice; improving the quality of justice that is

delivered (Te Ao Mārama); supporting the design and implementation of a new digital case management system (Te Au Reka); and a focus on judicial wellbeing. These have been our priorities for two years now, and it has been pleasing to see progress on them even amid the daily demands of such a busy court.

In 2025 we welcomed the appointment of 13 new judicial officers: seven Family Court associates (FCAs) and six District Court judges. Four of the new judicial officers were sworn in at ceremonies on marae, while the other swearing-in ceremonies were in courtrooms.

FCAs are a new judicial officer able to pick up some of the work of Family Court judges. The



seven appointed in 2025 joined the first six who started in 2024.

In 2025 the number of community magistrates (CMs) remained the same at 17 but it is set to increase. The Government announced its intention in 2026 to expand CMs' jurisdiction, fund three extra and create a new Chief Community Magistrate role.

As well as new appointments, several final sittings were held for retiring judges. I note the retirement in December of Judge John Walker, a former Principal Youth Court Judge who had continued to work under an acting warrant.

Judges must retire at the age of 70 but are able to seek an acting warrant. Acting warranted judges are a significant and experienced part-time resource for the court but the number seeking the role has dropped. This has the potential to adversely affect timely access to justice for court participants, as it may become difficult to fill judicial absences.

In 2025 we began to see some positive outcomes from the measures since 2023 to improve timely access to justice. The backlog of criminal cases in the District Court has reduced by 22% in 2025 and new cases coming to the court are being managed in a timelier way. By the end of 2025, 83%

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Plans were announced to expand community magistrates' jurisdiction and fund three extra.

of adult criminal cases progressed through the court within the timely access to justice thresholds I set out in 2024.

While a number of different initiatives contributed to the improvements in timely justice, my message to our judicial officers has been simple: ensure meaningful progress towards disposition is made at every appearance provided it is in the interests of justice to do so. Reducing the number of court events associated with each case is key to sustainable improvement.

There were also improvements in the Family Court, with a 9% reduction in backlog. Work began on developing timely access to justice thresholds for Family Court cases, which are expected to be published in 2026.

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Community magistrates at their 2025 conference with Chief Judge Taumaunu, their judicial lead, Judge Ida Malosi, and Judge Jonny Moses, far left, one of the conference programme organisers.

We have also made progress in the civil jurisdiction, with a significant reduction in the number of active cases and a civil action plan in place.

You can read more about timely access to justice on pages 18–19.

The timely access work is judicially led but it is well understood improvements in the District Court can only be achieved by a coordinated justice sector-wide effort within appropriate constitutional boundaries.

An innovative step we took in 2025 was establishing on a trial basis a new role of Chief Registrar, based at Te Whare. The role is intended to strengthen my directions for the orderly and efficient conduct of the court's business.

Timely access to justice is fundamental to enhancing justice, so it is closely entwined with another priority, Te Ao Mārama. Te Ao Mārama is a judicially led approach to enhancing justice for everyone who comes to the District Court.

Te Ao Mārama best practice approaches that do not require additional funding can be introduced in any courthouse in the country, in addition to the work progressing in the eight locations where it has designated funded: Kaitaia, Kaikohe, Whangārei, Hamilton (including Huntly), Tauranga, Gisborne, Napier and Hastings.

Pages 20–21 set out what this looks like, including new court lists (similar types of hearing grouped together), alternative courtroom layouts and establishing

community-based wraparound support services to help court participants, including victims. We are beginning to hear positive stories of change, both from those who come to court and from judicial officers using new approaches such as plain language.

Outdated buildings and systems pose an ongoing challenge to the work of the court. We welcome the courthouses being upgraded or replaced with new buildings, and the development of Te Au Reka. The Family Court will be the first to adopt it.

A number of judges have provided expert support at the design and build stage and more will be involved later. You can read more about Te Au Reka on page 22.

The volume and pace of change in the District Court – quite apart from the daily workload – mean judicial officers need to be well, resilient and thriving. This has always been true but is even more so now. The role is rewarding but has a relentless workload, increasingly complex cases, unique stressors and ongoing exposure to traumatic material. This is why judicial wellbeing is one of our priorities. We have a number of initiatives under way or planned, including improving how new judges are inducted and then mentored in their early years.

While there are many challenges, we have made significant improvements in 2025 and have created building blocks for more in 2026. Thank you to the bench and the many people who assisted the District Court in 2025, from justice sector agencies to the communities where our courts are located and serve. ■

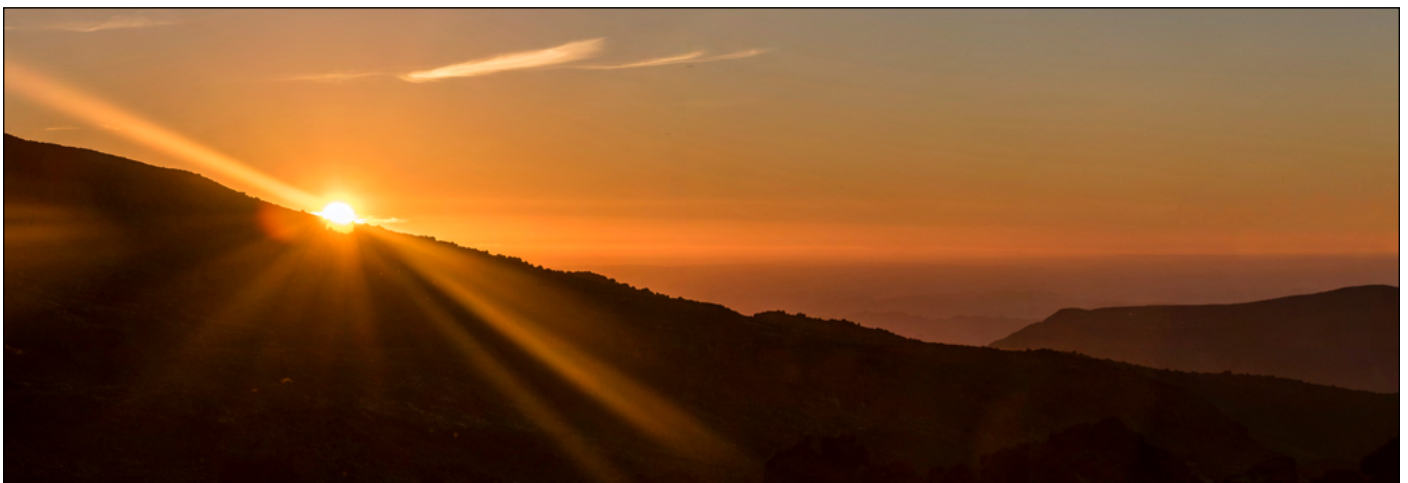




Image: Stephen A'Court Photography

» Report of Principal Family Court Judge Jacquelyn Moran

The Family Court is the second-largest division of the District Court, delivering judgments relating to more than 30 pieces of legislation and dealing with more than 60,000 applications in any given year.

The cases we see can be challenging and extremely complex, as they relate to the most personal aspects of people's lives, including treasured assets and possessions, and often, most importantly of all, their children.

Our absolute commitment is to children's safety.

In addition to the Family Court's statutory requirements, our judicial officers are very experienced in family violence issues and

all the factors that can be involved in a case. They are impartial and solution focused, so always balance the evidence before them to work out what is in a child's best interests.

In 2025 there were some unique and difficult issues that required explaining to media and the public the rationale behind how these interests are determined. I hope through ongoing engagement and education we will be able to increase awareness and understanding.

In April we welcomed Annette Gray to our bench. Judge Gray is sitting in Auckland. And in May we welcomed Annette Page, who is sitting in Manukau.

The second tranche of Family Court



associates were also sworn in by April. Seven associates were appointed, bringing the total number supporting the Family Court to 13. As well as the main centres, associates are now working in Whangārei, Hamilton, Rotorua, Palmerston North and Invercargill.

They frequently travel to smaller courts around the country, working mostly on Care of Children Act applications at the early stages of proceedings and allowing judges to focus more on hearing family violence and care and protection applications.

Associates are already making a positive impact. People are not having to wait as long for their first substantive court event and judges are being freed up to do an increased amount of judge-only work, including fixtures, which is essential as we strive for timely access to justice.

I have been very pleased with the Family Court's adoption of Te Ao Mārama, the initiative that reinforces the importance of ensuring our processes are inclusive and allow people involved in court proceedings to engage in a way that is meaningful for them.

It is vitally important people leave the court feeling heard, understood and respected and that they have had a fair hearing even if they may not agree necessarily with the outcome.

In 2025 more progress was made on introducing Te Au Reka in the Family Court. Alongside the technical build of the new digital case management system, significant work is under way to prepare for transition, including measures to minimise any impact on timely access to justice and service delivery.

The Family Dispute Resolution mediation service became free for all parties in 2025, helping more parents, guardians and whānau to agree on how to care for their children outside the formal Family Court process.

Many of the families judicial officers and lawyers refer to the mediation service reach parenting agreements that allow them to move on with their lives more quickly, saving them from the time, stress and expense of court proceedings.

There are now 12 Child Specialists across the country who work closely with a wider



Johan Niemand and Rachel Lohrey are two of the first tranche of Family Court associates appointed in 2024.



Our associates are already making an impact, with people not having to wait as long for their first substantive event.

pool of Voice of Child experts so children who are the subject of a family dispute can participate in the mediation process in an age-appropriate and safe way.

Another highlight of the year was attending the World Congress on Family Law and Children's Rights in Cambridge in the UK and the Experts Meeting on International Child Abduction in London. At the World Congress, I presented a panel session on practices and processes in Hague Convention cases alongside Justice Jill Williams from Australia and Justice Alistair MacDonald from the UK.

I am proud of the work we do in the Family Court and thank our judges, associates and everyone who supports our work for all their hard work and professionalism.

I am confident we are in good shape for 2026, which will be my last year as Principal Family Court Judge. ■



Image: Stephen A'Court Photography

» Report of Principal Youth Court Judge Ida Malosi

A founding principle of the Youth Court since it was established in 1989 is to hold the children (aged 10–13 at the time of alleged offending) and young people (aged 14–17) who appear in our courtrooms accountable to their victims and society while ensuring they are equipped with the tools required to make better decisions.

This solution-focused approach involves identifying the underlying causes of their offending and tackling them. It is now being mainstreamed in other District Court jurisdictions as a key best practice of the Te Ao Mārama initiative.

The approach is encapsulated in a proverb that now adorns the wall of the refurbished

Youth Court at Dunedin District Court: “Ka haea te ata. Ka hāpara te ata. Ka pō, ka ao, ka awatea!” (“The sun rises. The dawn breaks. From the night, a new day begins.”)

“Where the night is a time of darkness and reflection, the day calls us to action and inspires the potential within and around us,” Judge Emma Smith, who sits in the Dunedin Youth Court, says of the proverb. “It is about providing hope and new possibilities and outcomes for our children, young people and their families.”

New possibilities and outcomes require the input of many people, including judges, court staff, the wider Ministry of Justice, New Zealand Police, Oranga Tamariki and other agencies, youth advocates, lay advocates,



youth workers, mentors, youth forensic nurses, clinicians, education officers, communication assistants and a host of expert report writers.

Youth justice-focused community organisations around the country are performing an increasing role too and again in 2025 I visited or met with as many as possible.

Hard work, can-do spirit and pulling together are one of the great strengths of the New Zealand youth justice system and I thank everyone involved for their dedication.

Interconnectedness is a mark of the youth justice system internationally too and in 2025 New Zealand's system exchanged knowledge and understanding with delegations from Taiwan, California, Hawai'i, Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati. I also met with colleagues across the Tasman as a member of the otherwise all-Australian Council of Heads of Jurisdiction for Children and Youth.

The interest countries show in New Zealand is a measure of the global regard in which our youth system is held. We would never claim to be perfect, and are always striving to improve, but I am reminded on these occasions how far ahead we are.

Of course, offenders themselves and their families are a crucial element in achieving new possibilities and outcomes and I acknowledge those who have committed to changing and what can be the hardest work of all – making that happen and maintaining the change.

They are doing so at what is an especially tough time, with the Salvation Army's latest



Hard work, can-do spirit and pulling together are one of the great strengths of our youth justice system.

State of the Nation report recording more children and young people experiencing poverty and in a household on a welfare benefit, their mental distress at three times 10 years ago, and lower educational achievement.

This is in addition to the other factors we are familiar with in the Youth Court, including neurodiversity, state care backgrounds and intergenerational trauma, with many of those we see a child of one or more parent in prison.

These factors contribute to children and young people being in the justice system in the first place and make it more difficult for them to get off what can then become a 'justice highway' that continues into adulthood.

The Youth Court deals with offending too serious for police to manage through alternative action in the community. This is around a quarter of youth offending.

The ongoing disproportionate rates of Māori in the youth justice system, as in the adult, are a continuing challenge.

Another challenge has been the volatility of available Oranga Tamariki places for children and young people on remand.

Additionally, we are encountering delays in securing mental health and other specialist reports for children and young people, which is impacting timely access to justice in the Youth Court.

On a positive note, however, as of 31 December 2025, there were 840 active cases in the Youth Court, down 31 from the end of 2024 and a further drop from the post-pandemic high of 1,126 in September 2023.

Another positive sign was in the Ministry of Justice's latest Youth Justice Indicators Summary Report, which showed that between 1 July 2024 and 30 June 2025 police proceeded against fewer children and young people and fewer entered the youth justice system for the first time.

I am confident that by continuing to work collaboratively across the youth justice system the Youth Court will remain at the forefront of solution-focused judging to ensure better outcomes for all concerned. ■



Image: Hagen Hopkins

» Report of National Executive Judge James Johnston

As National Executive Judge, I support the Chief District Court Judge, Principal Family Court Judge and Principal Youth Court Judge in their administrative responsibilities and the priorities set by the Chief Judge.

I provide legal, operational and strategic advice across the District Court. The role sits at the intersection of national leadership and local judicial practice, helping ensure the court functions as a coherent whole while remaining responsive to the needs of individual regions and communities. I started in the role in April 2025, following Judge Russell Collins, and have built on the strong foundations already established.

A central focus during 2025 was continuing

the court's work to improve timely access to justice (see pages 18–19). Our 19 regional executive judges were asked to review and update their timely justice plans, ensuring national priorities were translated into practical, locally grounded actions. These plans are designed to support the efficient progression of cases while maintaining fairness, judicial independence and the quality of decision making.

Another key area of work was strengthening the use of data and insights to support judicial leadership. Training was delivered to executive judges on the use of Power BI dashboards, enabling clearer visibility of workload, scheduling pressures and



emerging issues. Better access to timely, reliable information supports more informed decisions about listing, resourcing and case management, ultimately helping matters proceed when they are ready and reducing unnecessary delay for court users.

Work continued on judicial wellbeing, one of the four overarching priorities set by court leaders. The judicial role is demanding, intellectually challenging and at times relentless, requiring commitment and dedication. There are a number of measures and initiatives to assist with wellbeing and more is being done. This has included cross-bench collaboration, reviewing and building on existing initiatives, considering new initiatives, and laying the foundation for drafting a District Court-wide wellbeing plan. Managing individual workloads will be key.

As National Executive Judge, my role also included regular liaison with the executive judges network during weather and other events impacting our courts from time to time.

Work also continued on projects aimed at improving court performance, including initiatives dealing with case review hearings, judge-alone trials and jury trial backlogs for serious cases, along with finalising an action plan for the civil jurisdiction.

Together, these initiatives aim to deliver tangible benefits for court users: more predictable hearing dates, fewer adjournments caused by lack of readiness, improved use of judicial time and clearer pathways for cases to move from initiation to resolution. At their core, they are about ensuring people experience the court as accessible, fair and timely.

The good news is progress is being made and the information set out in this annual report clearly shows this.

I want to acknowledge the commitment and leadership of our executive judges, who play a critical role in rolling out the national initiatives in their respective courts, along with dedicated judicial colleagues and court staff who continue to work collaboratively to improve how we serve the public. Thank you to you all.

Looking ahead, my focus will be on embedding these improvements, including for our civil court, strengthening consistency across regions while respecting local context, continuing to support initiatives that enhance timely access to justice, and judicial wellbeing.

This work is central to maintaining public confidence in the District Court and the service we provide communities. ■

» Judicial committees and governance

Many District Court judicial officers dedicate considerable time and thought to court operations and cross-judicial issues through their role on committees. These committees' work is vital to improving the administration of justice.

Some committees consist of judicial officers only and focus specifically on court operations. An example is the Criminal Leadership Forum, which the National Executive Judge chairs and which advises

the Chief District Court Judge on issues that impact on the orderly and efficient conduct of adult criminal cases. The Jury Liaison Judges' and Criminal Liaison Judges' Committees also focus on aspects of the adult criminal jurisdiction, while the Civil Committee provides advice in relation to civil cases and in 2025 led a civil action plan.

Both the Family and Youth Court have active advisory groups that support the work of their Principal Judges. Other

committees consider issues relevant to health, safety and judicial wellbeing, Te Ao Mārama and judicial education.

Some District Court committees include Ministry of Justice staff and others such as the Media Committee involve the broader community, in this case media representatives.

District Court judicial officers also contribute to cross-judicial committees, which are set out in the Chief Justice's annual report.

» Our annual workload

Adult criminal jurisdiction

	2025	2024	2023
Active cases	36,826	37,740	37,758
New business	107,343	107,712	107,388
Disposals	108,859	109,702	105,980

Family Court

	2025	2024	2023
Active applications	26,052	26,400	26,407
New business	63,748	61,938	60,367
Disposals	64,062	61,687	59,548

Youth Court

	2025	2024	2023
Active cases	840	871	1,071
New business	3,803	3,978	4,511
Disposals	3,713	4,060	4,235

Civil jurisdiction

	2025	2024	2023
Active cases	9,741	14,675	13,208
New business	15,969	29,149	22,959
Disposals	20,969	28,173	19,732

In all tables, active cases or applications are ones before the court and unresolved as of 31 December 2025. The tables also show new business and disposals for the calendar year.



» Timely access to justice

People having access to justice without undue delay is essential for a fair society. Delays in getting a hearing or a case progressing through the court take a human toll on everyone involved, including victims, defendants and families. Delays also add to the pressure felt by judicial officers, lawyers and court staff.

Timely access to justice is a major focus for the District Court. We are methodically addressing problems in the system that prevent or hinder meaningful progress of cases through the court and add to backlogs. Judicial officers do not hold all the levers and many of the initiatives we have put in place need a system-wide approach, supported by the legal profession, Ministry of Justice, New Zealand Police, Crown solicitors and the Department of Corrections.

In 2025 the different strands of our work on timely access to justice in the adult criminal court combined into a two-pronged strategy: improving timely progress of new cases through the court and a sustainable reduction of existing backlogs. The two are connected – reducing the weight of backlog cases frees up time and resource to focus on moving new cases through the court in a timely manner.

The Timely Access to Justice Protocol published in 2024 set out thresholds for different categories of adult criminal cases to progress through the court to completion, and an overall timely access to justice standard of 90%.

For example, when Category 3 non-jury charges are filed in court, under the protocol 90% must be heard and determined within a threshold of nine months. The 90% standard makes allowance (10%) for highly complex



cases unlikely to be completed within the applicable timeframe.

In 2025 we added six months to each of the category thresholds for cases under pre-sentencing monitoring. This more fairly reflects the reality that these cases need more time for the pre-sentence monitoring to be completed before they move to being counted as in backlog.

Achieving the 90% standard requires efficient court processes, sound case management and the optimal use of judicial officers' time. For judicial officers, the essential principle is to ensure meaningful progress is made at every court event towards a case's completion, as long as that is in the interests of justice.

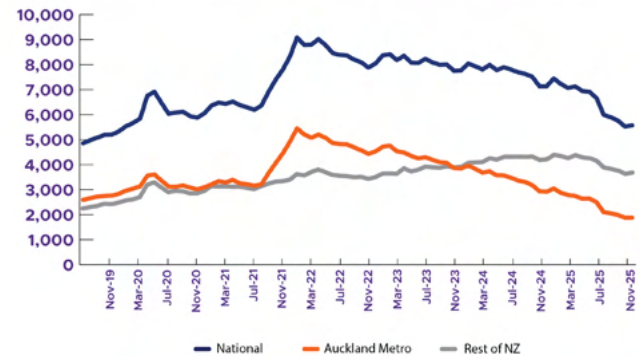
Two key initiatives introduced nationally in August 2025 were the Case Review Hearing Best Practice Guidelines and the Judge-alone (JAT) Trial Protocol. These aimed to improve access to justice by ensuring preparedness, reducing delays and maximising judicial time. They are intended to result in greater certainty for alleged victims, witnesses and defendants, in that a trial will be well prepared and more likely proceed on the day it is scheduled.

For example, the case review hearing guidelines introduced a memorandum of proof, provided by the Police Prosecution Service, outlining the charges and the evidence that will be relied on at trial.

Introduced in late 2024, the Bail Application Scheduling Framework ensures those in custody have their bail application heard as soon as possible. It is intended to make the most efficient use of judicial, court, lawyer and stakeholder resources by ensuring all necessary information is before the court and defendants are not needlessly called if their bail application is not ready to be pursued. Since it was introduced, there have been resulting improvements in the time taken for certified ready bail applications to be heard.

There was steady progress across the District Court in 2025. By the end of the year 83% of cases were completed within the timely access to justice thresholds. The figure was 81% in the Auckland Metro courts

ACTIVE DISTRICT COURT CRIMINAL CASES IN BACKLOG



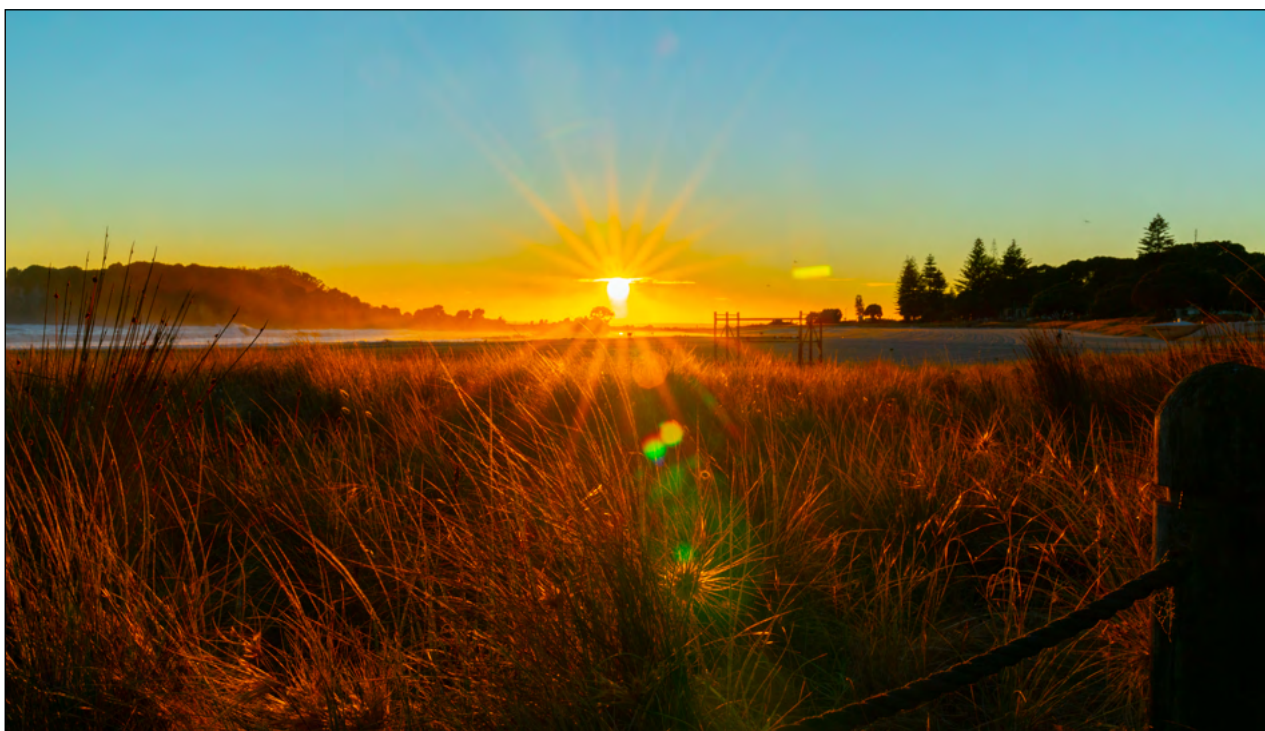
and 85% in the rest of the country. This has been achieved despite pressure points in Auckland such as more Category 3 cases entering the courts and more defendants electing to have a jury trial. Category 3 cases are more serious, take more events to resolve and need additional resources.

Timely access thresholds for the Family Court were developed during the year and are expected to be published in 2026.

The second prong of the approach to timely justice is reducing the backlog. The backlog consists of cases that have been progressing through the court for longer than the timely access to justice thresholds for each category. We have worked hard at identifying, hearing and determining our most serious backlog cases at the earliest opportunity and this effort will continue in 2026.

The work has paid dividends – courts continued to dispose of high volumes of backlog cases in 2025. The reduced backlogs in the Auckland Metro region and nationally have been impressive (see graph). Since February 2024 the backlog has decreased by 30% nationally, made up of a 51% decrease in Auckland Metro (a particular focus of priority-based resourcing and scheduling) and 10% in the rest of the country. At its peak, around 2022, almost 9,000 cases were in backlog. By the end of 2025 the figure was just over 5,500.

The results are significant and reflect the hard work of judicial officers, court staff, lawyers and other parts of the system. We will build on the two-pronged approach to timely access to justice in 2026, to the benefit of all who have business with the court. ■



» Te Ao Mārama

Enhancing justice for all

Te Ao Mārama is a judicially led initiative where the District Court and justice sector agencies work with iwi and other community organisations to improve the quality of justice in the court and ensure all participants, including victims and whānau, can understand and better take part in the cases that relate to them. Timely access to justice is a central feature of the initiative, as quality justice includes timeliness.

Te Ao Mārama is now embedded as 'business as usual' in five of the eight locations that received extra funding to help introduce the initiative. These locations are Kaikohe, Whangārei, Hamilton (including Huntly), Tauranga and Gisborne, with Kaitiāia, Napier and Hastings to follow in 2026.

Working with iwi and other community organisations, and responding to local

needs, wraparound support services for case participants and their whānau have been established for the Family Court in Kaikohe, family violence cases in Whangārei, the adult criminal court in Hamilton, the Young Adult List for 18- to -25-year-olds in Huntly and the adult criminal court in Tauranga. In Gisborne an existing service in the adult criminal court has expanded to include the Family Court and Youth Court.

A number of specialist courts and 'lists' that schedule together similar types of hearing have been introduced where needed to support a Te Ao Mārama approach. These include:

- Family Court Care and Protection Lists in Kaitiāia, Kaikohe, Whangārei and Tauranga
- Family Court Family Violence Lists in Kaitiāia, Kaikohe and Whangārei



- a refreshed Family Violence List in the adult criminal court in Whangārei
- a Young Adult List for 18- to 25-year-olds on victimless driving charges in Whangārei
- a refreshed Young Adult List for 18- to 25-year-olds in Hamilton (including Huntly)
- a Criminal Procedure (Mentally Impaired Persons) List in Gisborne.

Less formal alternative courtroom layouts for the Family Court have also been introduced in some locations for hearings where they are safe and appropriate. An alternative courtroom location is being developed for the Family Court in Kaitiāia.

Te Ao Mārama is at earlier stages in locations beyond the eight that were funded, but is very much a national initiative intended to improve the court experience of all New Zealanders no matter where they are and what branch of the District Court they are in.

Extra funding for the initiative beyond the initial eight locations will depend on evaluations that are taking place.

But the essence of the initiative are eight approaches recommended in the Te Ao Mārama Best Practice Framework released at the end of 2023 and most need no extra funding to implement. Many of our other 50 court locations around the country are already introducing approaches appropriate for them. That will accelerate, with a handbook for implementing the approaches nearing completion.

These evidence-based approaches reflect lessons learnt over decades of use in therapeutic and solution-focused courts such as the Family Court, Youth Court, Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Court and Matariki Court. They are:

- 1 Developing closer connections with the community.
- 2 Improving information provided to judicial officers, including by using protocols for sharing information between jurisdictions.
- 3 Implementing better processes for victims, complainants, children and other people they would benefit.

4 Encouraging people, including victims and whānau, to be heard in court.

5 Using plain language.

6 Toning down formalities.

7 Alternative courtroom layouts.

8 Adopting solution-focused judging when appropriate and relevant – ie asking “what has happened to this person to bring them to this point in their life?” and then addressing those causes. This is for people whose offences carry a maximum sentence of less than two years’ imprisonment.

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.

Timely access to justice is fundamental to Te Ao Mārama. It recognises every court appearance must wherever possible be meaningful to participants. Using best practice approaches should reduce unnecessary adjournments.

Te Ao Mārama helps judicial officers and court staff support victims in better ways. For example, there are more opportunities for victims and their whānau to speak during the court process.

The initiative is for everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, abilities, who they are or where they are from.

It responds to repeated calls for transformative change over the past four decades and long-standing concerns expressed by victims, defendants, other participants and wider whānau members that they have found District Court processes confusing, alienating, disempowering and retraumatising.

Some District Court locations have already been working in ways that contribute to Te Ao Mārama, including through specialist courts and lists, and they will continue to do so alongside other elements of the initiative. ■

» Te Au Reka

Significant progress was made in 2025 with the design and development of Te Au Reka, a new digital case and court management system being developed jointly by the judiciary and the Ministry of Justice. Te Au Reka is one of the District Court's four overarching priorities, reflecting its importance to our future operation.

Te Au Reka is expected to deliver substantial benefits for all court users by providing a more efficient and effective approach to managing caseloads. This represents a long overdue modernisation of court operations and a significant step forward in digital capability.

The Family Court will be the first to adopt Te Au Reka. One focus in 2025 was identifying the changes needed to courtrooms and judicial officers' chambers to support the new system. This included a comprehensive stocktake of Family Court courtrooms and judicial benches. The assessments extended to offsite hearing environments, such as hospitals. The findings from this work will inform the minimum courtroom configuration needed for effective implementation.

Planning has started for phase two of Te Au Reka, which will encompass civil and criminal proceedings in both the District Court and the High Court, and also the Youth Court. ■



» Our specialist courts

In November 2025, graduates of Auckland District Court's Court of New Beginnings, which deals with low-level offences by people who are homeless, joined judges, police, social workers and community organisations at the Auckland City Mission to mark the court's 15th anniversary.

The court's solution-focused approach ensures social and health supports are provided to help offenders address the underlying causes of their situation while also holding them to account for their offending and its impact on victims.

The court started in 2010 and independent evaluations have shown its approach reduces reoffending rates by 66% and saves on nights spent in prison by 78%. Hospital emergency department visits drop by 16% during participation and by 57% in the six months afterwards.

The anniversary event at the City Mission also acknowledged Judge Tony FitzGerald,



Judge Tony FitzGerald and the Court of New Beginnings being acknowledged at the Auckland City Mission.

who established the court, was its presiding judge and was about to retire in early 2026 after 27 years on the bench.

A recent graduate who was the first recipient of the Whaea Michelle Kidd Award for completing the court programme with distinction said at the event: "I'm here to say how grateful and thankful I am for having the opportunity to change my life and start a new beginning. Without this court, I could have been still homeless, on the street, could have no family. But by accepting me into this court and helping me get a home, I've now become a greater person and a better person."

In December, the solution-focused approach of another of the District Court's specialist courts, the Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment (AODT) Court, was the subject of a two-day conference at the University of Auckland.

The conference was co-organised by Judge Lisa Tremewan, who established the court along with Judge Ema Aitken.

The court was established at Auckland District Court and Waitākere District Court in 2012 and since 2021 has also been available at Hamilton District Court. It combines justice, health and social services to address the drivers of crime by helping offenders recover from addiction.

Latest Ministry of Justice figures show people who complete the AODT Court programme reoffend far less than comparable high-risk, high-needs offenders in the District Court: 50% less in their first year after completing the programme and 20% in their fourth.

Melanie Rauth was the 300th graduate of the court after facing several charges, including burglary offences, possessing



methamphetamine and driving while disqualified.

The AODT Court programme gave Melanie access to wraparound support services to help her deal with her substance misuse, including through recovery meetings and peer support groups. Now, as the Team Lead (Alcohol and Other Drug) Support Worker at Auckland City Mission, she is giving back to others who face similar challenges.

“What the drug treatment court gave me was a chance, a chance to rewrite my story,” she says. “Now I’m contributing to a society that I once took so much from.”

As well as the Court of New Beginnings and AODT Court, other specialist courts and dedicated lists (similar types of hearing grouped together) within the District Court include the following (in chronological order of being established):

Family Violence List

Established in 2001 at Waitākere District Court, this list in the adult criminal jurisdiction is now available in seven locations and seeks to bring a multi-agency approach to dealing with the underlying causes of family violence. In 2025 Whangārei refreshed its list as part of the Te Ao Mārama initiative, which included adding a wraparound support service for case participants and their whānau.

Christchurch Youth Drug Court

Established in 2002 to address the links between alcohol and other drug use and youth offending, this court refers offenders with a dependency to appropriate services and treatment.

Rangatahi Court | Te Kōti Rangatahi

Established in Gisborne in 2008, this court within the Youth Court sits on marae in 16 locations. The same laws and consequences apply as in the Youth Court but Te Kōti Rangatahi incorporates Māori cultural practices to reconnect Māori offenders to their heritage and better involve whānau, hāpū and iwi in court processes. It is not, however, exclusively for Māori. We are



Judge Lisa Tremewan co-organised a conference about the Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Court. Image: RNZ

increasing Te Kōti Rangatahi locations as part of Te Ao Mārama.

Pasifika Court

Inspired by the success of Te Kōti Rangatahi, this court sits in two Auckland locations after being established in 2010 in Māngere. The court sits in Pasifika churches or community centres and follows Pasifika cultural processes to reconnect Pasifika offenders to their heritage and better involve families and communities in court processes.

Matariki Court

This court was established in 2011 at Kaikohe District Court to address the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system and increase Māori perspectives and involvement in the court process. It engages the offender’s whānau, hapū and iwi in the sentencing stage, encourages use of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori, and facilitates wraparound services and alternative pathways to address the underlying causes of offending. It is not, however, exclusively for Māori.

Special Circumstances Court

Established in 2012 at Wellington District Court, this court (like the Court of New Beginnings in Auckland) addresses low-level offending by people who are homeless and/or have impaired decision making because



of such things as mental illness, intellectual disability and addiction. It provides rehabilitation plans monitored and overseen by judges.

Family Violence Intervention Court

Established in 2018 at Gisborne District Court, this court seeks to reduce family violence by investing time early in the court process to refer defendants facing family violence-related charges to relevant programmes to address their behaviour.

Young Adult List

Established in 2020 at Porirua District Court and since 2022 also available at Gisborne District Court and Hamilton District Court, this list is for 18- to 25-year-olds and recognises the challenges and needs this age group often bring with them to court. The goal is for everyone to understand what is happening and to feel understood themselves so they can fully participate in the court process. In 2025, as part of

Te Ao Mārama, Hamilton refreshed its Young Adult List, which included adding a wraparound support service for participants in the list in its Huntly satellite courthouse. Whangārei also added a Young Adult List for 18- to 25-year-olds on victimless driving charges.

Criminal Procedure (Mentally Impaired Persons) List

Established in 2020 at Auckland District Court, this list holds dedicated hearings for defendants whose sanity or fitness to enter a plea may need to be determined. In 2025 Gisborne added the list as part of Te Ao Mārama.

Personal Individual Needs Court

Inspired by the success of other specialist courts and established in 2020 at Masterton District Court, this court works with police, probation officers and other agencies to support offenders in addressing the underlying causes of their offending. ■



» Staying connected

The District Court's connections to the communities we serve are important to us. Developing those connections further is a key aspect of our Te Ao Mārama initiative. Listening to and understanding the needs of our communities is central to the work we do, as is enabling communities to understand as much as possible about that work.

We connect with communities in many different ways at both a national and local level. The Chief Judge and other District Court leaders meet as often as possible with community leaders and the many community organisations that contribute so much to the justice sector through their work with victims, defendants and/or families.

At a local level, judicial officers in each District Court location have a designated Community Day out of the roster each year so they and judicial colleagues in their courthouse can learn more about the community in which they operate and strengthen relationships with community organisations or initiate new ones.

For example, for their 2025 Community Day Tauranga District Court judicial officers attended a wānanga hosted by the justice programme of Whānau-ā-Apanui iwi at Te Kaha near Ōpōtiki, increasing their understanding of the issues facing people on the East Cape getting to court and how they might deal with matters more efficiently in the future.

Wellington and Hutt Valley judicial officers visited Barnardos head office for their day.

In 2025 community members were present at significant events such as a dawn blessing ceremony to mark the completion of additional courtrooms and improved facilities at Manukau District Court and the 'turning of the sod' for the start of building a new courthouse for Papakura.

The District Court also connects with New Zealanders by supporting an open, impartial and transparent justice system

– publishing decisions, releasing court records and working with the news media.

A selection of decisions from the approximately 200,000 adult criminal, family, youth and civil matters heard by the court each year is published openly.

A major project to transition these judgments from the District Court website to the Judicial Decisions Online database started this year and when complete will create a 'one-stop shop' for the public, media, researchers and academics to source court judgments.

The District Court website continues to host updates and announcements relevant to the court and our users, guidance for sector partners and articles explaining the workings of the court and our officers.

Individual courts and judges also release thousands of documents from the court record every year as provided under the District Court (Access to Court Documents) Rules.

In addition, the District Court Media Committee meets twice a year to build a shared understanding and positive working relationship between the District Court judiciary, court staff and media.



Judge Alan Goodwin and a member of the community at the Manukau District Court dawn blessing ceremony.

The District Court is deeply connected to the wider justice sector across its operations. The Ministry of Justice is the core government department responsible for supporting the judiciary and the operation of the court, as well as the provision of justice policy. Police, the Department of Corrections and Oranga Tamariki are other government agencies essential to supporting our work. We also engage with the legal profession, their representative organisations and Crown Law, for example, to consult on changes to court processes and priorities.

District Court leaders at the national and local level maintain regular contact with the justice sector and the profession. We do this for the regular business of the court and in some cases around specific projects within appropriate constitutional boundaries. An example is the Justice Sector Leadership Board, where the judiciary is invited to meet with justice sector chief executives. This connection has focused on the shared goal of improving timely access to justice and has included related initiatives such

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Court leaders maintain regular contact with the justice sector and the profession.

as use of technology to enable remote participation by defendants and others in court proceedings.

A monthly meeting chaired by the Chief District Court Judge and Chief High Court Judge brings together the leaders of the profession and representatives of the justice sector agencies. This is a chance for the profession to raise issues of concern and be informed of any initiatives that may have an impact on their work.

The Chief Judge acknowledges the commitment of justice sector agencies to supporting the work of the District Court. ■



» Our new judicial officers



Judge Annette Gray
Sworn in 16 April 2025
General/Civil/Family
Sits in Auckland



Judge Annette Page
Sworn in 1 May 2025
General/Family
Sits in Manukau



Judge David Laurenson KC
Sworn in 12 May 2025
General/Jury
Sits in Wellington



Judge Hermann Retzlaff
Sworn in 19 May 2025
General/Jury
Sits in Dunedin



Judge Sacha Nepe
Sworn in 23 May 2025
General/Jury
Sits in Manukau



Judge Bernadette Arapere
Sworn in 29 November 2025
General/Jury/Civil/Youth
Sits in Hastings





**Family Court Associate
Tracey Gunn**
Sworn in 21 February 2025
Sits in Hamilton



**Family Court Associate
Sandra Heney**
Sworn in 25 February 2025
Sits in Palmerston North



**Family Court Associate
Mānia Hope**
Sworn in 12 March 2025
Sits in Hamilton



**Family Court Associate
Carlyle Gibson**
Sworn in 13 March 2025
Sits in Rotorua



**Family Court Associate
Amanda Courtney**
Sworn in 18 March 2025
Sits in Whangārei



**Family Court Associate
Claire Mullord**
Sworn in 25 March 2025
Sits in Wellington



**Family Court Associate
Lana Paul**
Sworn in 27 March 2025
Sits in Christchurch

» Retirements

In 2025, District Court judge Michael Turner (sworn in 2011) retired and left our bench, as did acting warranted judges David Ruth (sworn in 2011), Laurie Newhook (sworn in 2001), Paul Mabey KC (sworn in 2016) and John Walker (sworn in 1994). Judge Walker, pictured, was Principal Youth Court Judge 2016–2022. Acting community magistrate Janet Holmes also



retired. The judicial officers are all thanked for their service to the District Court.

David Burns (sworn in 2005), Antony Mahon (sworn in 2015), Nicola Mathers (sworn in 2000) and Mary-Beth Sharp (sworn in 1995) retired as permanent judges but continue to serve under acting warrants, for which the District Court thanks them.

» Judicial education and wellbeing

Judicial officers undertake ongoing education throughout their careers. Te Kura Kaiwhakawā | Institute of Judicial Studies is responsible for providing education, with District Court education committees providing advice on relevant content.

In addition to Te Kura courses, new judges and Family Court associates receive an induction run by the District Court leaders. Judges attend regular common room sessions and District Court update sessions on law changes, significant reports such as the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care and other relevant topics.

Judges with Family and Youth Court warrants also attend updates related to their jurisdiction, as do Family Court associates, while community magistrates have an annual conference heavily focused on education and information specific to their role.

The wellbeing of judicial officers is essential not only at an individual level but for the effective functioning of the court. International research on judicial wellbeing acknowledges judicial officers deal with heavy workloads, time pressure, emotional stress, public scrutiny and safety concerns.

District Court leaders place a priority on wellbeing at all stages of a judicial career, aiming for a preventative, proactive approach. We envision a judiciary where

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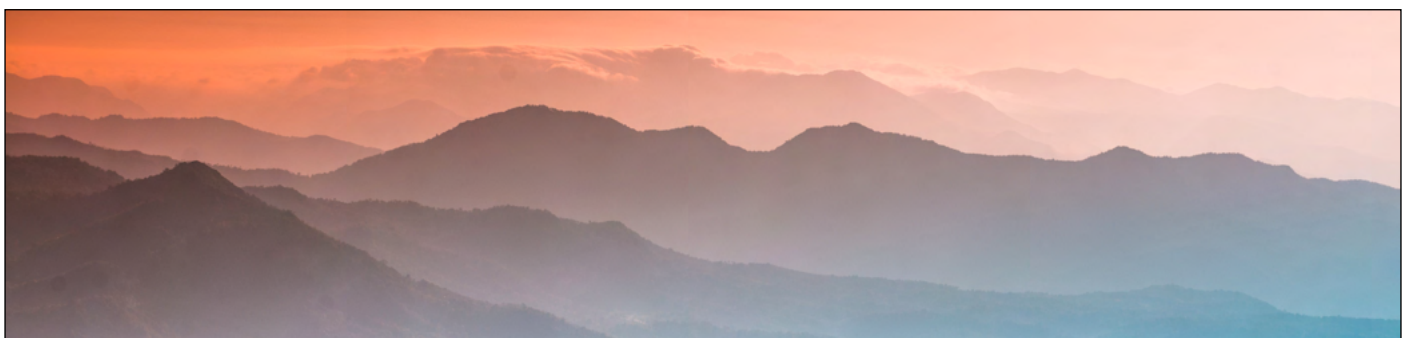
Court leaders place a priority on wellbeing at all stages of a judicial career.

all judicial officers can thrive mentally, emotionally and professionally, benefiting all court participants.

For example, we provide support for new judges through our Tuakana Teina mentorship programme.

Judges are encouraged to get professional supervision as a routine part of their practice and to have a comprehensive medical check-up each year. Leadership skills development is provided to executive judges, recognising the additional aspects of their role and the support they provide to other judges in their common room.

Higher case volumes and improving timely access to justice place increased pressure on judicial officers. In 2025 the Chief Judge continued to advocate for more judges to better meet the demands on the court. ■



» Where to find out more

We hope you found our 2025 annual report informative. If you would like to know more, here are some links to our website

Judges

www.districtcourts.govt.nz/the-district-court-judiciary/the-judges

Other judicial officers

www.districtcourts.govt.nz/the-district-court-judiciary/other-judicial-officers

Statistics

www.districtcourts.govt.nz/reports-publications-and-statistics/statistics

Previous annual reports

www.districtcourts.govt.nz/reports-publications-and-statistics/district-court-annual-reports/new-annual-report-content-page-2

