

COUNTY
COURT OF
VICTORIA

COURT
DIRECTIONS
2023-26

CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
Opening message from the Chief Judge and CEO	2
About the County Court of Victoria	3
Our purpose and public value outcomes	4
Drivers of change	5
Our strategic pillars	6
Pillars one to five	7
How we will deliver	12

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

The County Court of Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land and waterways upon which our lives depend. We acknowledge and pay our respects to ancestors of this country, Elders, knowledge holders and leaders – past and present. We extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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A MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUDGE AND CEO

Over the last five years, the County Court has continued to deliver justice amid unprecedented challenges.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic required the Court to transition to virtual hearings, program delivery, and administration, in a matter of weeks. A substantial amount of court work was conducted virtually, allowing our non-jury criminal work and work in the Common Law and Commercial Divisions to continue at pace. However, the pandemic resulted in a record number of pending criminal trials, and a continuing challenge is to ensure these matters are heard or resolved as quickly as possible.

Despite the challenges over the last few years, the Court has continued to make meaningful improvements. These include upgrades to our in-court technology, the launch of the Drug and Alcohol Treatment Court, the introduction of bail support (Court Integrated Services Program), and the continued expansion of the County Koori Court. We also redeveloped the Court's website and significantly enhanced the quality and availability of information about the Court, and its decisions, through expansive community engagement.

These achievements provide a solid base for the Court as we now look ahead with our new strategic plan, *Court Directions 2023–26*.

In developing this plan, the Court has worked closely with our stakeholders. Their candid and constructive feedback was essential to understanding where we are and where we need to go.

As our operating environment extends beyond the Victorian courts and tribunals, this plan recognises the need to continue our collaboration with the broader justice system by overcoming common problems and reaching shared goals.

Court Directions 2023–26 is not intended to encroach on the independence of judicial decision making – indeed, it seeks to enable it. The Court's fundamental purpose is to hear and determine matters in a fair, timely, efficient and accessible way. The Court commits to uphold the highest standard of fairness in the administration of justice while also improving the way we operate. With those core values in mind, this strategic plan defines clear goals for the Court's administration over the next three years: to create a court that is user centred, engaged with the community, and that continues to innovate to improve.



“Despite the unprecedented challenges of the past few years, the Court continues to engage in reform and is experiencing real momentum with its core purpose – addressing caseloads. I feel confident these new Court Directions will provide the foundation for further progress and innovation.”

Chief Judge Peter Kidd



“The next three years are about growth: building the Court's capacity and capability, and collaborating across the courts and with our justice system partners to deliver more value across the system as a whole.”

Alison Byrne
CEO



ABOUT THE COUNTY COURT OF VICTORIA

Established in 1852 to handle small civil claims in Melbourne and surrounding areas, the County Court has become Victoria's principal trial court, hearing a diverse range of criminal and civil law matters. These matters include appeals from the Magistrates' Court of Victoria and from the Children's Court.

The County Court's 76 permanent judicial officers, supported by more than 300 staff, held more than 46,000 hearings in 2021–22, with more than 18,000 of those heard virtually.

The Court sits in both Melbourne and 'on circuit', as judges hear cases in 12 regional locations: Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Horsham, Mildura, Morwell, Sale, Shepparton, Wangaratta, Warrnambool and Wodonga.

While committed to the enduring values of fairness, independence, impartiality and transparency, the Court is also a modern workplace, continuously searching for innovative ways to deliver more efficient, inclusive, and effective court services.

The Court is independent from government and from other courts and tribunals, however we collaborate across the justice system to improve outcomes, including for the most vulnerable people in our community.

The Court also engages with a wide range of community groups, including school and tertiary students, so our community has a sound understanding of how the Court and the wider justice system operates.

OUR PURPOSE AND PUBLIC VALUE OUTCOMES

The Court's purpose is to hear and determine matters in a fair, timely, efficient and accessible way. With this purpose in mind, and subject to independent judicial decision making, the Court's administration will achieve the following outcomes:

1. A COURT THAT IS PEOPLE CENTRED

- Ensuring that everyone has a shared understanding of court decisions and processes
- Increasing our focus on diversity and inclusion
- Supporting the safety and wellbeing of our people

2. A COURT THAT IS CONNECTED AND INFORMED

- Creating fit-for-purpose infrastructure, systems and processes
- Working across the justice system to maximise community value
- Being open and transparent with the media and via direct community engagement, to ensure the public has trust and confidence in the Court

3. A COURT THAT INNOVATES TO IMPROVE

- Continuously finding ways to hear matters in a timely manner
- Purposefully using technology to make the Court more effective and accessible
- Investing wisely, based on data and evidence



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Court Directions 2017–22 successfully guided us during challenging years. In the next three years we will consolidate our progress and continue to build on our success. The following drivers of change in our strategic and operating environment have influenced our priorities.

- The suspension of jury trials during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented number of pending criminal trials.
- Technology and digitisation enabled virtualisation of court services, including the appropriate use of online hearings, online lodgement and access to court materials, which creates opportunities to be more efficient, transparent and connected.
- There is a growing trend toward self representation, particularly in civil matters.
- Increasing diversity across the Victorian community impacts how people access the Court and its resources.
- Given past trends and future projections, we expect demand for court services to continue increasing, and forecast that there will soon be insufficient courtrooms in the Melbourne CBD.
- Developments and reforms across the law are increasing the complexity of court work, particularly for sex offences.
- Positive workforce trends highlight the importance of inclusion, safety and wellbeing, and the elimination of bullying and harassment.

OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Our strategic pillars are the foundation of our strategic plan. By focusing on these areas over the next three years, we will deliver on the Court’s purpose to hear and determine matters in a fair, timely, efficient and accessible way.

1. IMPROVE ACCESS FOR COURT USERS AND THE COMMUNITY

We will work to make the Court more accessible, by improving administrative processes, resources and infrastructure, to support just outcomes.

This pillar builds on the previous Court Directions objectives:

- Engage with the community
- Improve the court user experience

2. EMBED AND ENHANCE THERAPEUTIC JUSTICE

We will strengthen partnerships to improve access to therapeutic justice and community safety. We will evaluate the success of our programs to identify what works best and support ongoing investment.

This pillar builds on the previous Court Directions objectives:

- Expand and explore specialisation
- Reform based on evidence

3. UPLIFT OUR DIGITAL CAPABILITIES

We will make court services and processes more accessible using existing digital capabilities, while exploring the technologies needed to support the Court in the future.

This pillar builds on the previous Court Directions objectives:

- Harness new technology
- Improve the court user experience

4. STRENGTHEN OUR POSITIVE WORKING CULTURE

We will continue to foster an environment where the wellbeing of judicial officers and staff is always prioritised, and everyone is supported to do their best work.

This pillar builds on the previous Court Directions objective:

- Support judges and staff

5. SECURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE COURT

We will work to ensure fair and timely justice by deploying our resources efficiently, while advocating for the additional resources needed to address growing demand for our services.

This pillar builds on the previous Court Directions objectives:

- Support judges and staff
- Reform based on evidence
- Improve the court user experience

PILLAR ONE

Improve access for court users and the community

SUMMARY

We will work to make the Court more accessible by improving our administrative processes, resources and infrastructure, to support just outcomes.

OUR PRIORITIES

1. Ensure timely access to justice through expanded use of active case management, ensuring that pending matters are resolved as early as possible, when in the interests of justice.
2. Unless properly constrained by law, ensure court work is easily accessible to the public, both directly as well as via the media, to facilitate transparency and to protect trust and confidence.
3. Endeavour to make the Court's administration as consistent and streamlined as possible to improve access to services and to reduce costs.
4. Improve the Court's physical environment to welcome participation by everyone, including people with a disability.
5. Create a more welcoming and culturally-safe environment by providing cultural safety training to our workforce, promoting the use of inclusive language, and respecting the diversity of our community and court users.
6. Strive to ensure additional support is available for those who need it, particularly self-represented parties.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- We have a reputation for transparency, integrity and accessibility.
- Court users and the broader community understand the work we do and feel confident they can participate fully when they need to.
- The Court adapts to Victorians' changing needs and diversity.

PILLAR TWO

Embed and enhance therapeutic justice

SUMMARY

We will strengthen partnerships to improve access to therapeutic justice and improve community safety. We will evaluate the success of our programs to identify what works best and support ongoing investment.

OUR PRIORITIES

1. Comprehensively evaluate the Drug and Alcohol Treatment Court and the Court Integrated Services Program to demonstrate their positive social impacts, quantify whole-of-government savings, and support ongoing funding.
2. Collaborate deeply and effectively with our service partners to achieve our shared goals and solve shared problems.
3. Enhance data and knowledge sharing across the courts, and with our partners, to generate system improvements and build evidence of best practice.
4. Develop a high-quality learning and development strategy for our therapeutic justice programs to ensure our multidisciplinary team has the skills needed to best support our program participants.
5. Continue to develop the County Koori Court by expanding to new regional locations in line with the Aboriginal Justice Agreements.
6. Actively support self-determination as part of a wider program within the Court to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and court users.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- Therapeutic programs are effectively monitored, with insights shared to allow us to strengthen their impact across the justice system.
- Existing Specialist Courts programs are funded on an ongoing basis, and we use evidence of their success to advocate for expanded therapeutic justice offerings.

PILLAR THREE

Uplift our digital capabilities

SUMMARY

We will make court services and processes more accessible using existing digital capabilities, while exploring the technologies needed to support the Court in the future.

OUR PRIORITIES

1. Open dedicated e-Courts and an e-gallery to facilitate more virtual hearings and new types of digital engagement with court users.
2. Review our current digital products suite and accompanying processes to ensure we maximise their potential to support court hearings and court users.
3. Optimise use of existing in-court technology and virtual hearing capabilities to better support all types of court hearings (in-person, virtual and hybrid).
4. Collaborate with Court Services Victoria to improve data infrastructure and analytical capabilities.
5. Create a learning and development strategy to uplift digital capabilities across the Court and ensure existing technology is used effectively to support judicial officers, court hearings and court users.
6. Explore new case management system (CMS) technologies in collaboration with other courts to ensure the next generation CMS is fit for purpose and enables deeper integration across the court system.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- Digital tools and processes are used effectively by judicial officers, staff and court users.
- The Court's digital suite provides the most efficient and effective service possible.
- Virtual hearings operate seamlessly, improving our accessibility for court users and the community.
- The Court has a digital roadmap that describes how we will take pragmatic and cost-effective steps toward a more effective digital future.

PILLAR FOUR

Strengthen our positive working culture

SUMMARY

We will continue to foster an environment where the wellbeing of judicial officers and staff is always prioritised, and everyone is supported to do their best work.

OUR PRIORITIES

1. Review and improve the Court's recruitment, onboarding and induction processes for judicial officers and staff, drawing upon the diverse experiences of our people, to ensure those joining our workforce feel welcome and well prepared for their new role.
2. Fully implement recommendations from the recent reviews into sexual harassment at the courts, in order to prevent sexual harassment, improve reporting, support those who experience sexual harassment, and ensure accountability.
3. Working with Court Services Victoria, develop and implement a People, Culture and Wellbeing strategy that promotes and builds upon positive behaviours and performance, and identifies and addresses bullying and other negative workplace behaviours.
4. Refine processes to ensure mental health and wellbeing challenges, including vicarious trauma, are identified early and that evidence-based interventions are put in place for both judicial officers and staff.
5. Invest in attracting talent and developing emerging leaders to ensure the Court remains an inspiring and meaningful place to work.
6. Develop a flexible workplace policy, to define new hybrid work practices that balance flexibility with the need to provide in-person services and build high-performing teams.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- Everyone feels safe, included, and that their wellbeing is supported.
- Hybrid working practices are established and enable both high performance and effective court services.
- We have best-practice systems that reduce vicarious trauma and quickly address negative workplace behaviours.
- We are an employer of choice, and can attract and retain the skills we need.

PILLAR FIVE

Secure the sustainability of the Court

SUMMARY

We will work to ensure fair and timely justice by deploying our resources efficiently, while advocating for the additional resources needed to address growing demand for our services.

OUR PRIORITIES

1. Collaborate across the criminal justice system to address the unprecedented number of pending criminal trials (caused by the suspension of jury trials during COVID-19 lockdowns) as quickly as possible.
2. Embed and expand our use of active case management to support faster resolutions.
3. Develop and make our case for sufficient judicial officers and support staff, so that we can meet growing demand for court services.
4. Participate in cross-jurisdictional work to improve the Melbourne courts precinct and statewide court infrastructure, to ensure that all court environments are safe and accessible for everyone, everywhere, and can accommodate increases in demand for court services.
5. Enhance data and knowledge sharing across the courts, and with our service partners, to learn more about demand and the impact of system change or government investment.
6. Identify and develop joint funding initiatives with other courts and justice agencies to achieve shared goals or solve shared problems.
7. Continue to engage with government on the likely impact of proposed law reforms, so those reforms can be both effective and efficient.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- The number of pending criminal jury trials and pending civil matters has returned to the historical average, and the Court has sufficient resources to meet growing demand for its services.
- The Court has a detailed and evidence-based plan for how to meet future demand for:
 - Additional judicial officers and staff
 - Court infrastructure that takes account of the broader infrastructure needs of the CBD court precinct

HOW WE WILL DELIVER

The Court will identify strategic projects and initiatives to achieve the five pillars over the next three years, and will expand upon them in an annual court plan. Each year of *Court Directions 2023–26* will have a different focus, building upon the strength and success of the years prior. Our focus is on growth – growth of the Court’s systems and processes, growth of our people, and how we contribute to, and influence, growth within the system to improve justice outcomes.

2023

EMBED EXISTING SUCCESS

We will finalise initiatives commenced under the previous *Court Directions*, and assess our performance, ensuring the progress made is understood and that those successes are embedded.

2024

BUILD UPON SUCCESSES

We will commence a range of new initiatives based on our understanding of what worked before and what we need to do to deliver *Court Directions 2023–26*.

2025

INNOVATE TO IMPROVE

By actively monitoring the success of the initiatives underway, we will know what is working and what requires more focus, and we will make any adjustments needed to ensure the aspirations for improvement in *Court Directions 2023–26* can be achieved.



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