Evaluating the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Yarra

2007–2009
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Achieving effective justice

Successfully piloted the first community justice centre in Australia

• Established a vibrant, community court and neighbourhood centre in Collingwood, in the City of Yarra.
• The Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC) is seen as a community asset by residents, with over 11,000 people contacting the Centre in its first year.

Reduced re-offending

• Recidivism rates reduced from 41% down to 34% – a drop of 7%.
• In comparison to offenders from other courts (with the same profile), NJC offenders were 14% less likely to re-offend.

Increased offender compliance and community work

• At the NJC, the completion rate for Community Based Orders is 75% compared with a statewide average of 65%.
• For the NJC, offenders completed 105 hours of unpaid community work on average, compared with a statewide average of 68 hours.

Achieved value for money

• Benefit-cost modelling showed that for every $1 invested in the Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC), the expected return would range between $1.09 and $2.23.
• Every $1 the NJC invested in community projects attracted $5.66 from other agencies.

Improved users’ experience of the justice system

• NJC clients report very high levels of satisfaction with their experience of the NJC, compared to other courts.
• NJC court users show greater confidence in the justice system than at other courts.

Crime reduction

• Since the establishment of the NJC, the crime rate in Yarra has reduced by 12%. Residential burglaries are down 26%, motor vehicle theft is down 38% and other (mainly commercial) burglaries are down 20%.

Results from the evaluation of the Neighbourhood Justice Centre, March 2007 – 30 June 2009.
1. Introduction

There are only about 20 neighbourhood or community justice centres around the world and what we have in Yarra, in inner Melbourne, is the first in Australia.

By definition, as a decentralised initiative, community justice centres operate at a neighbourhood level.

Local people become involved in the justice process and with onsite client services available, the focus is very much on quality of life in the community.

The Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC) in Yarra was established in January 2007.

Its aim is to provide new and innovative ways of dealing with crime and other forms of social disorder, disadvantage and conflict in the local area.

The NJC works to create a more integrated, responsive and accessible justice system by engaging with the local community and addressing the underlying causes of offending.

The NJC is located in a purpose-built site in the suburb of Collingwood, within the City of Yarra. The Centre offers a range of justice and social services including:

- Magistrates’ Court of Victoria with jurisdiction to hear criminal offences, Children’s Court matters, and minor civil matters involving residents of the City of Yarra.
- Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) dealing with residential tenancy and guardianship matters and a range of other civil disputes.
- Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal.
- Client Services team that provides assessment, treatment and referral services to persons referred through the Centre’s justice processes as well as self referrals by residents of the City of Yarra.

In addition, a variety of justice and social service agencies have staff located at the Centre. These agencies provide their services in an integrated and coordinated fashion within a framework of therapeutic jurisprudence.

Active and positive community engagement is an essential element of the NJC and this includes being serious about:

- Increasing community participation in the justice system
- Engaging the community in crime prevention
- Generally contributing to community development in the City of Yarra.
2. Six major goals to achieve

The overall goals of the NJC are:

1. Increase the participation of the community in the justice system.

2. Increase offender accountability and improve justice outcomes by decreasing the rates at which criminal court orders are breached.

3. Improve community outcomes in response to identified needs.

4. Improve community outcomes in the administration of justice in the City of Yarra by improving the confidence of participants, including victims, defendants, applicants, witnesses and the local community, in the justice system.

5. Improve the administration of justice for NJC court participants.

6. Modernise Courts by contributing to cultural and procedural change in the justice system.

Goal 1: Increase the participation of the community in the justice system

Participation of the community is two way.
- It involves the NJC reaching out and getting involved with other agencies in the City of Yarra.
- It involves people in Yarra using NJC services, plus local people contributing to NJC activities.

To address participation questions a survey of NJC stakeholders (including NJC staff members), was conducted over the course of the evaluation.

Respondents to the survey were asked to rate their satisfaction with the:
- Opportunities created by the NJC for community participation
- Opportunities that community members have to influence the NJC
- The work of the NJC in engaging the community in local justice issues.

The results are shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Stakeholder survey results](image-url)
The extent to which people in the City of Yarra know about the NJC and use its services on their own initiative, are direct measures of community participation.

- Over 11,000 people contacted the Centre in its first year
- Residents and agencies make 100 bookings of the Centre’s facilities each month
- 112 visitors tour the Centre each month.

A social survey conducted in each of the three years of the evaluation showed that the proportion of respondents who had heard of the NJC increased from a little over a quarter (28%) of respondents in the first two years to a third (34%) in the final survey year.

As an example of local people getting involved, there is the Community Justice Advisory Group (CJAG), which meets monthly to advise on the NJC’s strategic direction and decision making.

Goal 2: Increase offender accountability and improve justice outcomes by decreasing the rates at which criminal court orders are breached

Two types of criminal court orders:

**The Community Based Order (CBO); and the Intensive Corrections Order (ICO).**

For more effective local justice, the NJC works to reduce court order breaches by identifying and responding to the problems encountered by offenders.
The NJC also aims to resolve any compliance issues that arise during the course of an order. Often complex matters are involved. Results depend on the efforts of many staff at the NJC including people within Community Correctional Services (CCS), Client Services and the Court. CCS works as part of an integrated team at the Centre, with support from a range of multidisciplinary professionals.

The Client Services team at NJC includes specialists in mental health, drug and alcohol problems, Koori justice, general counselling and casework management. In addition, Client Services is supported by service agencies with expertise in victim support, housing, chaplaincy, youth justice, employment and financial issues.

The Client Services team receives 20 to 30 new referrals each month.

CBO compliance rates have been rising steadily since the NJC was established.

In the period September 2008 to August 2009 the successful completion rate at the NJC was around ten percentage points higher than the rate for all CBOs statewide (75.4% compared with 65.2%).

Taken over the longer term, compliance rates for ICOs at the NJC have generally been equal to or slightly better than the statewide compliance rate.

“The lawyer, corrections officer and psychologist assigned to my case from my point of view have not only been professional but exceptionally honest and well-spirited people.”

NJC Client
Goal 3: Improve community outcomes in response to identified needs

For goal 3, the evaluation team specifically looked at community work hours contracted and completed by Community Correctional Services (CCS) offenders at the NJC.

In the period July 2008 to June 2009, offenders supervised at the NJC contracted to do a total of 13,147 hours of unpaid community work, and completed 11,521 of those hours: a completion rate of 88%.

Offenders at the NJC completed an average of 105 hours of unpaid community work in the 2008/09 year, compared with a statewide average of 68 hours (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services, 2009).

Also related to goal 3, the NJC helps resolve local justice issues:

- Through mediation work conducted by staff from the Dispute Settlement Centre who are based at the NJC
- With work on community development projects in the City of Yarra
- In partnership with the City of Yarra and Victoria Police, through a range of crime prevention projects under the general umbrella of Yarra Local Solutions. Example projects include:
  - Business Security Kits (advice to businesses in the City of Yarra about how to protect themselves and their customers against common forms of crime)
  - Park Smarter (advising motorists on how to avoid or prevent thefts from cars)
  - Driver education program for young refugees
  - Richmond Roundtable (responding to crime and safety issues on the Richmond Housing Estate).
Goal 4: Improve community outcomes in the administration of justice in the City of Yarra by improving the confidence of participants, including victims, defendants, applicants, witnesses and the local community, in the justice system.

Levels of confidence in justice administration were measured through a survey of court users at the NJC and two comparison venues. An annual social survey also examined general attitudes towards crime, safety and the justice system across the City of Yarra.

NJC court users have very high levels of satisfaction across a range of measures of court performance, as shown in Figures 2 and 3 on page 7.

Traditionally, many court processes are handled by the professionals – magistrate, lawyers, police. The parties most affected – defendants, victims, applicants and respondents – often play little direct part.

In this regard, the NJC is different. There is much more involvement by people such as defendants and victims. This indicates that these parties have much more confidence in the system.
A I understood what happened in my case
B I know what I should do next in my case
C The magistrate listened to all sides
D The magistrate had the information he/she needed
E The hearing was fair
F Both sides at the hearing were treated the same
G Whilst in court, I was treated with courtesy and respect
H I am satisfied with my experience at the court
I The outcome of my case was favourable to me

Figure 3: Mean scores for survey ratings (2)
NJC respondents
(1 = very satisfied, 4 = very dissatisfied)

A I understood what happened in my case
B I know what I should do next in my case
C The magistrate listened to all sides
D The magistrate had the information he/she needed
E The hearing was fair
F Both sides at the hearing were treated the same
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I The outcome of my case was favourable to me
Goal 5: Improve the administration of justice for NJC court participants

In order to respond to what clients need, courts require appropriate advice. Such advice may mean that clients need to receive different types of support, as well as specialised assessments.

The court observation study showed that NJC criminal court proceedings were much more likely to involve “other parties” (that is, parties other than the defendant, applicant or respondent, defence lawyers and prosecution). The Neighbourhood Justice Officer was present in nearly 80% of all criminal matters at the NJC, and there were also 27 “other parties” at cases observed at the NJC (an average of 0.38 per case). These figures compare with 8 “other parties” at the comparison venues (an average of 0.08 per case).

Cases at the NJC were more likely to involve reports being provided to the court. Reports were provided in 62% of criminal matters at the NJC, compared with 28% of criminal matters at the comparison venues. There was also greater involvement by respondents in VCAT residential tenancy matters at the NJC.

Under goal 5, there was also an objective to increase perceptions of court fairness, respectful treatment, and responsiveness to individuals within the NJC. Figure 4 shows the relevant findings.

If all the other courts were run like the NJC a lot of people’s lives would be a lot different and a lot would have more help in their life to move on. Thanks to the NJC my life has turned around.

NJC Client
Goal 6: Modernise Courts by contributing to cultural and procedural change in the justice system.

There are areas of the NJC’s operations and processes that represent important contributions to cultural and procedural change in the justice system.

The NJC has incorporated community engagement into its operations to an extent unprecedented in Victorian courts. The Centre’s community partnerships help to contribute to the confidence of the community in the justice system. Moreover, stakeholders view these partnerships positively.

The Centre’s client services model is unique as it provides services to the local community, as well as clients referred through the justice system. Clients view these services positively, and feel that they have more chance of getting the help they need.

Non-adversarial and therapeutic jurisprudence approaches are an increasingly important element in the work of Victorian courts. The jurisprudential practices and systems at the NJC represent a significant contribution to this trend.
3. Major goals for the future

Future goal 1: Increase community safety by contributing to the reduction of crime in the City of Yarra.

The number of recorded crimes within Yarra for the offences identified as specific targets for the NJC declined in the two years after the establishment of the NJC.

Comparing crime rates in Yarra for the two years prior to the establishment of the NJC (2004/05 and 2005/06) with the two years after (2007/08 and 2008/09).

- Residential burglaries fell by 26%
- Other (mainly commercial) burglaries fell by 20%
- Motor vehicle theft fell by 38%.

However, with some crime rates also falling in other areas, it is difficult to measure precisely how much of the fall can be attributed to the NJC.

Future goal 2: Increase offender accountability and improve justice outcomes by reducing the re-offending rates of participants.

Re-offending was measured for a sample of 100 offenders who had been sentenced by the NJC and who had received some form of intervention from NJC Client Services.

The results obtained were compared with outcomes for a sample of 200 offenders sentenced at other courts.

The re-offending histories of both groups were followed-up for around 18 months.

- Just over one-third (34%) of the NJC group was convicted of a further offence during this period, compared with 41% of the comparison group.
- The NJC group were 14% less likely to reoffend than the comparison group.

While these figures look positive, measurement of re-offending is complex and taking all factors into account requires care, judgement and a long-term view.
I have a young client with multiple, complex needs. He had a range of charges in various courts, but these were transferred to the NJC and we consolidated the charges, some of which had been around for a long time. I saw him improve over a 6–8 month period.

The magistrate deferred his sentence. This allowed us to prioritise his needs. In other courts, inevitably he would just have been processed and imprisoned.

At this time my client didn’t engage well with services. He was resistant. He was willing to talk but not to follow through.

During his deferral he had a problem solving meeting. The experience of having so many people around the table, all trying to help him and work with him, rather than telling him what to do, had a real impact. This was profound for him. He realised that maybe there was something he could do to change his situation. From memory he said, ‘I’ve never had so many people put so much into me’.

He was sentenced to a CBO. My client always interacted with the magistrate in court and was honest, but now you can see that there’s trust and a relationship there between my client and the magistrate. They have a real conversation now. There’s a recognition that the magistrate is not just there to punish him, but is pleased to see him doing well.

He has worked a lot with the Mental Health Worker. He supported him through seeking medical treatment. He’s much more stable now. Despite a recent medical diagnosis he has kept it together. Before he would have fallen apart.

He’s proactive and motivated now. He wants to engage with the financial counsellor now to do some family financial planning. He’s a devoted dad and recognises the need for structure in his life with time for his kids and partner. This is a big change as previously his life was in chaos. He’s sustained his improvements.

It’s nice to see people effect change with enough support. We may have broken the wheel that he’s been on. That’s what’s great about the NJC. You can get clients the help they need. What’s significant is seeing his progress over a period of time and his increased level of maturity. I get to see this progress through the CBO review process, which is unique to the NJC. At other courts my involvement ends post sentencing.

*Story told by NJC worker*
4. Evaluating community engagement

Active and positive community engagement is an essential element of the NJC.

The goals set for the NJC highlight the importance of community engagement and include:

- Increasing community participation in the justice system
- Engaging the community in crime prevention
- Generally contributing to community development in the City of Yarra.

Central to the idea of community engagement is the development of partnerships between the NJC and local and state government agencies, service providers, schools, local traders, residents and community groups.

In this regard the NJC has been particularly successful for there are more than 60 community partnerships and projects that the NJC has participated in, supported or instigated.
The client services systems at the NJC emphasise intensive clinical engagement with clients, and the provision of services to the local community rather than just to offenders referred from the justice system. Self referrals are a unique feature of the NJC Client Services model. Again, the NJC model represents one of a range of client services approaches in Victorian courts.

One of the core features of the NJC is the provision of a “one-stop” integrated service response to court users and the City of Yarra community. This “one-stop shop” is achieved, at least in part, by having a very broad range of justice and service agencies present at the NJC or directly connected to the NJC. Some of the organisations that the NJC works with are listed in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agencies on-site</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Police</td>
<td>Prosecution services</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Solutions Crime Prevention Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legal Aid Victoria</td>
<td>Legal services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fitzroy Legal Service</td>
<td>Legal services</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partnership in community legal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Correctional Services</td>
<td>Offender supervision and case management</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community work on a range of Yarra based partner organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Justice Victoria</td>
<td>Support for young offenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria</td>
<td>Mediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Association for the Care and Re-settlement of Offenders</td>
<td>Post-release support for prisoners and support for families and children of offenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Network</td>
<td>Support for people attending court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>Chaplain and material Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brotherhood of St Laurence</td>
<td>Vocational guidance and support to clients and residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlton &amp; Fitzroy Financial Counselling Service</td>
<td>Financial advice and assistance on financial planning and consumer rights matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeground Inc</td>
<td>Housing Information and Referral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Yarra Community Health</td>
<td>Casework and counselling service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odyssey House Victoria</td>
<td>Support for clients with drug and alcohol dependency</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Vincent’s Health</td>
<td>Mental Health assessment and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merri Community Health Services</td>
<td>Victims Assistance &amp; Counselling Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House</td>
<td>Just Delights Kiosk</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Art Rotating Exhibitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berry Street</td>
<td>Assistance to women and children escaping family violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hope Foundation</td>
<td>Casework and settlement advice for newly arrived refugees and migrants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglicare</td>
<td>Young Adult Restorative Justice Group Conferencing Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission</td>
<td>Indigenous complaints and education</td>
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The Neighbourhood Justice Centre is committed to repairing the harm caused by criminal behaviour in our community and helping victims – and people close to victims – to manage and recover from the effects of crime.

The NJC has dedicated services for victims of crime, including:

- the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program
- an Applicant Support worker for family violence issues
- advice on Family Court issues
- access to Client Services, which provides victims with a comprehensive range of services, from counselling and housing support to assistance with legal and financial issues
- support services for newly arrived and refugee victims of trauma
- community education programs on victims’ issues
- interpreter assistance for family violence matters.

The Young Adult Restorative Justice Group Conferencing Program is the only program of its kind in Victoria. It brings together victims, as well as their family and supporters, with young adult offenders, in a safe and controlled environment to decide how to repair the harm caused by the young adult’s offending. The emphasis is on allowing everyone to talk about the impact of the offending, supporting victims to recover from the aftermath of the offence and holding the young offender accountable for the impact of their actions.

The NJC Court is also a venue of the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal, which hears claims for financial assistance from victims of crime.

A building designed for victims’ needs

The NJC building has been designed with victims’ needs in mind. It gives individual victims greater privacy and an increased sense of safety, including:

- a separate entrance to the building for use by victims so they don’t have to come into contact with offenders
- a secure waiting lounge and counselling area for victims, including a safe play area for children
- a remote camera link to the court so victims can give testimony remotely
- a courtroom that is welcoming and comfortable.
While community members are able to access NJC services directly without having to be a court client, it remains the case that at least 90% of NJC’s client work is derived directly from the operations of the courts or tribunals located at the Centre.

To anyone familiar with the large, multi-court room Magistrates’ Courts that have been built over the past two decades, the court at the NJC presents some striking contrasts.

The court, located on the first floor of the Centre, is marked by its space, light and openness. The court room is well fitted out with good seating for both participants and observers. Beside the court is a spacious foyer area with interview rooms and a small outside deck. There is also a small kiosk.

**The same or different?**

At first glance, when the court is sitting it looks very similar to many courts with a bar table before a ‘bench’ for the Magistrate. However, important differences include the fact that there is a large flat screen television outside the court on which matters proceeding in court can be viewed; and in criminal matters defendants sit beside their lawyer.

Another critical difference is the presence of the Neighbourhood Justice Officer who provides an additional resource. This officer assists in the smooth running of the court by providing a link between the court and service agencies and runs problem solving processes. The Neighbourhood Justice Officer can liaise with parties, before and after a matter, to offer help.

The integrated nature of services and justice agencies also benefits the workings of the court.
At the NJC, disruptions are kept to a minimum. In other courts disruptions can occur where parties attend at the wrong time or are late, or there is a need for further information from service providers. However, at the NJC, the magistrate can hold matters over knowing that Victoria Legal Aid solicitors and police prosecutors are located on the next floor, or that the author of a court report is likely to be in the building should further information be required.

One magistrate only

The NJC court is different from most urban courts where there are usually a number of magistrates sitting. The fact that at the NJC there is only one magistrate sitting, enables those appearing to develop professional relationships with the magistrate.

One of the features of the NJC over the three years of its existence is that the professional participants in the court process have been a relatively small and stable group enabling the magistrate to gain deeper understandings of the challenges and abilities of those assisting the court.

While the court can be busy, especially in its general criminal jurisdiction lists, the court room is not characterised by a sense of production line processes. The court is rarely full with often just those appearing in the immediate matter in the courtroom. The court is usually able to proceed in a quiet and effective manner taking the necessary time to manage affairs.
In addition to the usual work of a court, the NJC court incorporates an active review process for those undertaking community based orders. One of the conditions of such orders is that the defendant returns to court regularly to report on progress. When conducting these reviews, the magistrate usually sits at the bar table with all the other participants.

One observer noted that the “... magistrate’s proximity to the offender helps create the sense that the magistrate is supportive of the offender and is just another participant (no more or less powerful than any others) in the process.”

Those working in the court have commented on how different it is from working in other courts. This is true of prosecutors, defence counsel, and visiting judicial officers. The differences include the lower volume of work at the NJC, the better physical environment and resources at the NJC, but also the relationships between those working at the NJC.

**Court work**

While the court has many jurisdictional hats, most of its activity revolves around the general criminal list, crimes (family violence) list and residential tenancies matters (as VCAT).

Additional streams of court work in 2008/09, include:

- Applications for Intervention Orders (273 applications, of which 238 were finalised).
- Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) applications. There were 81 VOCAT applications in the year, of which 49 were finalised.
- Children’s Court. There were 54 matters of which 23 were finalised.
- VCAT civil claims list. There were 78 matters during 2008/09.
- Guardianship and administration matters. This is also a VCAT jurisdiction, and there were 86 matters of this nature in the year.
From the beginning, there has been a continued growth in the number of criminal cases being heard at the NJC. For the first six months, from February 2007, the average was around 160 per month. In the year to June 2009 the total number of such matters was 2,550 – a monthly average of 212 matters.

The NJC court sits as a venue of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), and the second largest component of the work of the NJC court is residential tenancies matters. The majority of residential tenancies matters involve public housing tenants, where the Director of Housing is the applicant. Nearly two in three VCAT matters heard at the NJC fall into this category. The properties that give rise to these disputes are mainly in Collingwood, and 85% of Collingwood matters involve public housing.

The court processes of the NJC are not uniform. Much of the work of the court is little different to what takes place in other Magistrates Court locations in Victoria or in other VCAT locations. However the NJC does differ from other courts and tribunals in two major ways.

• The first is the court environment is radically different from almost any other court in its physical environment and atmosphere as described earlier.
• The second difference is broadening the focus of the court from the nature of the offence to the causes of offending.

Traditionally criminal justice systems and criminal courts have always focused on the nature of the offence. The therapeutic or problem-solving court approach, so explicit at the NJC, means that greater emphasis is given to the causes of offending. It recognises that in some situations, a minor offence, may be symptomatic of significant underlying personal difficulties warranting some form of therapeutic intervention.

![Figure 7: Offences dealt with at the NJC: 2008/09](image)
One of the primary goals set for the NJC was to improve the experience of the justice system for participants. It is obvious, therefore, that a vitally important perspective on the work of the NJC is provided by those who are users of the Centre’s services.

The evaluation included a survey of court users at the NJC and at two comparison sites from May to August 2009.

Of the 117 NJC respondents, 42% appeared before the Magistrate while 64% reported contact with a lawyer.

Respondents also saw:

- The Neighbourhood Justice Officer (20%)
- Community Correctional Services (13%)
- Counsellors (11%)
- An Alcohol and Other Drug or Mental Health Clinician (9%).

On average, there were 1.6 contacts per respondent – meaning that the majority of persons undertaking the survey accessed more than one person or service whilst at the NJC.

Nearly half of the respondents reported being “regular” users of the NJC or attending “several times a year”, whereas only 12% reported such common use at comparison sites.

Of course, the comparison sites did not have the same range of services available and respondent contacts were limited to a lawyer, the Magistrate or Court Network.

Overwhelmingly, respondents reported the most positive aspects of the NJC as being its:

- Location
- Accessibility
- Friendly, safe atmosphere.

‘I was very impressed with the proceedings at NJC. I felt heard and supported in every way and the staff I dealt with were unfailingly polite, friendly and very helpful. I think this kind of court is a fantastic community facility.’

NJC Client

The survey also found that staff members were seen as courteous, respectful, friendly and responsive.
Respondents also frequently commented on the architecture and layout of the NJC, being most impressed by its ‘clean [and] orderly condition’, the ‘modern, bright environment’ and its ‘open plan’ dimension.

One respondent commented, ‘The set out of the building is more user-friendly. Natural light and the outdoor seating area make the court much more comfortable’.

Some also highlighted the low profile of police as a good thing making for a more relaxed environment. For one respondent, contact with police at the NJC was seen as ‘fantastic’ and ‘respectful’.

Negative issues raised by few respondents centred mainly on court waiting time, parking and transport to the NJC.

Users were especially happy with the treatment they received from the Client Services area of the NJC as Figure 8 confirms.

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“People receive all the help they need including caring support workers and counselling.”

NJC Client

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**Figure 8: Satisfaction with Client Services treatment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>How satisfied were you with the help you received?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Did NJC staff listen to you AND give you adequate say over how your needs should be met?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Do you feel that staff treated you respectfully and fairly?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
During June or July of each of the three years of the evaluation (2007, 2008, 2009), a community survey was conducted with responses obtained each time from about 400 people within Yarra.

In general terms the profile of the survey respondents accurately reflected the profile of the NJC neighbourhood.

It is notable that there was an increase in the complexity and accuracy of role descriptions for the NJC by respondents over the three years of the survey.

In the first year many of the descriptions of the NJC’s role were sketchy (“assists people who are in need of help”) or inaccurate (“like a Neighbourhood Watch program”). However, by the third year there were many respondents who provided more detailed accounts of the Centre’s role.

Role descriptions in the final year of the survey covered more elements of the NJC role (“mediation”, “court services”, “legal advocacy”, “somewhere for abused women”, and “working with young people”, “therapeutic justice”) and some reflected a more detailed understanding of the different elements of the NJC.

Some of the main findings of the community survey can be summarised as follows:

• Yarra residents generally see themselves as safe, with crime diminishing as a local problem over the three years of the survey. Where crime and safety is identified as a problem, it is partly a local problem (household burglaries) and partly associated with being out at night, especially on public transport.

• Knowledge about the NJC has increased within Yarra since 2007. The proportion of respondents who had heard of the NJC rose across the three years of the survey, from a little over a quarter (28%) of respondents in the first two years to a third (34%) in the final survey year. When asked about the role of the NJC, respondents in 2009 were able to provide more accurate and more detailed descriptions than in 2007.

• In general, people in Yarra hold positive or strongly positive views about the police and the courts.

• Knowledge of the NJC appears to be strongly influenced by geographic proximity. Respondents who lived near the NJC, or who worked nearby were more likely to know about the Centre.
The economic component of this evaluation, in terms of benefit-cost analysis, was carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers. It very carefully documents the quantitative benefits and costs of the NJC court.

While there were certainly limitations to the benefit-cost analysis, due mainly to the unavailability of appropriate data, the main measures of cost-effectiveness that the evaluators examined were:

- Changes in re-offending
- Changes in the number of offences and severity of re-offending
- Community Correctional Order completion
- Breaches of intervention orders
- Differences in sentencing outcomes
- Increases in guilty pleas at the first hearing
- Increased community-work hours completed.

To measure the NJC’s cost effectiveness and efficiency, the following annual costs were used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2006–07 ($)</th>
<th>2007–08 ($)</th>
<th>2008–09 ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>3,375,000</td>
<td>5,255,000</td>
<td>5,410,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The benefits or avoided costs for the NJC were then summed and modelled against these costs.

The key outcomes of the benefit-cost modelling over the two years 2007–08 and 2008–09, include:

- A positive net benefit for all the scenarios of changes in re-offending behaviour – ranging from $201,002 to $2,805,853 – for five years to a lifetime (49 years)
- For $1 invested in the activities considered, the return would be expected to range between $1.09 and $2.23.

The results of the benefit-cost analysis as presented in the following graph illustrate the cumulative benefits associated with a reduction in re-offending behaviour. Clearly, the benefits associated with the NJC continue to accrue over time, as a reduction in re-offending can have a positive impact throughout the person’s lifetime.
In looking to the future there are major lessons that stand out for decision makers as they consider options for expansion and contemplate adopting the NJC approach.

1. One magistrate

The concept of having one magistrate is central to the NJC model. Having one magistrate provides a sense of familiarity and stability to the work of the court, and helps to develop collaborative working relationships.

A single magistrate also limits the volume of work that can go through the court, which is in turn important to the idea of local justice. The work generated by a single magistrate at the NJC is sufficient to keep a large Client Services team fully engaged.

2. Neighbourhood Justice Officer

Another important component in the NJC model is the Neighbourhood Justice Officer. This is one of the genuinely novel procedural features of the NJC. This position contributes to the open, inclusive nature of court proceedings at the NJC, and should continue to be a key element in this model.

3. Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR)

The NJC provides ADR through:

- mediation and advice to help resolve local disputes
- mediation for both civil and criminal matters
- workshops and training to increase people’s skills in resolving conflict
- restorative justice group conferencing to assist in healing the harm caused by crime
- all staff skilled in conflict resolution.

ADR is a key element of the NJC model and should continue to expand. It benefits local communities by allowing disputes to be resolved more quickly and cheaply, without having to go to court. Restorative justice also helps to meet the needs of victims of crime.
4. Partnerships

Community engagement at the NJC has rested on the involvement of the Centre in a series of productive partnerships with residents’ groups and community agencies.

There is a large network of established agencies with which partnerships can be established. However, this situation will not necessarily apply to other sites where the level of social disadvantage might invite the establishment of a community court. A precondition for successful community engagement must be the existence of services and agencies with which to partner, or a long term investment in community development.

5. Working with the community

The NJC has achieved high levels of community engagement with diverse groups in Yarra. In addition, the NJC has built a strong presence in community development and cultural activities in Yarra.

A common theme in stakeholder perceptions about community engagement is that it could extend further beyond the “traditional” clients of the justice system. In other words, businesses and the more affluent members of the community could be more involved in the Centre’s networks or partnership arrangements.

For community engagement to be comprehensive it must involve connections with all elements. In future, the Centre will be looking for more ways to include people in positions of advantage, for the benefit of the disadvantaged.
6. Crime prevention

Crime prevention is one of the key goals of the NJC model. Many of the NJC partnerships are involved in work that has crime prevention aims. Therefore, an important consideration in any replication of the NJC model should be the existence of local support for crime prevention initiatives.

7. Community advice

The NJC has a Community Justice Advisory Group (CJAG), made up of local residents, agencies and the business community. The group helps the Centre with its strategic directions and recruitment. It also runs a number of projects that help the community to understand justice.

The CJAG is a vital and lively element of the Centre. It helps keep the Centre relevant to residents and it advises the Centre about crime and safety issues in Yarra. Robust community advice should continue to be a feature of a modern justice system.

8. A building that works for the community

‘The way the building is designed makes for a calm environment to deal with quite tense issues’.

‘The set out of the building is more user-friendly. Natural light and the outdoor seating area make the court much more comfortable’.

NJC Court Users

The design of a justice facility can have a strong impact on the confidence of court users. The NJC building was designed to be calming, flexible and user-friendly and took community needs into account. Yarra residents and groups have embraced the NJC building as a community facility, and Centre users have given consistently favourable feedback on the building’s design. Similar design principles should be followed in future.
Before the NJC, I had been working in the employment field, primarily in mental health. One of my frustrations was the time it would take for my clients to be seen by the other services. This often meant that the crisis facing my client was not dealt with in a timely manner, resulting in the possible escalation of the problem, or a chance missed. This was trying for me and the client, not least because of the vulnerability of the group I was working with, who were putting trust in me to support them to move forward with their lives.

When I started work at the NJC, I was struck by the degree of diversity and specialisation that existed under one roof. It amazes me how quick and easy it is for me to refer my clients to other services. It is extremely gratifying to see the relief in the faces of clients who see their issues are being taken seriously and support is provided promptly.

For example, I was referred a client by the financial counsellor. I was able to see the client shortly after referral where we identified a training course to enhance his employment prospects. With registry’s help we were able to have the required documents certified and statutory declarations signed. Thus a speedy application was made and the client successfully enrolled in the course.

My client also disclosed some mental health issues and I was able to refer him to the psychologist for assessment. My client was seen shortly after referral. The Salvation Army also supported him with material aid.

This client has recently secured full time work. This is a big step for those who have been out of the workforce for sometime. Often there are many barriers to address, not least those resulting from loss of confidence and self-esteem. If issues such as mental health, drug and alcohol problems, homelessness, debt and so forth can be addressed alongside the vocational process, then the client will have a more realistic chance of entering and sustaining employment and/or education.

Had my client not received such timely interventions the outcome may well have been different. I believe the ‘one stop shop’ that is the NJC can play a pivotal role in supporting people to move forward with their lives.
A team of researchers from the University of Melbourne, Flinders University, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Social Research Centre and PricewaterhouseCoopers conducted the evaluation of the Neighbourhood Justice Centre. The evaluation covers the pilot period for the NJC, from March 2007 - 30 June 2009.

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