

NSW Justices Association Annual Conference 2010

Delivered by the Attorney General at Liverpool Catholic Club, Saturday 24 July 2010

Firstly, may I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, it's a great pleasure to be here, at this very important event.

This NSW Justices Association's Annual Conference is about coming together, to listen and learn and to strengthen the connections within the JP community.

And there is one other important purpose, in my view the most important – to honour the dedication and selfless service of the thousands of JP's across NSW.

The Liverpool Branch of the Association should be congratulated for hosting this event.

Role and history of JPs

Without doubt, the office of the Justice of the Peace has a rich history.

In fact, I'm told it dates back to at least the fourteenth century!

During their history, JPs have had the authority to control police, oversee corporeal punishment, license ale-houses and even impose imprisonment.

As such, I suspect there may be some JPs here today who long for a return to those heady days!

Nevertheless, the role of a JP in NSW today remains one that is highly regarded.

JPs are essential to many aspects of community life, including the efficient functioning of our legal system.

It's difficult to estimate the number of JP services provided every year in NSW.

However, a telephone survey of JPs by my Department found that 16 per cent of JPs provide their services every day of the week.

If correct, that figure alone points to over five million JP transactions every year. Now that's an incredible figure!

Clearly the NSW Justices Association has played an important role in supporting JPs to do that work, and I am constantly impressed by the initiatives of the Association.

These include coordinating JP desks at convenient locations, training and advising members, and even producing merchandise which helps JPs to perform their duties.

To support this work, we have made it a priority in Government to do what we can to make the life of the JP as easy as possible.

Recent initiatives

Code of Conduct

As you would all be aware, we recently introduced a new Code of Conduct for JPs.

The Code of Conduct was developed in consultation with the Association, to establish acceptable standards of conduct for JPs, in line with current community standards.

The code has not only clarified standards for JPs who are uncertain of their obligations, but has also been useful for members of the public who may be unsure of what to expect when seeking the services of a JP.

New guidelines

In addition, we also recently issued a new set of guidelines for the appointment and reappointment of JPs.

These guidelines cover the assessment of eligibility and good character, as well as the handling of complaints and reviews of appointments.

The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure that JP reviews are dealt with fairly and consistently and with clarity.

Moreover, the guidelines and the code work together to ensure the integrity of the office of the JP remains at its highest.

I would like to thank everyone here and the Association for your contributions in developing the new Code and for supporting it.

JP Handbook

Beyond standards of conduct, new JPs require clear guidance about how to perform their functions.

To assist with this, I have recently released the third edition of *A Handbook for JPs in NSW*.

Those of you who have downloaded a free copy from the internet will know that the Handbook has been significantly expanded.

It now addresses all the frequently-asked questions the Attorney-General's Department has received over the years.

And its new format provides more detailed, step-by-step procedures for every key duty of a JP, written in plain language.

We are very concerned to ensure that every JP has the assistance they need to perform their duties properly.

Use of technology

Turning to more administrative matters, one challenge we have is communicating with in excess of 90,000 JPs in NSW. To address this, we are now making better use of technology.

For example, JPs can now quickly update their contact details over the internet and, in addition, JPs are now sent text messages not just emails to remind them to update their details.

These small yet significant changes will help to ensure JPs receive their re-appointment reminders well in time to apply for reappointment.

Commencement of 5 year re-appointments

These changes are timely, because the 5 year terms of JPs appointed under the new JP Act introduced in 2002 have started to expire over the last 18 months and will continue to do so.

With this in mind, we have also been working to ensure that the actual process of applying for re-appointment is as simple as possible.

For example, there is no need to seek nomination of a Member of Parliament, or to attach new character references, and every JP will receive a reminder at least 3 months before the expiry of his or her appointment.

A handy new initiative just introduced is online reappointments. Going online is now the quickest and easiest way to apply for re-appointment.

Online reappointments can save up to 8 weeks processing time, and I would encourage all JPs to utilise this service.

And I'm pleased to announce that in the past 18 months, over 22,000 JPs have already been reappointed, much more efficiently than ever before.

Update of JP website

Finally, I'm pleased to tell you that the Attorney-General's Department is currently redesigning the JP website.

When completed, it will be much easier to use and will support JPs in their daily duties such as through a list of answers to frequently asked questions.

I would urge you all to regularly visit the JP website, located at www.jp.nsw.gov.au, for this assistance.

Closing remarks

The NSW Government is committed to all this and more because we recognise the invaluable role JPs perform in our community and the efficiency legal system.

For this I say thank you, and well done, and I wish you the best of luck with your conference.