

The new Parramatta Justice Precinct

By Simon Furness

A programme of building and renovating courthouses is unfolding across the state. Simon Furness from the New South Wales Attorney General's Department reports on endeavours to improve courthouse conditions for legal professionals, those they represent and all court users.

2006 is shaping up to be a big year for new court buildings. Three opening ceremonies at Bankstown, Mount Druitt and Broadmeadow is already more than any year since 1908. A fourth new building - the Children's Court at Parramatta - will start operating in November. These new buildings represent an investment of over \$80 million.

The new courthouses have all been built to the highest design standards and are equipped with the latest courtroom and security technology. They provide spacious and comfortable public areas and facilities for practitioners and clients to meet in private. They also accommodate a range of specialist justice services, and cater for the increasing trend towards alternative dispute resolution, with dedicated facilities for community justice centres.

Western Sydney, where the caseload continues to rise and existing court capacity is stretched to the limit, is a focus for much of the new development. The two new buildings at Bankstown and Mount Druitt, and a \$5 million extension onto Blacktown court, have provided eight new courtrooms in the region. The Children's Court will provide another six, and the new trial court at Parramatta will add a further nine courtrooms to the region in 2008. The completion of these projects will allow the department to attend to some long overdue improvements to Fairfield, Penrith and Parramatta. Far from being closed - as has been suggested in some quarters - these existing facilities in Western Sydney will be given a new lease of life.



For the future, the Attorney General's Department's priorities for new court facilities are Coffs Harbour, Armidale, Windsor and the South West of Sydney.

Many of the existing court buildings around the state are in dire need of improvement. Whilst many are fine heritage buildings (85 per cent of courthouses were built before 1930 and 72 per cent are considered historically significant), they lack the space and range

of amenities that today we regard as essential. Typically they were built with little or no public waiting areas or facilities for legal practitioners and other court support groups. Providing reasonable access for people with even minor mobility difficulties can be a major challenge. Older courthouses are often difficult to secure and do not conform to modern building standards.

More modern expectations in court buildings, such as safe rooms for victims of violent crime, facilities for vulnerable witnesses to give evidence from outside the courtroom, and dedicated rooms for the many public and philanthropic services have to be creatively accommodated in the limited available space. The cost to address all these issues in a heritage courthouse is often comparable with that of building a new one.

The government has allocated \$250 million over ten years for improvements to existing courthouses. Some significant projects in this programme were completed last year, including:

- ◆ an additional courtroom and associated facilities at Blacktown,

Parramatta Justice Precinct

The Parramatta Justice Precinct brings together a range of justice agencies in a highly accessible location for residents of metropolitan Sydney, effectively creating a second justice hub with the CBD. Over 550 solicitors and 100 barristers already work in the greater Parramatta region, making it the third largest legal centre in Australia. The precinct involves construction of three new justice facilities for a total investment of \$329 million. The project is well ahead of schedule.

- ◆ The Children's Court is a \$39 million investment.
- ◆ A new nine-court complex is to be built on the former Parramatta Hospital site. The project includes one court dedicated to the Parole Board. Construction will commence in 2006 and it will cost \$101 million. At this stage, it is scheduled for completion in December 2007, six months ahead of programme.
- ◆ The new office accommodation is a nine-storey building, for NSW Attorney General's Department. It includes provision for a range of client services including Births, Deaths and Marriages, Office of the Protective Commissioner and Office of the Public Guardian. The building will have a five star environmental rating, the first NSW Government facility to meet these standards. The building is scheduled for completion late September 2007, four months ahead of programme.

- ◆ improved access for people with a disability at Muswellbrook, Windsor, Kiama, Albury and Bourke,
- ◆ major improvements at Goulburn Courthouse,
- ◆ improvements to the fire safety systems at the King Street Courthouse (Supreme Court),
- ◆ airport-style perimeter security into eight court buildings, bringing the total number to 25,
- ◆ upgrades to electronic security and surveillance systems at 18 court buildings.

There are 166 operational court buildings in NSW, and fixing the problems in all of them would cost far more than the available budget. So expenditure needs to be prioritised. In the next year, \$30 million will be spent on capital improvements. The larger projects will include an extension at Nowra to accommodate an additional courtroom, and refurbishments at Albury, Fairfield, Central, Goulburn, Moree, King Street (Sydney) and Penrith. The department will also address some urgent works to improve disability access, especially in regional jury trial courts, and some alterations to accommodate the new CourtLink technology.

Looking ahead to the 2007/08 financial year, the Attorney General's Department plans to continue refurbishments at Goulburn and Central and start major renovations at Wagga Wagga, Dubbo, Bathurst, Taree and Waverley. In later years, capital investment will target Newcastle, Wollongong, Penrith, Manly, Gosford, Parramatta and jury courts in Sydney CBD.

All of the proposed renovations require detailed planning, wide consultation and innovative design to adapt historic buildings for modern use; these take considerable time to do properly. Invariably, courts need to remain fully operational during construction works, adding more time and complexity. Significant progress has already been made and it is hoped that the extensive works currently being planned will result in much improved conditions in our courthouses, especially for those whose working life depends on them.



New court buildings in 2006

- ◆ The new courthouse at Bankstown is over twice the size of its predecessor with five state-of-the-art courtrooms. The building also features a Community Justice Centre, where free mediation services are available for the resolution of civil disputes and facilities for the Magistrates' Early Referral Into Treatment Program.
- ◆ Mount Druitt did not have a court facility until 2006. The new building incorporates two courtrooms and facilities for the 'circle sentencing' program, which aims to address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody.
- ◆ Broadmeadow Children's Court, near Newcastle, is the first purpose built courthouse for children's matters, and is specially designed to provide a calm and secure environment for hearing both criminal and care matters involving children and young people. A children's clinic has been incorporated where young people can be assessed before they appear in court.
- ◆ The Parramatta Children's Court will provide a purpose built facility to handle both care and criminal matters for the greater metropolitan region of Sydney. Accommodation will consist of six multi-use children's courtrooms and facilities will include a children's clinic and children's registrar's hearing rooms. The court building is nearing completion and hearings will start there in late 2006.