

JP training to improve outcomes in court

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Providing ongoing training for Justices of the Peace will be a key step towards ensuring fair sentences are handed out in court, says the Secretary of Justice.

Tingika Elikana said he is well aware of public concern that criminals are being let off too lightly when they appear in court.

He said most of that concern seems to be directed towards Justices of the Peace (JPs), who preside over the majority of court hearings in the Cook Islands.

"I think the public are entitled to raise their concerns - that's just part of a democratic society. But at the end of the day it's the JP who sits on the bench. They sit in court and weigh up the evidence before them and reach their decision," Elikana said.

However, he agreed that there is room for improvement and said "it's an issue we're trying to address".

"I agree there's a need to have more training for the JPs, particularly in terms of assessing the evidence before them."

Training is being provided under the Pacific Judicial Development Programme, which aims to promote more effective justice systems in 14 countries within the region.

One part of the programme sees seven Cook Islands JPs attend regular mentoring sessions and training at the Manukau District Court in Auckland.

Another way of achieving better court outcomes is for police prosecutors to also have more training in their role, Elikana said.

JPs will be better able to make fair decisions if the prosecutors are presenting compelling arguments in court, he said.

Elikana's comments come as two Police Prosecutors - Senior Sergeant Maevarangi Kirikava and Prosecuting Sergeant Fairoa Tararo - participate in a three-year training programme designed to improve courtroom skills.

The pair were in Auckland at the end of January taking part in a four-day advocacy course.

There are about 40 to 50 local JPs but only about 10 of them are practising in court.

- Ben Chapman-Smith