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## **UNLESS INDICATED OTHERWISE, ALL LEGISLATION REFERRED TO IS VICTORIAN.**

## **2.1 Establishment, Role, Strategic Priorities & Purpose**

The Children's Court of Victoria ['the Court'] was most recently **established** by s.8(1) of the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989* (No.56/1989) ['CYPA'] and is continued in operation by s.504(1) of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (No.96/2005) [‘CYFA’].

The Court’s **vision** is: "Consistent access for all Victorians to a dedicated, specialist Children’s Court where cases involving children and young people are heard in safe and culturally appropriate environments."

Its **role** is described as follows: “The Children’s Court expertly and fairly applies the law in cases involving children and young people. We work closely with youth justice, legal services, child protection and other community-based services to provide a multi-disciplinary court response to address the best interests of children in need of protection. We promote the accountability and rehabilitation of young offenders and, in doing so, improve community safety.”

In a document entitled “Statement of Priorities 2022-2025”, the Court’s **strategic priorities** are summarised as follows:

1. **Implement Self Determination Plan**

* Ensure the delivery of all initiatives in the Children’s Court Self Determination Plan that sits within the CSV Self Determination Plan – Yaanadhan Manamith Yirramboi: Striving for a Better Tomorrow.
* This Plan sits across all the Court’s Strategic Priorities, ensuring that Koori self-determination underpins all aspects of the Court’s planning and operations.

1. **Improve the Court User Experience**

* Review and adapt service models based on sound evidence to meet the changing needs of Victorian families and young people.
* Undertake an evaluation of online hearings to guide future operating models.
* Explore and identify Family Violence best practices and improve Family Violence responses.
* Refresh the Children’s Koori Court Model to ensure it continues to be tailored to meet the needs of Aboriginal young people and look for opportunities for expansion to more locations across the state.
* Support the implementation of the Disability Advice and Response Team (DART), a new support service which will assist in screening for disability and referral to services to address the young person’s disability needs.
* Establish the Children’s Court Online Bail and Remand Court. [This initiative commenced on 03/09/2022 and is described in **section 2.5.3** below.]

1. **Increase the number of specialist Children’s Courts**

* Use existing and new assets to deliver high-quality Children’s Court services.
* Develop, design and deliver dedicated Children’s Courts at Bendigo and Wyndham.
* Deliver a dedicated specialist Children’s Court at Dandenong to strengthen access to justice services in Melbourne’s South-east.
* Redevelop the Moorabbin Children’s Court to improve access to Children’s Court services.
* Identify priority locations and plan for new dedicated specialist Children’s Courts.

1. **Engage with the Community**

* Explore ways to increase and improve the way the court engages with court users.
* Undertake regular court user surveys and targeted evaluations to understand and respond to court user needs.
* Make information easily available and tailored to the communication needs of court users.
* Promote better understanding of the unique role of the Children’s Court to improve public confidence in the justice system.

1. **Develop and support our people**

* Design and implement a workforce plan that ensures we have the roles and structures to achieve our vision and fulfil our unique role.
* Develop safety and wellbeing strategies that define the foundations for maintaining a healthy workplace.
* Ensure access to high quality and contemporary education and training for staff to maintain and further enhance specialist capabilities.

1. **Enhance participation and efficiency through technology**

* Design and implement a modern end-to-end Case Management System. [This is in the process of construction: see **section 1.6.3** of the Research Materials.]
* Improve wayfinding and information provided to court users.
* Update Children’s Court courtrooms with the attest technology to enable greater accessibility and flexibility in the way matters are heard.

The Court’s **purpose** is: "To provide an efficient, modern and responsive specialist court to hear and determine cases involving children and young persons in a timely, just and equitable manner which is easily understood by court users and the public generally."

It is important to emphasize what the Court’s purpose is not. As an institution of judicial decision-making, the Court has no power to become involved with a child until either–

* an officer of the Child Protection Service of the Victorian Government's Department of Families, Fairness and Housing;
* an officer of Victoria Police; or
* some other authorised person–

decides to invoke its jurisdiction by commencing a case in the Court. The Court has no authority to play a general watch-dog role like an ombudsman or a commissioner for children. Nor does it provide any overall or continuous supervision of the Child Protection Service or any other agency involved with a child once the particular case before it has been completed. Nor, unlike the Coroner’s Court, does it have an investigative arm except insofar as the assistance provided by the Children’s Court Clinic in the context of a particular case or its power to issue subpoenas could be so classified. The Court is, by definition, a reactive part of the system, although in its written decisions it sometimes makes general comments about perceived failures within the system.

It is also important to understand that the Court is completely independent of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Victoria Police just as it is of all of the other parties – parents, children, extended family members or others – who appear in cases before it. In his report entitled “Protective Services for Children in Victoria” Justice Fogarty made this crystal clear as long ago as 1993 yet the Court still regularly hears comments along the lines that the Court and the Department are engaged in a partnership to protect the children of Victoria. The Children’s Court is not in a partnership with anybody. It is not a “stakeholder” in anything nor are the police nor the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing “stakeholders” in it. They have no greater “ownership” of the Court than any other litigant. The Court’s independent nature and its purpose were described by Justice Fogarty at pp.142-143 of his report as follows:

“Whilst different models could have been provided for the court or tribunal carrying out the responsibilities now imposed on the Children’s Court, the fact is that throughout its history in Victoria these duties have been carried out through a court, but coupled with provisions that it is to proceed without undue formality and that it is not to be inhibited by the normal Court rules of procedure and evidence. That is also the approach generally accepted in each of the other States.

Much of the criticism [of the Court], especially from the Department, proceeds in my view from a failure to understand this. A significant reason for the existence of the Children’s Court is that it stands independent of the Department, the children and the parents and represents the community in the determination of these extremely difficult and delicate issues which are likely to have a profound, perhaps permanent, effect on the lives of the young children involved. Consequently, it is necessary for the Court to be independent and to be seen to be independent, especially from the Department which is a party in every proceeding before it. It must have the confidence of the parents who come before it and the confidence of the community that it will act in an independent way in accordance with the legislation.

At times I was left with the impression in discussion with some officers of the Department, that they would really like to regard the Court as a natural extension of the Department and that they are uncomfortable with its independence. Whilst that view was not articulated in a direct way, it is important that even at a subconscious level that attitude be recognized and rejected. I felt at times, both at a high level within the Department and from speaking with some workers, that there was a view that because a notification of abuse had been investigated by the Department and because it had reached a conclusion as to what order should be made, there was something obstructive about a process by which those opinions and views were independently assessed and at times rejected.

In reality, the orders sought by the Department are accepted by the Children’s Court in a surprisingly high percentage of cases. The figures demonstrate that this happened in excess of 80% of cases and even amongst the remaining 20% a number are withdrawn or not proceeded with by the Department as distinct from being rejected by the Court.

In my view the Children’s Court must maintain its position of independence and integrity and if anything that position should be reinforced rather than diminished.”

See also *Re C Children* [Children’s Court of Victoria-Power M, unreported, 18/07/2013] at pp.98-100.

## **2.2 Judicial & Administrative officers of the Court**

Under s.504(2) of the CYFA, the Court consists of–

* a President;
* the magistrates;
* the judicial registrars; and
* the registrars–

of the Court.

The President is a judge of the County Court who is appointed by the Governor in Council on the recommendation of the Attorney-General made after consultation with the Chief Judge: s.508(2). The President holds office for a term not exceeding 5 years and is eligible for reappointment: s.508(3)(a). The President may exercise any power conferred on a magistrate by or under the CYFA or any other Act: s.508(8).

The first President of the Court was Judge Jennifer Coate. She was appointed in June 2000. She had previously been Senior Magistrate of the Court since December 1995. Her predecessor, Mr Greg Levine, is currently a Reserve Magistrate at the Court. The second President, appointed in late April 2006, was Judge Paul Grant who was previously a Deputy Chief Magistrate in the Magistrates’ Court. The third President, appointed on 01 May 2013, was Judge Peter Couzens who was previously a Regional Coordinating Magistrate. The fourth President, appointed on 12 May 2015, was Judge Amanda Chambers who was previously a Magistrate. The current President, as and from 01 January 2021, is Judge Jack Vandersteen who was previously a Regional Coordinating Magistrate.

The President, after consulting the Chief Magistrate, may assign any person who is appointed a magistrate or a reserve magistrate to be a magistrate for the Court, whether exclusively or in addition to any other duties: s.507(1). In making such assignment, the President must have regard to the experience of the person assigned in matters relating to child welfare: s.507(2). The President, after consulting the Chief Magistrate, may at any time revoke such assignment: s.507(3). See also [**Part 2.6**](#_2.6_A_specialist) below.

Under ss.509(1) & 509(3), the Governor in Council may appoint a magistrate nominated by the President to be Acting President for a term not exceeding 3 months during any period when:

* there is a vacancy in the office of President; or
* the President is absent on leave or temporarily unable to perform the duties of the office.

Provisions relating to judicial registrars, including appointment, duties, powers, remuneration and terms & conditions, are set out in Part 7.6A of the CYFA and in the *Children, Youth and Families (Children’s Court Judicial Registrars) Rules 2021* [S.R.No.22/2021], as amended from 23/07/2021 by S.R.No.90/2021. The powers of judicial registrars in the Children’s Court include the power:

* r.2.03: to deal with the 6 listed matters whether or not contested;
* r.2.04: to deal with the 11 listed Criminal Division matters whether or not contested;
* r.2.05: to deal with the 4 listed Criminal Division matters – including diversion – if uncontested;
* r.2.06: to deal with the 5 listed Family Division matters – including matters under the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* and the *Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010* – whether or not contested;
* r.2.07: in addition to r.2.06(1) to deal with any other uncontested Family Division applications;
* r.2.09: to perform the duties and exercise the powers of registrars.

In addition, r.2.06(2) provides that the Court constituted by a judicial registrar may preside at the following hearing types in the Family Division: a judicial resolution conference, a readiness hearing, a directions hearing, a mention or special mention and a return from a conciliation conference.

The President may assign duties to a magistrate for the Court [s.510(1)] and to a judicial registrar [s.542A(1)]. Such magistrate/judicial registrar must carry out the duties so assigned [s.510(2)/ s.542A(2)]. Nothing in s.13 of the Magistrates’ Court Act 1989 gives the Chief Magistrate any power to assign duties to a magistrate for the Children’s Court in respect of his or her office as a magistrate for the Court [s.510(3)]. It is important to note that although the President has power to assign duties to a magistrate and to a judicial registrar, the principles of judicial independence do not permit the President to direct a magistrate or a judicial registrar as to how to carry out his or her judicial function.

The following officers of the Court are authorised by s.535(1) of the CYFA:

* a principal registrar;
* registrars; and
* deputy registrars.

The duties, powers and functions of these officers are set out in the CYFA and the regulations [s.535(3)]. Pursuant to s.539, these include:

* power to issue any process out of the Court;
* power to administer an oath or affirmation;
* with the consent of the parties to a proceeding in the Family Division, power to extend an interim accommodation of a kind referred to in ss.263(1)(a) & 263(1)(b) of the CYFA;
* power to abridge or extend the bail of a person granted bail in relation to a criminal proceeding;
* power to endorse a warrant to arrest in accordance with s.62 of the *Magistrates' Court Act 1989*;
* powers to do various things under intervention order legislation.

See also s.21 of the *Magistrates' Court Act 1989*.

The current Principal Registrar of the Court is Ms Leanne de Morton who has held that position since the retirement of her predecessor, Mr Godfrey Cabral, in December 2002. Mr Cabral had previously been Principal Registrar since September 1998.

Section 545(1) of the CYFA continues the Children's Court Liaison Office, established by s.36(1) of the CYPA. The functions of the Children’s Court Liaison Office are set out in s.545(3):

(a) to provide information and advice about the Court to children, families and the community;

(b) to co-ordinate the provision to the Court of any reports that are required;

(c) to collect and keep general information and statistics on the operation of the Court;

(d) to provide general advice and assistance to the Court; and

(e) to undertake any research that is required to enable it to carry out its functions.

## **2.3 Organisational Structure of the Children's Court at Melbourne**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **OFFICE HOLDERS – 31 MAY 2024** | |
| President | Judge Jack Vandersteen |
| Chief Executive Officer | Mr Simon McDonald |
| Deputy Chief Executive Officer | Ms Kylie Pieters |
| Chief Operating Officer | Mr Rob Challis |
| Principal Registrar | Ms Leanne de Morton |
| Strategic Advisor to the President | Ms Louise James |
| Director, Strategic Policy & Planning | Mr Peter Lamb |
| Senior Legal Officer, Office of the President | Dr Lisa Lee |
| Senior Registrar | Ms Emma Taylor |
| State Co-ordinator | Mr Glenn Barnes |
| Special Advisor to the President | Mr Peter Power |

## **2.4 Divisions of the Court**

Under s.504(3) of the CYFA the Children’s Court in effect has three Divisions:

(a) the Family Division;

(b) the Criminal Division; and

(c) the Koori Court (Criminal Division).

For reasons which are unclear to the writer s.504(3)(d) defines a fourth Division, the Neighbourhood Justice Division. Prior to 06/01/2025 the Neighbourhood Justice Centre [NJC] was simply a venue of:

* the Criminal Division of the Court; and
* that part of the Family Division relating to intervention orders.

From 06/01/2025 the Children’s Court no longer sits at the NJC.

Section 3(4) of the CYFA provides that unless the context otherwise requires, a reference in the CYFA to the Criminal Division includes a reference to the Koori Court (Criminal Division).

The Court must not sit as more than one Division at the same time in the same room: s.504(5).

Under s.504(7), the Court, in any Division, is constituted by the President or a magistrate except in the case of any proceeding for which provision is made by any Act for the Court to be constituted by a registrar. Examples of the latter include applications for extension of bail and applications for extension of certain sorts of interim accommodation orders. However, under s.504(8) the Court may be constituted by a judicial registrar in any proceeding for which provision is made by rules of court for–

(a) the court to be so constituted; and

(b) the delegation to judicial registrars of powers of the court to hear and determine such proceeding.

The Children’s Court of Victoria processing statistics (detailing initiation, finalisation & pending statistics) for child protection cases and criminal cases are as follows:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **STATE-WIDE PROCESSING STATISTICS – CHILD PROTECTION CASES** | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **2022/23** | **2023/24** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Initiations** | 16473 | 16071 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Finalisations** | 16604 | 14384 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Pending** | 4757 | 5651 |  |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **STATE-WIDE PROCESSING STATISTICS – CRIMINAL CASES** | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **2016/17** | **2017/18** | **2018/19** | **2019/20** | **2020/21** | **2021/22** | **2022/23** | **2023/24** |
| **Initiations** | 10477 | 9277 | 9339 | 10154 | 7715 | 6683 | 7458 | 7266 |
| **Finalisations** | 12201 | 9530 | 9230 | 8142 | 7708 | 8444 | 8197 | 8040 |
| **Pending** | 2573 | 1914 | 2400 | 4512 | 4410 | 3085 | 2798 | 2448 |

The Children’s Court of Victoria more detailed finalisation statistics for 2022/2023 & 2023/24 are as follows:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **FINALISATION STATISTICS 2022/23** | | | | |
| **FAMILY DIVISION** | 19847 | **Child Protection** | 16604 | 54% |
| **Intervention Orders** | 3243 | 10% |
| **CRIMINAL DIVISION** | 11118 | **Criminal Cases** | 8197 | 27% |
| **CAYPINS** | 2921 | 9% |
| **TOTALS** | **30965** |  | **30965** | **100%** |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **FINALISATION STATISTICS 2023/24** | | | | |
| **FAMILY DIVISION** | 17420 | **Child Protection** | 14384 | 48% |
| **Intervention Orders** | 3036 | 10% |
| **CRIMINAL DIVISION** | 12385 | **Criminal Cases** | 8040 | 27% |
| **CAYPINS** | 4345 | 15% |
| **TOTALS** | **29805** |  | **29805** | **100%** |

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## **2.5 Venues of the Court**

### **2.5.1 Sections 505 & 505A of the CYFA**

Section 505 of the CYFA formerly contained a fairly rigid stipulation, in part requiring the Children’s Court to be held at places at which the Magistrates’ Court is to be held and on such days and at such times as the President, after consulting the Chief Magistrate, appoints by notice published in the Government Gazette. Although not expressly excluded, the headquarters of each of the Courts [Melbourne Children’s Court and Melbourne Magistrates’ Court] never complied with former s.505(1)(a), having always been in completely separate buildings. Section 505(3) prohibited the Children’s Court from being held in the same building as that in which the Magistrates’ Court was at the time sitting unless the Governor in Council, by Order published in the Government Gazette, otherwise directed with respect to any particular building. Subject to that, s.505(4) permitted the Children’s Court to sit and act at any time and place.

The situation was further complicated by the absence of a legislative link between s.505 and the very complex definition of ‘proper venue’ in s.3(1). Speaking generally and subject to limited exceptions, s.3(1) provides that the ‘proper venue’ is the venue of the Court that is nearest to–

1. the place of residence of the child; or
2. the place where the subject-matter of the case arose.

Although the Children’s Court understands the importance of keeping its proceedings as far as possible away from courts in which adult proceedings are being conducted, the interests of justice occasionally require them to be held at the same time in the same building. Accordingly, for this reason and because of an ongoing need for online hearings from time to time, s.505 has been substantially amended to provide simply: “The Court may sit and act at any time and place.”

New s.505A now provides the following link with the definition of ‘proper venue’ in s.3(1):

“(1) Without limiting s.505, the Court may order that a hearing be held at an appropriate place that is not the proper venue for the hearing if the Court considers that–

1. for any reason it is **appropriate** that the hearing not be held at the proper venue; **and**
2. it is in the **interests of justice** that the hearing not be held at the proper venue.

(2) In determining an appropriate place to hold a hearing for the purposes of subsection (1), the Court must first have regard to–

1. places closest to the proper venue for the hearing; and
2. the views of the parties to the proceeding.”

For a discussion of the meaning of **“interests of justice**” in the context of an unopposed but unsuccessful application for a judge-alone trial see the dicta of Jane Dixon J in *DPP v JH* [2022] VSC 237 at [15]-[19], including her Honour’s reference to [2020] VCC 726, cited with approval by Hollingworth J in *DPP v Tiba* [2020] VSC 600, and also cited with approval by the Court of Appeal in *Hooper v Oxymed Australia Pty Ltd* [2021] VSCA 68 [37]. See also dicta of Judd J in *McHugh v Commonwealth of Australia* [2025] VSC 11 at [13]-[18] in relation to the meaning of **“interests of justice**” in the context of cross-vesting legislation between the Supreme Court of Victoria and the Federal Court.

By comparison with s.505A CYFA, s.31 of the Criminal Procedure Act 2009 [CPA] provides:

“If the Magistrates’ Court considers that–

1. a fair hearing in a criminal proceeding cannot otherwise be had; or
2. for any other reason it is appropriate to do so–

the court may order that the hearing be held at another place or venue of the court that the court considers appropriate.”

And s.192 of the CPA contains a similar provision in relation to criminal trials:

“If a court considers that–

1. a fair trial in a criminal proceeding cannot otherwise be had; or
2. for any other reason it is appropriate to do so–

the court may order that the trial be held at any other place that the court considers appropriate.”

The writer considers that s.528(2)(b) of the CYFA does not make s.31 of the CPA applicable to the Children’s Court because the contrary intention appears in new s.505A. Further, the distinction between the words “trial” in s.192 CPA and “hearing” in s.505A CYFA means that s.192 is not directly applicable to the Children’s Court although the principles enunciated by superior courts in relation to the operation of s.192 are likely to be relevant to an application for change of a Children’s Court hearing venue.

Factors to be considered in relation to an application to change the venue of a Supreme Court murder trial were set out by Taylor J in *R v Allan (Change of Venue)* [2018] VSC 571 at [5]-[7]. At [5] her Honour referred with approval to the legal principles set out in *R v Iaria and Panozzo* [2004] VSC 96; (2004) 9 VR 425 at [10] where Nettle J quoted with approval the formulation of Pincus JA in *R v Yanner* [1988] 2 Qd R 208:

“… the proper rule to be applied is that each case in which an application is made for a change of venue falls to be considered on its own merits and not with any preconceptions, save that a trial should ordinarily proceed in the district in which the offence charged is alleged to have been committed, ‘removal being warranted where sufficient cause is shown’.”

In *Re DC, DE and KS* [2024] VSC 676 – an unsuccessful application to change the venue of a Supreme Court jury murder trial from a regional court to Melbourne – Jane Dixon J summarised at [10]-[15] the legal principles governing the operation of s.192 CPA, in particular noting at [15]:

“Finally, the important public policy rationale for justice being dispensed in the proper venue where the alleged offending occurred was pithily expressed by Cummins J in an oft-cited extract from *DPP v Bennett* [2004] VSC 148; (2004) 10 VR 355 at [6]:

‘The local community is the community in which the alleged crime took place; it is concerned to have the law administered within it; and to remove a circuit trial to Melbourne can lead the vacated community to feel disenfranchised, marginalised or alienated. All this is common experience. This basal requirement should not be watered down by mere administrative convenience. This is the Supreme Court of Victoria, not the Supreme Court of Melbourne.’”

See also *R v Vjestica* [2008] VSCA 47; (2008) 182 A Crim R 350 per Maxwell P; *Re Cohrs* [2023] VSC 752 per Taylor JA.

### **2.5.2 Victorian Children’s Court venues**

As from 06/01/2025 the Children’s Court sits as listed at the locations detailed in the following table:

VICTORIAN CHILDREN’S COURT VENUES

**AS FROM 6 JANUARY 2025**

Ararat

Bairnsdale

Ballarat

Benalla

Bendigo

Broadmeadows

Castlemaine

Cobram

Colac

Corryong

Dandenong CC

Echuca

Geelong

Hamilton

Hopetoun

Horsham

Kerang

Korumburra

Kyneton

Latrobe Valley

Mansfield

Maryborough

Melbourne CC

Mildura

Moorabbin JC

Myrtleford

Nhill

Omeo

Orbost

Ouyen

Portland

Robinvale

Sale

Seymour

Shepparton

St Arnaud

Stawell

Swan Hill

Wangaratta

Warrnambool

Wodonga

Wonthaggi

At **Melbourne CC, Broadmeadows, Dandenong CC & Moorabbin JC** and also at most country locations, the Court sits in both Divisions. From 06/01/2025 the Children’s Court does not sit in either Division at any of the remaining courts in the extended metropolitan area, namely **Dromana, Frankston, Heidelberg, NJC (Collingwood), Ringwood, Sunshine & Werribee**.

Family Division Child Protection [CP] cases originating from DFFH’s Frankston & Cheltenham offices are generally heard at **Moorabbin JC**. CP cases originating from DFFH’s Dandenong office are generally heard at **Dandenong CC**. Except for final contests listed for more than 5 days CP cases originating from DFFH’s Preston office are generally heard at **Broadmeadows**. All other CP cases originating in the extended metropolitan area are generally heard at **Melbourne Children’s Court**.

From 06/01/2025 all Children’s Court Criminal Division cases and intervention order [IVO] cases involving a child respondent which would previously have been heard at the locations listed in **blue** above will be heard at either **Melbourne CC, Broadmeadows, Dandenong CC** or **Moorabbin JC** depending on the type of case and the catchment area in which the child currently resides. See the following map and chart.

## A map of different colored regions Description automatically generated

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Catchment area** | **Child’s current residence postcodes** | **Court Venue from 6/1/2025: Summons/ Bail / IVO** | **Court Venue from 6/1/2025: Remands** |
| **Central** | 3000–3011, 3012 (except Maidstone+Tottenham), 3013–3018, 3019 (Braybrook North), 3025, 3028, 3031, 3032 (except Maribyrnong), 3050–3057, 3065–3071, 3101–3104, 3121–3124, 3126, 3141–3142, 3146, 3147 (Ashburton), 3181–3184, 3205–3207 | **Melbourne** | **Melbourne** |
| **East** | 3106–3116, 3125, 3127–3140, 3147 (Ashwood), 3149–3160, 3170, 3178–3180, 3765–3779, 3782 (Clematis), 3785–3799 | **Melbourne** | **Dandenong** |
| **West** | 3012 (Maidstone+Tottenham), 3019 (Braybrook + Robinson), 3020–3023, 3032 (Maribyrnong), 3037–3038, 3335–3427 | **Melbourne** | **Melbourne** |
| **North East** | 3058 (Moreland), 3072–3099, 3105, 3750–3752, 3754–3755, 3757–3763 | **Melbourne** | **Melbourne** |
| **North West** | 3033–3036, 3039–3049, 3058 (except Moreland), 3059–3064, 3428–3429, 3753, 3756 | **Broadmeadows** | **Melbourne** |
| **South West** | 3024, 3026–3027, 3029–3030, 3211 | **Melbourne** | **Melbourne** |
| **Peninsula** | 3196–3201, 3910–3944, 3977 (except Cranbourne North), 3980 | **Moorabbin** | **Dandenong** |
| **South** | 3143–3145, 3148, 3161–3163, 3165–3169, 3185–3195, 3202–3204 | **Moorabbin** | **Melbourne** |
| **South East** | 3164, 3171–3177, 3781, 3782 (except Clematis), 3783, 3800–3815, 3975–3976, 3977 (Cranbourne North), 3978, 3981–3984 | **Dandenong** | **Dandenong** |

In addition, all of the Melbourne, suburban and regional Children's Courts and a number of the country venues are equipped with video-conferencing & remote witness facilities. These have 2 main functions:

* to allow a judicial officer and/or one or more parties to be in a different location from another party; thus, for instance, a magistrate in Melbourne can preside over a case in which some or all of the parties are in Bendigo;
* to allow a witness who is in a location remote from the courtroom to give evidence and be cross-examined without coming into the courtroom; there are 2 main situations in which the Court is likely to permit this to be used:

(i) where a witness is interstate or overseas or in another town or city;

(ii) where a witness is in the same town or city but the court orders that, for reasons of convenience, safety or protection of the witness, the witness should not be in the same room as a party.

See e.g. ss.42E & 42F of the *Evidence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1958.* In *R v Cox & Ors (Ruling No.6)* {also known as *R v Cox, Sadler, Ferguson & Ferguson*} [2005] VSC 364 Kaye J summarized the principles on the application of s.42E which he considered were to be elucidated from the cases of *R v Kim* (1998) 104 A Crim R 233, *R v Weiss* [2002] VSC 15 & *R v Strawhorn* [2004] VSC 415. In *R v Goldman* [2004] VSC 165 Redlich J traced the genesis of the legislation and analysed a large number of relevant cases – Victorian, Australian & foreign – before concluding at [32] that: "The accused's right to confrontation and the forensic advantages that may flow therefrom needs to be balanced against the need to protect the witness against the risk of harm."

Melbourne Children's Court is the headquarters of the Children's Court of Victoria. The President and most of the registry staff are located there, as are 19 magistrates and 4 reserve magistrates who are currently assigned to the Children's Court. In addition RCM Dotchin is located at Moorabbin JC and is assisted by one magistrate. RCM Macpherson is located at Broadmeadows and is assisted by one magistrate. RCM Hubble is located at Dandenong and is assisted by one magistrate. The Children’s Court’s one judicial registrar – appointed in May 2021 – is located at Melbourne Children’s Court.

At country & regional locations other than Shepparton, a magistrate assigned to that court generally hears cases in the Children's Court in addition to his or her other duties in the Magistrates' Court. However, in country & regional locations, final contested Family Division hearings listed for 3 days or more are generally heard by a magistrate from Melbourne Children’s Court. At Shepparton Children’s Court a Melbourne Children’s Court magistrate sits on Thursday/Friday to hear Children’s Court cases.

In addition, contested suburban criminal cases of more than 1 day's duration are generally heard by the Melbourne Children's Court, albeit at the discretion of the coordinators of both courts.

In its second interim report – [Report into Victoria’s Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems](https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Yoorrook-for-justice-report.pdf) – tabled on 04/09/2023, the Yoorrook Justice Commission made 46 recommendations for legislative and general system reform. Yoorrook’s recommendation 18 is:

1. The Victorian Government must:
2. ensure Children’s Court of Victoria judicial officers determine child protection matters state-wide; and
3. abolish the current practice of having non-specialist magistrates determining child protection matters in some rural and regional court locations.

The reasons for this recommendation together with the reasons for recommendation 19 – the expansion of the Marram-Ngala Ganbu (Koori Family Hearing Day) state-wide – are detailed on pages 163-167 of the report.

The Victorian government advised in April 2024 that it supported recommendations 18 & 19 in principle.

### **2.5.3 Children’s Court Weekend Online Remand Court [WORC]**

Commencing on 03/09/2022 a new Children’s Court Weekend Online Remand Court [WORC] was established in the Criminal Division of the Court to hear–

* bail and remand applications;
* pleas by remanded children in appropriate cases; and
* other appropriate Criminal Division applications–

online from across the State. WORC sits between the hours of 3pm and 9pm on weekends and public holidays (excluding Christmas Day). Any part-heard WORC cases are adjourned at the discretion of the presiding judicial officer. Any other uncompleted WORC cases are generally adjourned to the appropriate venue of the Children’s Court on an appropriate date.

After hours Interim Accommodation Order hearings in the Family Division of the Court continue to be heard by Bail Justices.

Out of Court bail and remand applications also continue to be heard by Bail Justices. A child who is remanded by a Bail Justice is to be remanded to the next sitting of the Children’s Court, whether that be a WORC sitting or a weekday sitting.

Youth Justice, the Central After Hours Assessment and Bail Placement Service (CAHABPS), Victoria Legal Aid’s Youth Crime Program and Victoria Police Specialist Children’s Court Prosecution Group have all worked closely with the Children’s Court to set up WORC, using the expertise and cooperation developed over the last two years during the justice system’s crisis response and digital transformation.

The establishment of WORC has increased access to justice for young people in metropolitan and regional Victoria by ensuring:

* access to specialist Children’s Court magistrates;
* immediate referrals to services and supports;
* access to legal representation at the most critical time;
* access to technology to appear in court directly from police stations or Youth Justice Centres; and
* significantly reduced pressure on local Courts.

State-wide WORC heard 173 cases from 03/09/2022 to 30/06/2023 and 163 cases from 01/07/2023 to 30/06/2024.

### **2.5.4 The Court Security Act 1980**

The *Court Security Act 1980* [CSA] is described as “An Act to make Provisions in relation to the secure and orderly operation of Courts…” It applies to all venues of the Children’s Court by virtue of the definition of ***‘proceeding’*** and paragraph (d) in the definition of ‘**court**’ in s.2(1). Its provisions include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **SECTION** | **CONTENT** |
| 2(1) | Definitions including ***‘authorized officer’***, ***‘court’***, ***‘court premises’***, ***‘pandemic declaration’***, ***‘pandemic order’***, ***‘proceeding’***, ***‘prohibited item’***, ***‘publish’*** & ***‘recording’***. |
| 2(2) | A reference in the CSA to “the security, good order or management of the court premises” includes:  (a) the safety of all persons who work at or attend the court premises;  (b) the safety and welfare of all persons in custody at the court premises;  (c) the good order or management of legal proceedings or other business conducted at the court premises;  (d) in relation to a pandemic declaration, the health of all persons or any class of person who work at, attend or are in custody at the court premises;  (e) the following of any relevant pandemic order at the court premises;  (f) the following of any relevant directions made by an authorised officer under Part 8A or 10 of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* at the court premises. |
| 3 | Powers of authorized officers include powers to:   * demand from a person who is on court premises the person’s name and address, reasons for being on the premises and evidence of identity; * give to a person who wishes to enter court premises, or is on the court premises, a reasonable direction to do or not do a thing, for the purpose of maintaining or restoring the security, good order or management of the court premises; * escort a person to or from court premises if that person has consented to being escorted; * direct a person whom the officer reasonably suspects is making a recording, transmission or publication of a proceeding contrary to the CSA or any other Act:   (i) to stop making the recording, transmission or publication; and/or  (ii) to permit an authorized officer to view the recording, transmission or publication on a device; and/or  (iii) to delete the recording;   * require a person who wishes to enter court premises, or is on the court premises, to submit to a frisk search or a search of anything in the person’s possession; * seize and retain any item found during a search that the authorized officer believes on reasonable grounds is a prohibited item; * refuse a person entry to the court premises or remove a person from the court premises if the authorized officer believes on reasonable grounds that the person is likely to affect adversely the security, good order or management of the court premises. |
| 3A | Police to be present at courts |
| 4 | Offence to carry or possess firearm, explosive substance or offensive weapon on court premises |
| 4A | Offence to intentionally record a proceeding except in accordance with ss.4A(2)-(4). |
| 4B | Offence to intentionally publish a recording of a proceeding except in accordance with s.4B(2). However, s.4B(2A) provides that a person may publish a recording of a proceeding if the person does so on behalf of a court or tribunal for a purpose set out in s.8B of the *Open Courts Act 2013*. |
| 4C | Offence to intentionally transmit to or give a recording of a proceeding to another person except in accordance with ss.4C(2)-(4). |
| 5 | The powers conferred by the CSA are in addition to and do not derogate from any other powers conferred on or possessed by any court, judge or person in relation to the conduct of proceedings in a court or the regulation of the conduct of persons in court premises. |
| 6 & 7 | Powers to make regulations and/or rules. |

Section 7A CSA which provided some temporary measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was repealed as and from 11/10/2023.

## **2.6 A specialist court**

Prior to 2000 the Children’s Court had been in some respects a sort of ‘add-on’ to the Magistrates’ Court. In the Second Reading Speech in support of the *Children and Young Persons (Appointment of President) Bill 2000* the then Attorney-General Mr Hulls made it clear that one of the purposes of the Bill was to create an autonomous specialist court [Hansard, 04/05/2000, p.1322]:

“The…Bill elevates the status and authority of the long-neglected Children’s Court and by doing so advances the government’s commitment to promoting the position of young people in the Victorian community.

The Bill creates the office of President of the Children’s Court and establishes the Children’s Court as a new court which is separate from the Magistrates’ Court.

The creation of the office of President of the Children’s Court:

* reflects the importance, increasing specialisation and authority of the Children’s Court; and
* will allow the Children’s Court to develop its specialist responsibilities autonomously. The President will be able to promote the adoption of a consistent philosophy and set standards for the consistent treatment of young people in courts across the state. This advances the government policy of growing the whole of the state of Victoria and providing increased services to rural and regional Victoria.

The establishment of the Children’s Court as a freestanding, separately recognised court underlines its increased importance and specialisation. This change clearly demonstrates the government’s recognition of the important role played by the Children’s Court in our judicial system in providing a specialised court catering for children and young people in both the criminal and family jurisdictions.”

Section 507(2) of the CYFA requires the President, in assigning a magistrate or a reserve magistrate to be a magistrate for the Court, to have regard to his or her experience in matters relating to child welfare.

In order to enhance their experience in this specialist area, judicial officers assigned to the Court attend regular seminars on various matters relating to child welfare, especially on psychological and psychiatric issues and on aspects of child abuse. Many of these are closed seminars arranged by the Children's Court Clinic.

In *T v Secretary of Department of Human Services* [1999] VSC 42 Beach J dismissed an appeal by a mother against interim accommodation orders placing her 2 children in the care of a suitable person. At the conclusion of his judgment, Beach J said at [21]:

"The Children's Court is a specialist court presided over by Magistrates experienced in matters affecting young children and with ready access to experts in the field of child care. It is beyond doubt that Magistrates at the Court become very skilled in dealing with children and assessing the veracity of evidence given by them in courts and of the complaints they make particularly complaints of sexual abuse. Th[e Supreme] Court should be reluctant to interfere with orders of the Court made in such matters, particularly interim orders which are still subject to further review by the Children's Court itself and should do so only where it is abundantly clear that some significant error has been made."

In *P v RM & Ors* [2004] VSC 14 Gillard J, after referring to the above dicta, said at [28]: "I would not raise the hurdle as high as that…Speaking for myself I take the view that weight should be accorded to decisions made by Magistrates experienced in this area." In *DOHS v SM* [2006] VSC 129 at [14] Hansen J expressed a similar view:

“[T]he decision of an experienced Magistrate in a specialist court is to be afforded respect and weight in consequence that it is such a decision, but doing so, in the end the decision must nevertheless be regarded in the context of all the relevant facts and circumstances of the case.”

In *DOHS v Sanding* [2011] VSC 42 at [28] Bell J referred with approval to the first two sentences of the above dicta of Beach J in *T’s case* and to dicta of Gillard J in *R v RM & Ors* at [27] and of Habersberger J in *CJ v DOHS* [2004] VSC 317 at [21] and said:

“This Court recognizes the specialist nature of the jurisdiction of the Children’s Court and the expertise which it has developed in the exercise of that jurisdiction… This will be an important consideration in the present case, for the court will be cautious before interfering with decisions made by the Children’s Court concerning the procedures to be followed in the exercise of its specialist jurisdiction.”

In *DHHS v Brown* [2018] VSC 775 Beach J said at [62]:

“The Children’s Court is a busy specialist jurisdiction that deals day in day out with cases involving the wellbeing of children. It is frequently called upon to resolve matters of great complexity where there may be significant competing considerations that must be taken into account in the resolution of its proceedings. Accordingly, in an appeal of the present kind, the views of the magistrate who has conducted a lengthy and detailed proceeding must be accorded considerable weight. There is no occasion for this Court to substitute its view for the view of the magistrate in a case where reasonable minds might legitimately disagree.”

In *Cardell (a pseudonym) v DHHS* [2019] VSC 781 Maxwell P said at [40]-[41]:

“The written submission for the appellant contended that, if the appeal from the Children’s Court orders failed, then this Court should proceed to make its own order with respect to the care and protection of Oliver. I expressed the provisional view in the course of argument that, were that to be the outcome of the appeal, it was extremely unlikely that I would be persuaded to exercise the Court’s inherent [*parens patriae*] power. I drew attention to authorities relied on by the Secretary (who is the defendant to the originating motion), the effect of which is that where a child’s welfare is being dealt with by a specialist court, under a legislative scheme explicitly directed at child welfare, the Supreme Court would be very slow to step in and exercise its own jurisdiction: *Re Anna, Bruno, Courtney and Deepak* [2001] NSWSC 79, [20]; *RC v Director-General, Department of Family and Community Services* [2014] NSWCA 38, [65]. I remain of that view.”

In *TSH v DFFH* [2022] VSC 390, having referred to the judgment of Beach J in *T v Secretary of Department of Human Services* [1999] VSC 42, the judgment of his son in *DHHS v Brown* [2018] VSC 775 at [62] and the judgments in *P v RM* [2004] VSC 14 at [28] and *DOHS v SM* [2006] VSC 129 at [13]‑[14], Tsalamandris J said at [62]:

“I consider that the Magistrate sitting in the specialist Children’s Court decided the appropriate weight to be given to each of the principles required of her under s 10(3) of the Act. There is nothing to persuade me that the Magistrate erred in law in respect of her decision.”

See also *Mia Harris (a pseudonym) and Adam Jackson (a pseudonym) v Secretary to the Department of Families Fairness and Housing* [2023] VSC 228 at [106].

## **2.7 The Court is generally open to the public**

Generally, courts are open to the public. Anyone has a right to go into any court when it is sitting, unless for special reason in a particular case the presiding judge/magistrate has ordered a closed court hearing. The reason for this was stated in eloquent terms by Lord Shaw of Dunfermline in *Scott v Scott* [1913] AC 417. Quoting Bentham, his Lordship said at 477-8:

“’Publicity is the very soul of justice. It is the keenest spur to exertion and the surest of all guards against improbity. It keeps the judge himself while trying under trial’. ‘The security of securities is publicity’ but amongst historians the grave and enlightened verdict of Hallam, in which he ranks the publicity of judicial proceedings even higher than the rights of Parliament as a guarantee of public security, is not likely to be forgotten: ‘Civil liberty in this Kingdom has two direct guarantees; the open administration of justice according to known laws truly interpreted, and fair constructions of evidence; and the right of Parliament, without let or interruption, to inquire into, and obtain redress of, grievances. Of these, the first is by far the most indispensable; nor can the subjects of any State be reckoned to enjoy a real freedom, where this condition is not found both in its judicial exercise and in their constant exercise.”

The principles espoused in *Scott v Scott* were recognized by the High Court in *Russell v Russell* (1976) 134 CLR 495, a case which concerned, among other things, the constitutional validity of sections of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) which at that time required Family Courts to be closed and prohibited publication of their proceedings. At p.520 Gibbs CJ said:

"It is the ordinary rule of the Supreme Court, as of the other courts of the nation, that their proceedings shall be conducted 'publicly and in open view' (*Scott v Scott* [1913] AC 417 at 441). This rule has the virtue that the proceedings of every court are fully exposed to public and professional scrutiny and criticism without which abuses may flourish undetected. Further, the public administration of justice tends to maintain confidence in the integrity and independence of the courts. The fact that courts of law are held openly and not in secret is an essential aspect of their character. It distinguishes their activities from those of administrative officials, for 'publicity is the authentic hall-mark of judicial as distinct from administrative procedure' (*McPherson v McPherson* [1936] AC 177 at 200). To require a court invariably to sit in closed court is to alter the nature of the court. Of course there are established exceptions to the general rule that judicial proceedings shall be conducted in public; and the category of exceptions is not closed to the Parliament. The need to maintain secrecy or confidentiality in the interests of privacy or delicacy may in some cases be thought to render it desirable for a matter, or part of it, to be heard in closed court."

Similar statements of principle are to be found in numerous other cases, including *Dickason v Dickason* (1913) 17 CLR 50, *David Syme & Co Ltd v General Motors Holden’s Ltd* [1984] 2 N.S.W.L.R. 294 per Street CJ at 299, Hutley AP at 307 & Samuels JA at 310, *Raybos Australia Pty Ltd v Jones* [1985] 2 NSWLR 47 per Kirby P at 50-53, *John Fairfax & Sons Ltd v Police Tribunal of New South Wales* (1986) 5 N.S.W.L.R. 465 per McHugh JA at 476; *Jarvie v Magistrates' Court of Victoria* [1995] 1 VR 84 per Brooking J; *Herald & Weekly Times Ltd v Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria* [1999] 1 VR 267 at 278-292 per Hedigan J; *The Queen v G* [2007] VSC 503 [Edited Version] esp at [14]-[16] per Whelan J; *Russo v Russo* [2010] VSC 98 at [9]-[16] & [25] per Croft J.

When the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) commenced in 1975, it provided that cases would be heard in closed court and also prevented publication of any details of the cases. This was to preserve the privacy of the people involved, including the children, and to prevent reporting in the media of sensationalised stories about peoples' private lives. Following wide-spread criticism, the provision for closed Family Court hearings was repealed in 1983 and the prohibition on publication was substantially modified, so that now it only prohibits publication of anything which identifies people involved in the case.

In ***Ramsay Alec (a pseudonym) v The King* [2023] VSCA 208** – a case in which the principles of open justice, procedural fairness and apprehension of judicial bias coexisted – the Court of Appeal allowed an appeal, set aside a conviction for incest and associated offences in which the appellant’s stepson TB was the complainant and ordered a new trial. At a ground rules hearing on the day before TB gave evidence at a special hearing, the judge was told by the intermediary that the complainant – with whom both counsel had met – “would be one of the most anxious young men that I’ve come across in my time of doing this work” and said that if it was possible for the judge “to have a brief chat with him” before he gave evidence “that would be ideal”. The judge did meet privately with the child complainant, no objections to the meeting having been raised by counsel. No record was made of the meeting although in the special hearing the judge articulated some, but not all, of the conversation he had with TB. The Court of Appeal (Priest, Walker & Taylor JJA) held that–

* the process by which TB came to give evidence at the special hearing was tainted;
* the principle of open justice requires court proceedings to be open to scrutiny; and
* the meeting occasioned a substantial miscarriage of justice and had given rise to a reasonable apprehension of partiality.

The Court of Appeal said at [21]:

“Almost a century ago, Lord Hewart LCJ, in *R v Sussex Justices; Ex parte McCarthy* [1924] 1 KB 256, 259, declared that it ‘is of fundamental importance that justice should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done.’”

Their Honours continued at [23], [27]-[30] & [32]:

[23] “It cannot be doubted that, in deciding to meet privately with TB [albeit apparently in the presence of the intermediary], the judge in the present case was also motivated by consideration for a youthful witness. But as was the case in *R v Dunne*, ‘something was said to or by this witness which was not in the hearing or presence of the jury or of the accused’: see (1929) 21 Cr App R 176, 178.”

[27] “Senior counsel for the applicant accepted that ‘the judge … was concerned that [TB] needed to have his anxiety ameliorated’. That did not justify a private meeting. Counsel submitted that the judge could have invited the complainant into the courtroom in an informal manner prior to the hearing; he could have come down off the bench; he could have talked to the complainant in the presence of counsel; and he could have removed his robes if he wanted to make the complainant feel more comfortable. But he ‘should not have met the complainant in the absence of the parties’.”

[28] “That the administration of justice must not take place behind closed doors is axiomatic. The principle of open justice requires court proceedings to be held in public; or, in cases where exceptions to that general rule are tolerated — such as in cases of alleged sexual offending — to be otherwise open to scrutiny. Self-evidently, open justice promotes the rule of law and militates against the erosion of public confidence in the administration of justice. Open justice promotes the fair conduct of curial proceedings and the impartiality of judges. When justice is administered in private, the fairness of the process, and the impartiality of the judge, are brought into question.”

[29] “As Mason J observed in *Re JRL; Ex parte CJL* (1986) 161 CLR 342, 350:

‘A central element in the system of justice administered by our courts is that it should be fair and this means that it must be open, impartial and even-handed. It is for this reason that one of the cardinal principles of the law is that a judge tries the case before him on the evidence and arguments presented before him in open court by the parties or their legal representatives and by reference to those matters alone, unless Parliament otherwise provides. It would be inconsistent with basic notions of fairness that a judge should take into account, or even receive, secret or private representations on behalf of a party or from a stranger with reference to a case which he has to decide.’

[30] Mason J also cited with approval at 350-1 the following observations of McInerney J in *R v Magistrates’ Court at Lilydale; Ex parte Ciccone* [1973] VR 122, 127:

‘The sound instinct of the legal profession – judges and practitioners alike – has always been that, save in the most exceptional cases, there should be no communication or association between the judge and one of the parties (or the legal advisers or witnesses of such a party), otherwise than in the presence of or with the previous knowledge and consent of the other party. Once the case is under way, or about to get under way, the judicial officer keeps aloof from the parties (and from their legal advisers and witnesses) and neither he nor they should so act as to expose the judicial officer to a suspicion of having had communications with one party behind the back of or without the previous knowledge and consent of the other party. For if something is done which forms a reasonable basis for such suspicion, confidence in the impartiality of the judicial officer is undermined.’

See also *Charisteas v Charisteas* (2021) 273 CLR 289, 297 [13]; *Assistant Commissioner Condon v Pompano Pty Ltd* (2013) 252 CLR 38, 107 [186].”

[32] “There is no evidence in the present case that TB said anything to the judge that in fact had the capacity to compromise the judge’s conduct of the case. But that is not to the point. It is the suspicion of partiality which is aroused by the judge meeting privately with a witness which is important.”

[33] “We note that some of the authorities appear to contemplate that a judge may meet privately with a party, their legal adviser or a witness ‘with the previous knowledge and consent of the other party’. There will undoubtedly be circumstances where that is so; a judge attending a function at which counsel for a party is attending, with the knowledge and consent of the other party, provides an example of such circumstances. But we do not consider that the ‘previous knowledge and consent’ of the applicant in this case is such as to mean that there is no apprehension of partiality raised by the judge meeting privately with the principal witness for the prosecution.”

In ***DPP v Smith* [2023] VSCA 293** the judge had met privately with a child complainant in the presence of counsel for both the accused and the prosecution and an instructing solicitor for the prosecution. The meeting was not recorded and the accused was not present. There had been no objections from counsel to the meeting. Indeed, such a meeting was commonplace in County Court trials, it being approved in the “Multi-jurisdictional Court Guidelines for Ground Rules and the Intermediary Program”. The Court of Appeal (Emerton P, Priest & Macaulay JJA) held that the meeting represented a fundamental irregularity in the trial process and that the only remedy was for the evidence of the complainant to be taken at a further special hearing conducted before a different judge.

At [4]-[7] & [10] Emerton P said:

[4] “In submissions before us, there was no challenge to the Court’s reasoning in *Ramsay Alec (a pseudonym) v The King* [2023] VSCA 208. The question in this case is, in substance, whether the presence of counsel at the meeting with the witness makes any difference.

[5] For the reasons given by Priest JA, I am not persuaded that the presence of counsel at the out-of-court meeting between judge and witness means that the reasoning and the principles articulated in *Alec* do not apply.

[6] It is a central tenet of the administration of criminal justice in this State that proceedings be conducted in open court and in the presence of the accused. The principle of open justice is reinforced by s 24(1) of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, which provides that ‘[a] person charged with a criminal offence … has the right to have the charge … decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing’. The introduction of a statutory regime directed to ensuring that vulnerable witnesses are supported so as to be in a position to give their best evidence should not be taken to impinge on the principle of open justice unless a departure is permitted or endorsed by express statutory language or by clear implication from the language of the statute.

[7] In this case, the complainant is a child, who is to be supported by an intermediary when giving evidence. There was a ‘ground rules hearing’ to enable orders to be made governing the questioning of the complainant at the special hearing which subsequently took place. The complainant had reported to the intermediary that she had ‘anxiety at a level higher than the baseline’ when thinking about giving evidence and that meeting new people was a particular trigger for increased anxiety. The judge sought to alleviate that anxiety by briefly meeting with the complainant to say ‘hello’. While the judge’s desire to ease the witness’s anxiety was understandable, and conformed with one of the measures suggested in the *Multi-Jurisdictional Court Guide for the Intermediary Pilot Program: Intermediaries and Ground Rules Hearing*, it was not, in my opinion, allowed. Apart from other issues — such as the lack of facilities to record what was said or done — the meeting necessarily took place in the absence of the accused. The accused had no choice but to stay away.

…

[10] In my view, the CPA cannot be construed so as to permit a judge to leave the confines of the courtroom to speak privately to a witness, no matter how briefly and benignly, in the absence of the accused.”

At [32]-[34], [40] & [54] Priest JA said:

[32] “…[O]ne of the central elements of the system of criminal justice administered by this State’s courts — that it must be open, impartial and even-handed {*Re JRL; Ex parte CJL* (1986) 161 CLR 342, 350; *Alec* at [29]} finds recognition in s 24(1) of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*: ‘A person charged with a criminal offence … has the right to have the charge … decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing’.

[33] Although limited exceptions have been recognised, the principle of open justice — which requires criminal proceedings to take place in public — is an essential characteristic of criminal justice in this State. And importantly, the confined categories of cases in which the principle of open justice will succumb to modification will not lightly be extended. So much was made clear by French CJ in *Hogan v Hinch* (2011) 243 CLR 506, 530-2 at [20]‑[21]. See also *WEQ (a pseudonym) v Medical Board of Australia* (2021) 69 VR 1, 15 [59]; *John Fairfax & Sons Ltd v Police Tribunal (NSW)* (1986) 5 NSWLR 465; *Russell v Russell* (1976) 134 CLR 495; *Dickason v Dickason* (1913) 17 CLR 50.

[34] To a large extent, the manner in which criminal proceedings are conducted in this State is prescribed by the *Criminal Procedure Act 2009*. As s.32 of the Charter makes plain, so far as it is possible to do so consistently with their purpose, the provisions of the CPA must be interpreted in a way that is compatible with human rights, including the accused’s right to have the charges decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing. Plainly, the principle of open justice is ingrained.

…

[40] Nothing in s 389E, however, authorises — either directly or by necessary implication — a private meeting between a trial judge (whether or not accompanied by counsel) and a witness outside the courtroom.

…

[54] In my view, it is anathema to the principle of open justice that a judge could have a non-public communication with a witness in the course of a criminal proceeding, particularly a witness whose evidence is central to the prosecution case. Apart from recognised common law or statutory exceptions — which generally owe their existence to the necessity to secure the proper administration of justice in particular situations — no aspect of the administration of criminal justice in this State should ever take place in a private setting: see *Alec* at [32].”

The DPP was granted special leave to appeal by the High Court. The appeal was allowed by all 5 judges and the order made by the Court of Appeal in *DPP v Smith* [2023] VSCA 293 was set aside: see ***DPP v Smith* [2024] HCA 32**. The plurality (Gageler CJ, Gleeson, Jagot & Beech-Jones JJ) and Edelman J both concluded that the decision of the Court of Appeal in *Ramsay Alec (a pseudonym) v The King* [2023] VSCA 208 was correct. See in particular:

* Paragraphs [75], [84] & [85] where the plurality said:

[75] “The problem in *Alec* was not a lack of power to arrange and attend such a meeting under s.389E(1) [of the *Criminal Procedure Act 2009*]; it was that the judge attended a meeting with the complainant privately (that is, in the presence of the intermediary but without counsel for the prosecution and the accused).”

[84] “The reasoning in *Alec* also correctly stated the principle of open justice in the circumstances of that case. In *Alec*, the Court of Appeal recognised the importance of the principle to the proper administration of justice because ‘[w]hen justice is administered in private, the fairness of the process, and the impartiality of the judge are brought into question.’”

[85] “There is no free-standing principle of open justice relied upon in *Alec*. *Alec* is an orthodox decision that, on the facts of the case, there was a miscarriage of justice requiring the conviction to be set aside because the meeting between the judge and the complainant in private gave rise to a reasonable apprehension of bias.”

* And paragraph [104] where Edelman J said:

“In both *Alec (a pseudonym) v The King* and this proceeding the Court of Appeal was correct that the directions to hold private meetings with the complainants were irregular, particularly as the directions were made, and the private hearings were attended, by the judges who then presided over the special hearings.”

However, in most other respects there was significant disparity between the reasoning in the two judgments which led to significant disparity between the answers given to the four reserved questions of law:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **PLURALITY** | **RESERVED QUESTION** | **EDELMAN J** |
| Unnecessary to answer as the question does not arise in the proceeding. | 1. Did the meeting infringe the principles of open justice as identified in *Alec (a pseudonym) v The King* [2023] VSCA 208? | Yes |
| Unnecessary to answer as the question does not arise in the proceeding. | 1. Did the meeting bring the impartiality of the presiding judge into question? | Unnecessary to answer |
| **PLURALITY** | **RESERVED QUESTION** | **EDELMAN J** |
| **No** | 1. **Did the occurrence of the meeting represent a fundamental irregularity in the trial process, such as to constitute a serious departure from accepted trial processes?** | **No** |
| Unnecessary to answer as the question does not arise in the proceeding. | 1. If the answer to questions 1, 2 and/or 3 is in the affirmative, is the only remedy for the evidence of the complainant to be taken at a further special hearing conducted before a different judge? | No |

The basis of the significant disparity between the reasoning in the two judgments is their opposing views of the operation of s.389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act* *2009* (Vic). Under the heading “**Directions which may be given at ground rules hearings**”, s.389E provides as follows:

(1) At a ground rules hearing, the court may make or vary any direction for the fair and efficient conduct of the proceeding.

(2) Without limiting subsection (1), the court may give one or more of the following directions—

(a) a direction about the manner of questioning a witness;

(b) a direction about the duration of questioning a witness;

(c) a direction about the questions that may or may not be put to a witness;

(d) if there is more than one accused, a direction about the allocation among the accused of the topics about which a witness may be asked;

(e) a direction about the use of models, plans, body maps or similar aids to help communicate a question or an answer;

(f) a direction that if a party intends to lead evidence that contradicts or challenges the evidence of a witness or that otherwise discredits a witness, the party is not obliged to put that evidence in its entirety to the witness in cross-examination.

Contrary to the reasoning at [40] of Priest JA (with whom Emerton P & Macaulay JA agreed) that s.389E did not authorise – “either directly or by necessary implication – a private meeting between a trial judge (whether or not accompanied by counsel) and a witness outside the courtroom”, the plurality said at [2]:

“The appeal must be allowed. As will be explained, the meeting was authorised under s 389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act* and did not give rise to any fundamental irregularity in the criminal proceeding. Although the meeting created a risk of an irregularity because of what could have occurred at the meeting, no such irregularity in fact occurred.”

The plurality held at [59] & [67]-[68] that the meeting did not contravene the relevant provisions of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic):

[59] “The relevant right that a person charged with a criminal offence has under s.24(1) of the Charter is to have the charge against them ‘decided…after a fair and public hearing’. For the reasons below, the meeting between the complainant, the judge and counsel, which occurred prior to the direction made under s.389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act*, was not itself a ‘hearing’ and nothing that occurred at the meeting was required to occur in a ‘hearing’ in order to be compatible with the right protected by the Charter.”

[67] “In this case, the direction to hold the meeting made at the ground rules hearing was an exercise of judicial power as it determined that the meeting should be held in order to facilitate the complainant giving evidence at the special hearing. But it was not proposed that, at the meeting, any judicial power be exercised, and, in fact, no judicial power was exercised. As such, and contrary to the submissions for the accused, the meeting itself, in contrast to the ground rules hearing, did not have ‘the hallmarks of a hearing’. No exercise of judicial power of any kind was proposed, or sought, or occurred. At most, the meeting was preliminary to the proposed exercise of judicial power in the special hearing to be held on the day after the meeting.”

[68] “It would be wrong to construe ‘hearing’ in s.24(1) of the Charter to mean only the ‘trial’ of an accused. But it would also be wrong to construe s.24(1) as if ‘hearing’ refers to every circumstance involving the exercise of any power, administrative or judicial, which a court might be called upon to exercise in a criminal proceeding. In conducting (in contrast to directing the holding of) the meeting, the court was not exercising jurisdiction. It was performing a non-judicial function preliminary to the exercise of jurisdiction in holding the special hearing. Given the carefully calibrated scheme of the *Criminal Procedure Act*, there is no basis to construe s 389E(1) more narrowly than its language permits by reason of (non-existent) incompatibility with s 24(1) of the Charter. Section 24(1) of the Charter accordingly furnishes no basis for construing s 389E(1) to exclude power to direct the holding of the meeting.”

The plurality also stated at [82]-[83] & [91]:

[82] “…[N]o authority is to be understood as imposing an absolute rule that an accused must be present throughout their trial to avoid a miscarriage of justice (let alone throughout every administrative or judicial step in a criminal proceeding). Even at common law, there are exceptions to this rule: e.g. *R v Gee* (2012) 113 SASR 372 at 388 [61]-[62]; *R v Chute [No 4]* (2018) 337 FLR 222 at 243-244 [81]-[82] and the cases cited therein…”

[83] “…The Court of Appeal was wrong to conclude that s.389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act* does not authorise the direction of ‘a private meeting between a trial judge (whether or not accompanied by counsel) and a witness outside the courtroom’. *Alec* does not support that statement. **The issue is not lack of power, but** (as the reasoning in *Alec* correctly exposes at [32]-[38]) **the apprehension of bias that ordinarily would arise if a judge met a witness in the absence of legal representatives for all parties.**” [emphasis added]

[91] “Neither the occurrence of the meeting (in the unchallengeable circumstances in which and as it occurred) nor the admission into evidence at the trial of the accused of the recording of the special hearing constituted or would constitute a fundamental irregularity in the trial process. This is because, in the circumstances in which and as the meeting occurred, it cannot be concluded that ‘a fair-minded lay observer might reasonably apprehend that the judge might not bring an impartial mind to the resolution of the question the judge is required to decide’: *Charisteas v Charisteas* (2021) 273 CLR 289 at 296 [11], applying *Ebner v Official Trustee in Bankruptcy* (2000) 205 CLR 337.”

By contrast, at [104]-[106] Edelman took a totally different view of the width of the power conferred by s.389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act 2009*:

[104] “The private meeting from which the accused was excluded was a well-intentioned attempt to address an understandable concern with the discomfort of a nervous child complainant before the difficult experience of giving evidence. But there were other ways of addressing this concern. In both *Alec (a pseudonym) v The King* and this proceeding the Court of Appeal was correct that the directions to hold private meetings with the complainants were irregular, particularly as the directions were made, and the private hearings were attended, by the judges who then presided over the special hearings. **In neither case did the directions fall within the power under s 389E(1) to make directions ‘for the fair and efficient conduct of the proceeding’.** To the contrary, in both cases the meetings caused inefficiency and had the potential to undermine the fairness ideals of the system of criminal justice. This conclusion is powerfully reinforced by the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic).” [emphasis added]

[105] In the present proceeding, what would have happened if the complainant had said something at the private meeting which was relevant to a fact in issue at the trial? If the precise content of that statement were disputed by the complainant, could counsel for the accused have given evidence about it at the trial? See s.43 *Evidence Act 2008* (Vic). Would the accused then have been required to obtain new counsel? Could the judge have referred to their recollection of the statement? What would have happened if comments or conduct by the judge at the private meeting were considered by counsel for the accused as demonstrating an apprehension of bias? Who could have given evidence and been cross-examined on the appeal if the judge refused an application for recusal but the judge’s factual account of the comments or conduct at the private meeting was disputed or said to be incomplete?

[106] Ultimately, however, in the circumstances of this case, the private meeting, whilst irregular, did not amount to a fundamental irregularity. For the reasons below, the Court of Appeal was correct to answer the questions reserved to the effect that the private meeting was irregular but was not correct to conclude that the private meeting was a fundamental irregularity which required the evidence of the complainant to be retaken at another special hearing before a different judge. Although my conclusion differs from the Court of Appeal in part, my conclusion is heavily dependent upon the limited facts before this Court; I acknowledge the real force in the reasoning of the Court of Appeal and the grave dangers of private meetings in advance of trial that are attended by a judge and a prosecution witness.”

Ultimately, in his concluding paragraph Edelman J summarised the essential disparity between the two High Court judgments as follows:

[167] “The most crucial point of difference in my reasoning from that of the majority is that I do not accept that s 389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act* empowered the court to direct that a private meeting take place between the judge, counsel and a witness, in the absence of the accused. The reasoning of the majority has the effect that, unless and until it is amended, s 389E(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act* will confer a discretion upon the Victorian judiciary to give directions for private meetings between a judge and a witness but excluding the accused, at least where those private meetings are also attended by counsel. Whether it would be wise for such directions to be given is another question.”

### **2.7.1** **Section 523 of the CYFA and sections 8A & 8B of the Open Courts Act 2013**

Prior to the commencement of the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989* ['CYPA'], proceedings in the Children's Court were closed to the public. Without leave of the Court, the only persons who could attend were the child, a parent or guardian of the child, the child's legal representative and representatives of various service providers. That was changed in 1991 by s.19 of the CYPA and the change has been continued by s.523 of the CYFA. However, this section is subject to s.527A which makes evidence of anything said or done in a judicial resolution conference inadmissible unless the Court otherwise orders, having regard to the interests of justice and fairness.

Underpinned by the same sorts of reasons as led to the opening of Family Courts, ss.523(1) & 523(2) of the CYFA require all proceedings in the Children's Court to be conducted in open court unless the Court, on the application of a party or of any other person who has a direct interest in the proceeding or without any such application, orders that–

1. the whole or any part of a proceeding be heard in closed court; or
2. only persons or classes of persons specified by it may be present during the whole or any part of a proceeding.

See also s.125(1) of the *Magistrates’ Court Act 1989*. Victoria is comparatively unusual in this respect. In many other jurisdictions, including China and England, children's court proceedings are closed to the public.

Although s.523 of the CYFA remains a source of power to make a closed court order, the writer considers that s.528(1) of the CYFA makes the provisions of the *Open Courts Act 2013* (‘OCA’) which invest jurisdiction on the Magistrates’ Court applicable to the Children’s Court, at least to the extent that they are not inconsistent with s.523. Although the OCA does not expressly refer to the Children’s Court in its definition of “court or tribunal” in s.3, a Director of Criminal Law Policy of the Department of Justice and Community Safety has advised the Principal Registrar of the Children’s Court that–

“The Children's Court was considered as the [OCA] was drafted…[I]n so far as the Children's Court can exercise the powers of the Magistrates' Court under s.528(1), it retains the power to make any order that the Magistrates Court can make. There was certainly no intention for the OCA to be interpreted as narrowing s.528(1) of the CYFA.”

However, s.523 of the CYFA has effectively been modified by COVID and post-COVID amendments to the OCA. The relevant amendments involve the insertion of s.8A & s.8B into the OCAand the subsequent amendment of s.8B. So far as is relevant to the Children’s Court these sections provide:

**“8A Handing down and delivering judgments by electronic communication does not contravene rules of law relating to open justice**

A court or tribunal does not contravene any rule of law relating to open justice if, instead of handing down or delivering judgment in a court room or hearing room that is open to the public, the court or tribunal—

(a) gives the parties notice that the judgment is to be handed down or delivered as described in paragraphs (b) and (c); and

(b) sends the judgment to the parties by electronic communication; and

(c) makes the judgment available to—

* + - * 1. the public generally; or
        2. a member of the public on request.

Nothing in subsection (1) permits the publication of information in connection with a proceeding if the publication is contrary to a prohibition or restriction imposed by or under this Act or any other Act.

In this section—

***judgment*** includes the following—

(a) reasons;

(b) an order (including a final order);

(c) a ruling;

(d) a finding;

(e) a decision;

(f) a determination.

**8B Certain measures in relation to proceeding or hearing do not contravene rules of law relating to open justice**

A court or tribunal does not contravene any rule of law relating to open justice if, instead of holding a proceeding or hearing in a court room or hearing room that is physically open to the public, the court or tribunal does whichever of the following things the court or tribunal is satisfied it is in the interests of justice to do—

arranging or providing a contemporaneous audio or audio visual broadcast of the proceeding or hearing to—

1. the public generally; or
2. a member of the public on request.

(b) arranging or providing an audio or audio visual recording of the proceeding within a reasonable time after the conclusion of the proceeding or hearing to—

1. the public generally; or
2. a member of the public on request.

A court or tribunal may determine what means or access or combination of means of access under subsection (1) is or are more appropriate in all the circumstances.

No fee is payable for a contemporaneous audio or audio visual broadcast under subsection (1)(a) [or] an audio or audio visual recording of a proceeding or hearing under subsection (1)(b)…by a person to whom it is provided.

Subsection (3) applies despite any Act (other than the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*) or any regulation which fixes a fee for the provision of any broadcast [or] recording…”

So far as the presence in Court of an accused is concerned, the Court of Appeal in *Mareangareu v The Queen* [2019] VSCA 101 said at [59]: “It is a fundamental principle that, unless there is some disentitling conduct or waiver, all aspects of a trial for an indictable offence must be conducted in the presence of the accused. See *Lawrence v The King* [1933] AC 699, 708; *R v Abrahams* (1895) 21 VLR 343, 347‑8; *R v Vernell* [1953] VLR 590, 596; *R v Jones* (1998) 72 SASR 281, 294–5.” However, the accused may be present in Court by audio visual link or audio link in circumstances falling within Division 3 of Part IIA of the *Evidence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1958*. In *Caulfield (a pseudonym) v The King* [2023] VSCA 76 the accused was in prison but connected to the courtroom by an audio visual link. As the judge was reading her sentencing reasons, the connection with the prison was lost. Rather than immediately adjourning the Court to allow the connection to be re-established, the judge took the opportunity to speak directly to persons in court who had provided victim impact statements. At [36]‑[42] the Court of Appeal (Beach, Niall & Kaye JJA) held that “the remarks made by the judge in the absence of the applicant should not have been made” and enunciated some cardinal principles as to why. However, although leave to appeal was granted, the appeal was ultimately dismissed on the basis that no lesser sentence was appropriate.

### **2.7.2 Sections 28-30 Open Courts Act 2013and section 93.2Criminal Code Act 1995(Cth)**

In order “to strengthen and promote the principle of open justice”, the OCA originally provided in s.28 a presumption in favour of hearing a proceeding in open court. The *Open Courts and Other Acts Amendment Act 2019* replaced the presumption in favour of open courts with an obligation to consider the primacy of the open justice principle, free communication and disclosure of information, and to not make a closed court order unless necessary to override that principle. This obligation effectively applies to any closure of the court, whether made under the *Open Courts Act*, other legislation, or at common law. Section 29 of the OCA provides that the common law powers to make closed court orders remain unaffected by the OCA.

Hence, in deciding whether or not a Children’s Court hearing should be closed in whole or part under s.523 of the CYFA, the provisions of s.30(2) of the OCA [replacing s.126(1) of the *Magistrates’ Court Act 1989*] are relevant by virtue of s.528(1) of the CYFA. Insofar as it is relevant, s.30(2) of the OCA provides:

“A court…may make a closed court order if satisfied as to one or more of the following grounds:

1. the order is necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice that cannot be prevented by other reasonably available means;
2. the order is necessary to prevent prejudice to the interests of the Commonwealth or a State or Territory in relation to national or international security;
3. the order is necessary to protect the safety of any person;
4. the order is necessary to avoid causing undue distress or embarrassment to a complainant or witness in any criminal proceeding involving a sexual offence or a family violence offence;
5. the order is necessary to avoid causing undue distress or embarrassment to a child who is a witness in any criminal proceeding…”

However, in the writer’s view these five circumstances do not comprise a complete list of pre‑conditions to the making of a Children’s Court closed court order under s.523 of the CYFA.

Section 93.2 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) provides a court exercising federal jurisdiction with both a closed court power and a suppression order power in circumstances where the exercise of the power is in the interests of Australia’s national security:

**93.2 Hearing in camera etc.**

(1) This section applies to a hearing of an application or other proceedings before a federal court, a court exercising federal jurisdiction or a court of a Territory, whether under this Act or otherwise.

(2) At any time before or during the hearing, the judge or magistrate, or other person presiding or competent to preside over the proceedings, may, if satisfied that it is in the interests of Australia’s national security:

(a) order that some or all of the members of the public be excluded during the whole or a part of the hearing; or

(b) order that no report of the whole or a specified part of, or relating to, the application or proceedings be published; or

(c) make such order and give such directions as he or she thinks necessary for ensuring that no person, without the approval of the court, has access (whether before, during or after the hearing) to any affidavit, exhibit, information or other document used in the application or the proceedings that is on the file in the court or in the records of the court.

(3) A person commits an offence if the person contravenes an order made or direction given under this section.

Penalty: Imprisonment for 5 years.

See also **section 2.8.2** below.

It is important to note that closed court orders:

* are not suppression orders; they do not directly suppress material or fall within the definition of ‘suppression order’ in s.3 of the OCA and hence are not subject to the general provisions applicable to suppression orders in Part 2 of the OCA;
* are one of the most severe encroachments on the open justice principle, involving as they do a prohibition on the attendance of the public or certain members thereof against the general rule that justice must be administered in open court;
* are not a bar to the publication of reports on the proceedings and do not justify withholding publication of the court’s judgment and orders; courts and tribunals should always seek to publish an appropriately formulated statement of reasons, conveying an adequate account of the litigation and the reasons underlying its orders: *David Syme & Co Ltd v General Motors-Holden’s Ltd*[1984] 2 NSWLR 294; redaction of reports of proceedings may allow the judgment and orders to be published without causing prejudice where a court has been closed.

Closed court orders are often seen as an order of last resort. Section 30(2)(a) of the OCA provides that a closed court order must be necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the administration of justice “that cannot be prevented by other reasonably available means”, such as “making a proceeding suppression order”. The implication is that proceeding suppression orders impinge less significantly on the open justice principle.

Courts have confirmed the desirability of addressing the relevant concern without issuing a closed court order. For example:

* In *ABC v D1* [2007] VSC 480 J Forrest J noted at [36]:

“The nature of the order which is sought to be made is germane to the ultimate disposition of a suppression application. The closing of the Court for the whole of a proceeding is a serious matter indeed; on the other hand, suppressing the names of certain witnesses but permitting the evidence at the hearing to be reported will require different considerations.”

* In *XY v Board of Examiners*[2003] VSC 196 Cummins J said at [11] that “there are a number of steps short of closure of the Court or prohibition of the whole of the proceedings which can meet a number of [the applicant’s] concerns, including use of pseudonyms, prohibition of publication of names and other matters of sensitivity”.
* In *Ami Australia Holdings Pty Ltd v Fairfax Media Publications Pty Ltd* [2009] NSWSC 1290, Brereton J hesitantly closed the court after anxious consideration of other options at [6]-[7]:

“I have considered whether, short of conducting proceedings in closed court, some other mechanism — such as a non-publication order could be put in place — which might permit the court to remain open while at the same time preventing or prohibiting publication of the imputations. But it seems to me that, given that if the court were open it would be open to all, and the court would not be in a position to be able to identify and control who might enter and who might have notice of any non-publication order, that would not be a satisfactory solution. It also seems to me that requiring counsel, witnesses and the court to use veiled speech during the hearing would not be in the interests of justice. In effect, such a course would still seek to conceal from the public what was at the heart of the proceedings, while going through the pretence of conducting them in open court, while at the same time imposing additional difficulties on the conduct of the proceedings.

As grave a step as it is — and it is one that I embark upon with considerable hesitation — it seems to me that the fundamental point is that the relief sought in the proceedings would be rendered futile if the proceedings were not conducted in a closed court…”

Nevertheless, a closed court order may be preferable in proceedings where an open court would create an unacceptable risk that sensitive or confidential information would be disclosed. In *R v Lodhi* (2006) 199 FLR 270, Whealy J thought at [31] that non-publication orders could be made “as such problems emerge”, but “that would be to run the real risk that the damage would have been done” which would be “plainly so if the inadvertence were to occur in open court”.

### **2.7.3 Pseudonym orders**

Section 7(d) of the *Open Courts Act 2013* provides that that Act does not limit or otherwise affect the making of an order or decision by a court or tribunal that—

1. conceals the identity of a person by restricting the way the person is referred to in open court;
2. restricts the way an event or thing may be referred to in open court;
3. prohibits or restricts access to a court or tribunal file.

As Dixon J noted in *AS v Minister for Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] VSC 486 at [3], such orders – known as pseudonym orders – differ from other restrictions on open justice, such as suppression orders and closed court orders. In that case the litigation guardian for a 6 year old asylum seeker living in detention in Christmas Island and proposing to issue proceedings on behalf of AS for damages for psychological harm had sought a suppression order. Dixon J did not make a proceeding suppression order but made a pseudonym order that the plaintiff only be referred to by the pseudonym AS and that all documents filed in the proceeding only refer to the plaintiff as AS. At [7] his Honour referred to and applied the following principles applicable in making pseudonym orders as distilled by J Forrest J in *ABC v D1 and Others; Ex Parte The Herald Sun & Weekly Times Limited* [2007] VSC 480 at [64]-[71]:

“First, that the principal rule is that judicial hearings should take place in open court: publicly and in open view, with no restriction on reporting. This is a fundamental precept underpinning the administration of justice.

Second, that in certain circumstances the administration of justice requires a qualification of the general rule. There will be circumstances where modifications of the general rule are necessarily made to ensure that the administration of justice is not frustrated. These exceptions are many and varied and cannot be prescriptively identified.

Third, that the test to be applied by the court in making the pseudonym order is, to use the words of the statute, where it is necessary to do so in order not to prejudice the administration of justice.

Fourth, that a court, in determining whether to make a pseudonym order, is entitled to take into account the individual considerations affecting the person seeking the order and balance those against the principal rule of open justice in determining whether the administration of justice warrants the making of the order. Relevant to these individual considerations is whether there is a real risk of the party or witness suffering psychological harm as a result of publication of his or her name or the names of other parties. Also relevant is the real risk of a party not proceeding with an action in the event that he or she or another person is identified.

Fifth, that in certain circumstances, particularly those involving sexual assaults, it may be appropriate not only to suppress the name of the plaintiff but also to suppress the name of the defendant or defendants.

Sixth, that in determining whether to make such an order, a court is entitled to take into account the fact that there will still be a reporting of the proceeding and that the hearing itself will be conducted in open court, subject to the restrictions imposed by the pseudonym order.

Seventh, in determining whether it is necessary to make such an order, usually the proofs must be cogent and will not be satisfied by mere belief on the part of a party that the order is necessary. However, in certain cases a court can, in a practical sense, act on its own experience and draw appropriate inferences.”

As Dixon J also noted at [9], the fourth point identified by Forrest J – that genuinely held fears of psychological harm upon disclosure of identity will be a relevant factor for the court’s consideration – is illustrated by *TTT & JJJ v The State of Victoria* [2013] VSC 162 at [18] per Cavanough J and *Director of Public Prosecutions v EN* [2023] VSC 724 at [50] per Elliott J.

In making a pseudonym order in *XYZ v State of Victoria & Anor* [2016] VSC 339, T Forrest J approved and applied the principles espoused by J Forrest J in *ABC v D1 and Others; Ex Parte The Herald Sun & Weekly Times Limited* [2007] VSC 480 and by Cavanough J in *TTT & JJJ v The State of Victoria* [2013] VSC 162 and added at [17]-[19] (emphasis mine):

[17] “The *Open Courts Act* recognises that a pseudonym order differs from other restrictions on open justice, such as suppression orders and closed court orders. When a proceeding suppression order is made under s.17 of the *Open Courts Act*, it is necessary to comply with Part 3 of that Act. The order I propose to make will not constitute a proceeding suppression order. There will be no effect on the public nature of the proceedings and the ability of the media to fully report on proceedings will only be restricted on the issue of the identity of the proposed plaintiff and other individuals involved: see the comments in *X v Sydney Children’s Hospitals Speciality Network* [2011] NSWSC 1272 [15] and *Witness v Marsden & Anor* (2000) 49 NSWLR 429. The order will not directly restrain conduct by publication, although a potential liability in contempt may arise on breach of the order [*AAA v BBB* (unreported, Supreme Court of Victoria, Ashley J, 26/08/1994, 6‑7; *R v Savvas, Stevens & Peisley* (1989) 43 A Crim R 331; *Attorney-General for NSW v Mayas Pty Ltd* (1988) 14 NSWLR 342,355], but **no need arises for media proprietors to be heard in respect of either the making or the revocation of the order.** My order will be subject to any further order.

[18] At common law, the power to make pseudonym orders is well established: *Witness v Marsden & Anor* (2000) 49 NSWLR 429; *R v Smith* (1996) 86 A Crim R 308; *Raybos Australia Pty Ltd v Jones* (1985) 2 NSWLR 47; *John Fairfax Group Pty Ltd (receivers and managers apptd) & Anor v Local Court of NSW & Ors* (1991) 26 NSWLR 131. One category of case in which suppression, closed court and pseudonym orders are generally made to prevent prejudice to the administration of justice are those where it is desirable to protect the safety of persons who are to be litigants or witnesses in those proceedings: *XG v Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria* [2010] VSC 79; *The Age Co Ltd & Ors v Magistrates’ Court of Victoria & Ors* [2004] VSC 10; *Victorian Lawyers RPA Ltd v ‘X’* [2001] VSC 432; *Witness v Marsden & Anor* (2000) 49 NSWLR 429; *R v Savvas, Stevens & Peisley* (1989) 43 A Crim R 331. In *BK v ADB* [2003] VSC 129 at [10] Nettle J accepted that pseudonym orders may be made in–

a case where disclosure of the identity of the plaintiffs might be sufficient to deflect the plaintiffs from prosecuting their case; which is to say they might reasonably be deterred from bringing proceedings unless public disclosure of their identities could be prevented.

[19] At common law, pseudonym orders in particular have been made in the following categories of cases:

(a) when the plaintiff would reasonably be deterred from bringing proceedings without a pseudonym order: see also *ANN v ABC & XYZ (No 1)* [2006] VSC 348; *A v Peters* [2011] VSC 478; *National Australia Bank Ltd v KRDV* (2012) 292 ALR 639; *ABB (by her litigation guardian ABC) v D1* [2013] VSC 81; *TTT & JJJ* v *State of Victoria* [2013] VSC 162;

(b) when the defendant would reasonably be deterred from defending proceedings without a pseudonym order;

(c) cases involving sexual offences; and

(d) cases involving children.”

In *Mokbel v The King* [2023] VSCA 114 the Chief Commissioner of Police sought that 8 of 11 individuals be allocated fresh pseudonyms differing from those used in the Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants. In refusing that application McCann JR discussed at [11]-[12] the relevant law in relation to the making of pseudonym orders:

“Section 7(d) of the Open Courts Act 2013 does not limit or otherwise affect the making of an order concealing the identity of a person. The power to make a pseudonym order is in the Court’s inherent jurisdiction. Before the Court will make such an order it needs to be satisfied that there is ‘a proper foundation which establishes that if the orders are not made, the administration of justice will be prejudiced’: see *Secretary Department of Justice and Regulation v Zhong (No 2)* [2017] VSCA 19 at [8]. There must be ‘a demonstrable justification’ based on cogent evidence not merely an assertion based on expressed belief or opinion: see *PQR v Secretary, Department of Justice and Regulation (No 1)* [2017] VSCA 513 at [73]; *Zhong (No 2)* [2017] VSCA 19 at [4] quoting *ABC v D1; Ex parte The Herald & Weekly Times Limited* [2007] VSC 480 at [65]–[71].

The categories of risk are not closed. The exceptions to the principle of open justice are many and varied and cannot be prescriptively identified: *Zhong (No 2)* at [4]. The test is whether it is necessary to make an order to prevent the frustration of the administration of justice: see e.g. *ESB v Victoria* [2010] VSC 479 at [12]; *AX & Anor v Stern & Anor* [2008] VSC 400 at [12]; *ABC v D1* [2007] VSC 480 at [42]–[60]. It follows that the issues for consideration are what is the risk and is the order is necessary.”

Based on this legal analysis, her Honour concluded at [19] that risk will not be materially increased by using the already allocated pseudonyms and that orders for fresh pseudonyms are not necessary.

See also *ABC-1 & ABC-2 v Ring & Ring* [2014] VSC 5; *Giurina v Giurina* [2018] VSC 599 at [24]-[32]; *XBA (ex parte)* [2019] VSC 49 at [4]-[17]; *GHJ v Secretary to the Department of Justice and Community Safety* [2019] VSC 89; *Jane Doe v XYZ* [2019] VSC 176 at [9]; *IJW v Swinburne University of Technology* [2021] VSC 846 at [31]-[42]; *Karam v The Queen (Ruling No.2)* [2022] VSC 168;, esp. at [10]-[11]; *Taylor v State of Victoria* [2023] VSC 320 at [9]-[27]; *Legal Services Commissioner v JXL* [2023] QSC 283 at [33]-[36], [41]-[43] & [54]-[66]; *Re Mokbel (Ruling No 1)* [2024] VSC 26 at [36]-[42]; *Attorney-General v Temssah* [2024] VSC 172 at [33]-[34]; *Re Cardwell* [2024] VSC 263 at [48]-[50].

### **2.7.4 Media applications for copies of court documents in Criminal Division cases**

A protocol regarding media access to certain documents in cases in the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court has been developed by the court. Journalists making applications for access to materials are generally required to file a completed “Application for Access to Material” form which also contains a 6 point undertaking to be given by the journalist in the event that materials are released. A copy of this Application form can be downloaded from the Children’s Court website by tabbing “Forms” 🡺 “General Forms” 🡺 “Application for Access to Material”. Whether or not all or any part of the requested material is released is entirely at the discretion of the presiding judicial officer in each case.

### **2.7.5 Media applications for copies of audio or audiovisual recordings of police interviews**

There are specific prohibitions in the *Crimes Act 1958* in relation to the possession and playing of audio recordings or audiovisual recordings of police interviews and associated recordings made under ss.464B(5H), 464G or 464H. Section 464JA(2) makes it an offence punishable by level 8 imprisonment for a person other than the suspect, his/her legal representative and an authorized person acting in the course of his or her duties knowingly to possess such a recording. Section 464JA(3) makes it an offence, also punishable by level 8 imprisonment, to play such a recording except in certain circumstances. One such circumstance is if “the recording is played by an authorised person acting in the course of his or her duties”. Eighteen categories of persons are defined in s.464JA(1) as “authorized persons”. The relevant category for media applications is s.464JA(1)(i): “...a person acting under the direction of a court”. This must be read in conjunction with s.464JB(2): “A court may give directions, with or without conditions, as to the supply, copying, editing, erasure, playing or publishing of [such a] recording.”

When Parliament enacted the *Open Courts Act 2013* it chose not to include records of interview in that Act but left the question of their release totally in the hands of the Court under s.464JB(2) of the *Crimes Act 1958*: see *R v Hemming (Ruling 1)* [2015] VSC 351 [8] & [18] per King J. In *DPP v Angela Maree Williams (Ruling No.1)* [2015] VSC 107 – a decision approved and applied by both King J in *R v Hemming* and Lasry J in *R v Reed-Robertson* [2016] VSC 236 [20]-[22] – Hollingworth J provided at [11] the following non-exhaustive list of factors which may be relevant to the exercise of the court’s discretion pursuant to s.464JB:

“(a) the privacy of the interviewee, interviewers, and others mentioned in the interview;

(b) whether the interviewee consents to the release;

(c) the attitude of other people affected by the interview;

(d) whether any person (such as victims or children) would be adversely affected by release;

(e) whether the record of interview discloses graphic details of offending;

(f) whether any criminal investigations or trials are ongoing;

(g) whether release may undermine the integrity of the criminal justice process;

(h) the level of contemporaneous public interest in the case;

(i) whether release will enhance the fair and accurate reporting of the case;

(j) the principle of open justice (where the record of interview has been played in open court); and

(k) the nature of the proposed publication.”

Applying this test ultimately all three applications for release of audiovisual recordings were refused.

In the Children’s Court the restriction on publication of proceedings set out in s.534 of the CYFA – discussed below – creates an additional hurdle for a media applicant seeking copies of audio or audiovisual recordings of police interviews of accused children.

### **2.7.6 Recording of proceedings in the Children’s Court**

All Court proceedings in the Children’s Court are digitally recorded by the Court in accordance with s.19A *Magistrates’ Court Act 1989* (MCA), read in conjunction with s.528(2)(a) of the CYFA. Section 19A provides: “The principal registrar must ensure that all proceedings in the Court are recorded in accordance with the Rules.” However, in light of the general confidentiality provisions in s.226 CYFA, Family Division conciliation conferences are not formally recorded.

Over the years the Magistrates’ Court has issued 4 Practice Directions on the issue of audio recording of court proceedings. The current Practice Direction – No. 2 of 2023 – has been in operation since 14 April 2023 and provides in part:

1. Proceedings before the Magistrates’ Court of Victoria (the Court) are recorded by the Court’s audio recording equipment.

2. Audio recordings of proceedings in the Magistrates’ Court of Victoria are retained for 12 months from the date of hearing.

3. Unless the Court determines in any particular matter that a recording should not be released, a copy of a recording may be released to a party to a proceeding or their legal representative upon payment of the applicable fee or approval of application for fee waiver. Release of a recording may be subject to conditions as determined by the Court.

4. A copy of a recording may be requested by a non-party to a proceeding. Such request requires approval by the Court. If approval is granted a copy of the recording may be released upon payment of the applicable fee or approval for fee waiver. Release of a recording may be subject to conditions as determined by the Court.

However, there have never been any relevant Rules as contemplated by s.19A. This gives rise to the question whether s.19A imposes any binding obligation on the principal registrar in the absence of Rules. The writer’s preferred interpretation is that in the absence of relevant Rules, the words “in accordance with the Rules” should be regarded as ‘blue-pencilled’ out of s.19A with the truncated section continuing to impose an obligation on the principal registrar to ensure that all proceedings in the Court are recorded.

In the Children’s Court audio recordings of proceedings are also generally retained for 12 months from the date of the hearing.

In relation to child protection proceedings and proceedings under the *Terrorism (Community Protection) Act 2003* in the Family Division of the Children’s Court, paragraphs 18-19 of the Children’s Court Practice Direction No.1 of 2024 provide:

**DIGITAL RECORDINGS**

18. An application by a self-represented party for a copy of a digital recording in a proceeding is to be made by filing a Request for Copy of Audio Recording Form with the relevant Children’s Court Registry.

19. An application by a represented party for a copy of a digital recording in a proceeding is to be made by the legal practitioner filing the Request for Copy of Audio Recording Form in the CMS portal.

Although these paragraphs on their face seem to be confined to the release of digital recordings to parties to the relevant proceeding, it is clear from paragraph 4 of the Magistrates’ Court Practice Direction No.2 of 2023 that a copy of a recording may be requested by a non-party to a proceeding. The relevant Request Form provides for that.

To apply for a copy of a digital recording of any Children’s Court proceeding, the applicant must–

* complete a “Request for Copy of Audio Recording” form; legal practitioners in child protection cases may file the request form in the CMS portal; other persons may download the form from the Children’s Court website: <https://www.childrenscourt.vic.gov.au/court-forms/general-forms>; and
* pay a fee of $55 per day unless the fee has been waived by the Court.

Applications must be made directly to the venue of the Children’s Court where the proceeding was heard.

Applications are not granted as of right. They require an order of the Court, usually by the presiding judicial officer or the President. In the writer’s view the Court would not order the release of a digital recording of a child protection case in the Family Division if to do so would not be in the best interests of the subject child: cf. s.8(1) of the CYFA. However, this test does not apply to release of a digital recording of a Criminal Division case: cf. s.8(4) of the CYFA.

If a copy of a digital recording is released by the Court, this is generally done by email to the applicant containing a link to the recording in **.mp3** format. The applicant must not copy, distribute or publish, or cause the copying, distribution or publication of the recording in any way without the express approval of the Court. In this regard, the application form contains a **WARNING** relating to the publication of identifying particulars prohibited by s.534 of the CYFA which is discussed in **section 2.8.1** below.

There are specific offences created by ss.4A, 4B & 4C of the *Court Security Act 1980* [CSA] which relate to the **unauthorised** recording of Court proceedings and to the **unauthorised** publishing or transmitting of recordings of Court proceedings. The sections each provide a maximum penalty of 20 penalty units. In s.2(1) of the CSA, “Court” includes the Children’s Court and “proceeding” includes a Children’s Court proceeding. A specific form is available on the Children’s Court website which must be completed by any member of the public making an application to record proceedings in the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court.

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## **2.8 Restriction on publication of proceedings**

### **2.8.1 Statutory prohibition on publication of identifying particulars-s.534 of the CYFA**

Under s.534(1) of the CYFA – the statutory predecessors of which are s.26 of the *Children and Young Persons Act 1991*, s.48 of the *Children’s Court Act 197*3, s.43 of the *Children’s Court Act 1958* & s.43 of the *Children’s Court Act 1956* – it is an offence punishable by fine or imprisonment for a person to publish or cause to be published–

(a) except with the permission of the President or of a magistrate under s.534(1A), a report of any proceeding in the Court or of a proceeding in any other court arising out of a proceeding in the Court that contains any particulars likely to lead to the identification of–

(i) the particular venue of the Children's Court, other than the Koori Court (Criminal Division) or the Neighbourhood Justice Division, in which the proceeding was heard; or

(ii) a child or other party to the proceeding; or

(iii) a witness in the proceeding; or

(b) except with the permission of the President or of a magistrate under s.534(1A), a picture as being or including a picture of a child or other party to, or a witness in, a proceeding referred to in paragraph (a) above; or

(c) except with the permission of the President or of a magistrate under s.534(1A) or – per s.534(3) – of the Secretary granted in special circumstances in relation to a child who is the subject of a family reunification order, care by Secretary order or long-term care order, any matter that contains any particulars likely to lead to the identification of a child as being the subject of an order made by the Court.

In footnotes 38 & 39 of his judgment in *Re WD (No 2)* [2023] VSC 790 Elliott J said in relation to the words “or other party to the proceeding” in s.534(1)(a)(ii) CYFA:

(38) “Although it was not the subject of any argument, the apparent breadth of this subparagraph is notable. In many proceedings in or arising from the Children’s Court (such as this one), the Director of Public Prosecutions (or other public entity) is a ‘party to the proceeding’. Presumably, this subparagraph cannot be intended to restrict or prohibit the publication of a report containing any particulars likely to lead to the identification of the Director of Public Prosecutions, as such an interpretation would undermine the purpose of s 534: see *Howe v Harvey* (2008) 20 VR 638, 658-659 [94] (Neave and Kellam JJA and Forrest AJA).”

(39) “In a similar vein, and again as in the circumstances of this case, it will sometimes be the case that a child the subject of a proceeding in or arising from the Children’s Court is in the care of the Secretary. However, this subparagraph likewise cannot be intended to restrict or prohibit the publication of the name of the Secretary in a report of the proceeding, as such an interpretation would likewise undermine the purpose of s 534: ibid.”

Section 534A exempts from the restrictions in s.534(1) identifying material, including a picture, of a victim or alleged victim aged 18 or older so long as the circumstances detailed in s.534A(2) do not apply.

Section 534B – inserted in 2019 – exempts from the restrictions in s.534(1) identifying material published by a judge of the County Court or the Supreme Court when sentencing an adult offender in the circumstances detailed in s.534B(2).

Section 534(1A) provides that on application to the Court, a magistrate may exercise the powers of the President under ss.534(1)(a), (1)(b) or (1)(c) and grant permission for the requisite publication if the magistrate is satisfied that–

1. the circumstances giving rise to the request for permission to publish are an emergency; and
2. publication is reasonably necessary for the safety of–
3. the child, other party or witness referred to in s.534(1); or
4. any other person in the community.

Section 534(4) of the CYFA lists the following particulars – not intended to be exhaustive – which are deemed to be particulars likely to lead to the identification of a person:

1. the name of the person;
2. the names of–
3. any relative of the person;
4. any other person having the care of the person;
5. in addition to subparagraphs (i) & (ii), in the case of an Aboriginal person, a member of the Aboriginal community of the person;
6. the name or address of any place of residence of the person, or the locality in which the residence is situated;
7. the name or address of any place of education, training or employment attended by the person, or the locality in which the place is situated.

In *Herald & Weekly Times Pty Ltd v AB* [2008] VChC 3 at [14]-[19] Judge Grant refused an application by HWT to identify the alleged offender. In so doing his Honour outlined the legislative background and rationale for s.534 and its predecessor provisions as follows:

“[14] Prior to the commencement of the CYPA matters heard in the Children’s Court of Victoria were heard in closed court. This is still the case in some jurisdictions throughout the world.

[15] The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Justice (also known as the Beijing Rules) of November 1985 state:

‘8.1 The juvenile’s right to privacy shall be respected at all stages in order to avoid harm being caused to him or her by undue publicity or by the process of labelling.

8.2 In principle, no information that may lead to the identification of a juvenile offender shall be published.’

[16] The official commentary to the Rules recognises how young people are particularly susceptible to stigmatization. There is a reference to criminological research into labelling processes. This research has provided evidence of the detrimental effects resulting from the permanent identification of young people as criminal or delinquent.

[17] The *Child Welfare Practice and Legislation Review Report* of 1984 (often referred to as the Carney Report) recommended that proceedings in the Children’s Court should be open to both the public and the media. The ‘trade off’ for opening the court was to recommend a bar on reporting or disseminating any identifying information of children and families. At p.409 of the report there is the following analysis – ‘The mischief which it is unanimously agreed must be avoided at all costs is the dissemination of information which would, or which could, identify and embarrass individual children and families appearing before the court.’

[18] The recommendations in the Carney Report were influential in the development of the CYPA. The changes to law introduced by that Act opened the Children’s Court to the public for the first time in its history. There were, however, two important riders on the open justice principle. In s.19 the court was provided with a wide unfettered power to close the court in appropriate circumstances. Section 26 contained a prohibition as to the publication of identifying information of the children and parties and witnesses involved in the court’s proceedings without the permission of the head of the Children’s Court.

[19] In the Criminal Division of the court the limit on identification of the child/young person subject to proceedings was in line with established principle. It was designed to protect a young person appearing in the Criminal Division from the indignity of being labelled a criminal and the stigma that attaches to that description. In the Second Reading Speech for the CYPA the then Minister stated ‘The rights of children and young people who come before the court are clearly established in the proposed legislation. The Bill provides that proceedings must be comprehensible to children and their families, respect cultural identity and minimize stigma.’ Section 534 of the CYFA significantly reproduces the old s.26. One subsection not found in the old Act is s.534(5)...It allows publication of accounts of proceedings of the court where those accounts have been approved by the President...Section 534(5) was included in the legislation at the request of the court and I am satisfied that its intended purpose was limited to the court’s use of its own website for the publishing of de-identified decisions.”

It is rare for the President to give permission for identifying material to be published pursuant to ss.534(1)(a), 534(1)(b) or 534(1)(c) of the CYFA. In the past fifteen years, the only cases in which such permission has been given have involved:

* abandoned children where details were permitted to be published in an attempt to locate a parent;
* children who were missing or had absconded in an attempt to locate them;
* children believed to be in need of protection but whose whereabouts are currently unknown; and
* a case in which a TV channel was permitted to identify a child – with consent of child and family – in a program highlighting the success of the child's rehabilitation.

In *ABC and DOHS & others* [2014] VChC 1 an application was made to Judge Couzens to publish reports of a proceeding in the Children’s Court, including pictures of parties in de-identified form. Counsel agreed that ‘likely’ in the context of particulars ‘likely to lead to the identification of’’ should be taken to mean ‘a real possibility that cannot be sensibly ignored’ as opposed to being ‘more likely than not’: see in *Re H and Others (Minors) (Sexual Abuse: Standard of Proof)* [1996] AC 563 at 583. His Honour adopted dicta of the Court of Appeal in *Howe v Harvey* (2008) 20 VR 638 at 653 that:

“We are inclined to think that s.26 [of the CYPA] would be breached if the particulars which are published are sufficient to enable those who know a child (for example his or her school friends or neighbours) to identify him or her as the child who has been involved in court proceedings, even though a general reader would not do so.”

Judge Couzens held [at pp.12-13] that a pixilated/distorted/partial picture of a child or other party or witness in a proceedings in the Children’s Court was subject to the prohibition in s.534(1)(b) whether or not publication of the picture is likely to lead to the identification of the child, party or witness. His Honour said: “In my view, if the legislature had intended to limit the prohibition to only pictures that were likely to lead to the identification of a child, other party or witness, it would have been expected to include those words as it did with (1)(a) and (c).” However, his Honour ultimately granted the ABC’s application and permitted the publication of reports – which included a partial picture of the child and a distorted picture of the child’s father – for the following reasons [at p.16]:

“Ultimately, the question of whether or not to grant the ABC’s application is a balancing exercise between the paramount interests of the children who are the subject of the report and the public’s right to know about what is reported to have happened to the children whilst in the care of DHS.

Where, as in this case, I am satisfied that the risk of the children being identified is at best minimal, the public’s interest in knowing what is said to have happened to these highly vulnerable children in the care of the State weighs the balance firmly in favour of publication.”

In *HWT v DM & Ors* [2016] VChC 3 an application had been made to Judge Chambers for permission to publish pixilated pictures and video recordings of children who have been involved in proceedings in the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court and in respect of whom the Court has sentenced, or has deferred sentencing, under the provisions of the CYFA. The application was made in the context of the involvement of the HWT in a “Youth Summit” to be convened by the Chief Commissioner of Police on 21/07/2016. The application was opposed by the three young persons whose pixilated photographs were proposed to be published for the following factual reasons (set out at [12]):

“[T]hey fear being identified by family members, friends and associates who are not aware of their role in this offending, or by other members of their community, including other young people held in detention, if their images (even where pixilated) accompany the feature article....[They] are ashamed of their offending behaviour, and submit that the shame and embarrassment to them and to their families will be exacerbated by the publication of the images. They fear becoming the ‘face’ of the problems leading to the Youth summit being convened.”

In refusing the HWT application her Honour held:

[15] “...I intend to adopt the approach of Judge Couzens to my consideration of this application. In doing so, it is instructive that Parliament has not utilised the language it purposely adopted for s.534(1)(a) and (1)(c). Section 534(1)(b) does not limit the prohibition of images of a child, a party or a witness involved in proceedings in the Children’s Court to those likely to lead to their identification. It is a broader prohibition, prohibiting the publication of such images without the permission of the President, even where the images may not lead to the identification of those whose image is represented in picture.

[16] Clearly, in exercising my discretion under s.534(1) of the Act, I must have regard to a number of competing interests.

[17] [I]n considering any proceedings under the Act, it is necessary to have regard to, and to the extent possible, give effect to the purposes of the Act contained in s.3, which includes making provision in relation to children who have been charged with, or been found guilty of offences. Parliament has sought to achieve this objective by creating a distinct sentencing regime for children with discrete sentencing considerations set out at s.362 of the Act, in marked contrast to the sentencing considerations applicable to adults under the *Sentencing Act 1991*. These considerations include those aimed at achieving the important objective of rehabilitating the child while minimising the stigma to the child resulting from a Court determination.

[18] The distinctive nature of the Children’s Court criminal jurisdiction was recently considered by the Victorian Court of Appeal in the decision of *Webster (a Pseudonym) v The Queen* [2016] VSCA 66... at [7]-[9]...

[19] The desirability of avoiding stigma to a child is also emphasised in the procedural guidelines set out at s.522 of the Act which requires the Court, as far as practicable, to minimise the stigma to the child and his or her family in any proceeding, including an application under Part 7.5. The Court is also required to have regard to the expressed wishes of the child.

[20] Against this, the case of the applicant is framed in the context of the public interest in promoting an understanding of and facilitating public debate surrounding the nature and extent of criminal offending by a small cohort of young offenders.

[21] In my view, this application must be considered in the context of the harm sought to be ameliorated by s534(1) of the Act. As stated in *Howe v Harvey (2008) 20 VR 638 at 651* the provision is intended to protect against ‘the stigmatisation and interference with the privacy of the child and his or her family caused by identifying them as participants in court proceedings’. In so stating, the Court echoed the fundamental rights of a child as outlined in Article 40 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to ‘have his or her rights to privacy fully respected at all stages of the proceedings’.

[22] Here, even where the facial images of the offenders are pixilated or distorted, there are other identifying features of the offenders that are relevant to my consideration. These include, but are not limited to, distinctive clothing or clothing generally worn by the offender or their physical characteristics including their height, build, gait and particular mannerisms that may otherwise lead to identification. This is relevant to my consideration of the potential stigmatising impact of publication of the images on the respondents.

[23] The HWT is able to report...on the nature and extent of the offending conduct leading to the charges before the Court, provided it does so in a manner that is not likely to lead to their identification. A question arises whether the public interest in understanding the nature and extent of the offending is furthered by the incorporation of the images and CCTV footage. Moreover, that the public interest in being so informed overrides the competing interest in avoiding stigma to the child, protecting the child’s privacy and facilitating the important objective of furthering the child’s rehabilitation to achieve the twin objectives of reducing the risk of further offending and promoting community safety.

[24] In respect of this application, having the benefit of considering the draft feature article and the detail contained in that article regarding the offences, I do not consider that the public interest or public understanding is significantly advanced by the incorporation of even heavily redacted images of the offending. Certainly, not to the extent that it overrides the legislative objective of protecting child offenders from stigmatisation and promoting the rehabilitation of those who are the subject of proceedings in the ‘distinctive’ criminal jurisdiction of this Court.”

In *Victoria Police v. AY & NA (pseudonyms)* [Melbourne Children’s Court, 29/05/2019] the respondents were 2 of 4 youths who were believed to have committed two aggravated home invasions, an attempted carjacking, a carjacking and associated offences. Applications were made to Judge Chambers by Victoria Police to publish identifying details of the respondents whose whereabouts were unknown. Holding that the circumstances giving rise to the applications are an emergency and that publication is reasonably necessary for the safety of other persons and members of the community, her Honour granted the applications for permission to publish particulars likely to lead to the identification of the child in the form of the draft media release produced by Victoria Police together with the accompanying photographs. Pursuant to s.534(1A) of the CYFA her Honour made self-executing orders in these terms but held that upon the location and arrest of the child the permission to publish will no longer apply and the permission granted by the order will be taken to be revoked.

In 2009 the then President, Judge Grant, had taken advice from the Director of Public Prosecutions and agreed with his advice that the publication of photographs of children or witnesses involved in Children’s Court proceedings, “whether pixilated or otherwise altered to prevent the identity of the [person] being revealed, would breach [s.534(1)(b) of the CYPA]”. By letter dated 28/05/2009 his Honour requested the Strategic Communications Advisor to the Supreme Court of Victoria to publish a warning to all media outlets about this interpretation of s.534(1)(b).

There have been several prosecutions of persons or bodies corporate alleged to have breached s.534 of the CYFA or s.26 of the CYPA. One such prosecution was *Peter Harvey v Channel 7 Melbourne Pty Ltd, The Herald and Weekly Times Pty Ltd, Nationwide News Pty Ltd & Others*, a decision of Magistrate Lisa Hannan [now Justice Hannan] on 15/05/2006. This prosecution followed the publication of identifying particulars of a 14 year old boy who had made an application at Melbourne Children’s Court alleging irreconcilable differences with his mother. Her Honour held at pp.9-11 that an offence against s.26 is a strict liability offence. At pp.15-18 she was unable to be satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that those of the defendants who were reporters or news readers had the necessary degree of control over what was ultimately broadcast or telecast to bring them within the scope of “publish” or “cause to be published” in s.26. She ultimately dismissed the charges against 12 of the 17 defendants. She found the charges proved against the remaining 5 defendants and imposed significant fines. Appeals and cross-appeals against Her Honour’s decision were dismissed by the Supreme Court: *Howe & Ors v Harvey; DPP v Quist & Ors* [2007] VSC 130. Ensuing appeals and cross-appeals were dismissed by the Court of Appeal: *Howe & Ors v Harvey & DPP & Ors* (2008) 20 VR 638; [2008] VSCA 181.

In *Porch v State of Victoria* [2023] VSC 61 John Dixon J drew a distinction between ‘publication of a report of a proceeding’ under s.534 CYFA, s.166 *Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic)* or s.121 *Family Law Act 1975 (Cth)* and ‘inspection and copying of a Court file’. The substantive proceeding in this case was a common law claim for negligence against the State of Victoria brought by the plaintiff Ms Porch under Part 4, Division 8 of the *Victoria Police Act 2013* (Vic) in respect of the conduct of police officers. A material allegation, central to the plaintiff’s claims, concerned the conduct of a police officer, DS who was married to the plaintiff and they had three children. DS was also in a relationship with Ms B which, in part, overlapped with his marriage to the plaintiff.

The Age Company Ltd – a non-party to the proceeding – had applied for permission to inspect and copy the pleadings in these proceedings pursuant to r 28.05 of the *Supreme Court (General Civil Procedure Rules) 2015 (Vic)*. The Prothonotary initially refused the Age’s request on the basis that provision of the file would be a breach of its obligations under s 534 of the CYFA. The plaintiff’s solicitors informed the Prothonotary of her consent to the Age inspecting the file. To the Age’s renewed requests, the Prothonotary maintained this refusal on the basis that provision of the file would be a breach of its obligations under s 166(2)(b) of the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) and s 121 of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth). The pleadings also named Ms B who may be a witness to and/or a victim of family violence.  Ms B, who was also represented on the application by the plaintiff’s solicitor – also consented to the Age’s request. John Dixon J ordered that The Age, by its authorised representatives, be permitted to inspect and copy the pleadings in these proceedings. In particular at [18]-[21] his Honour said:

[18] “It is necessary to look more closely at the provisions of the Family Violence Protection Act, as the pleadings make reference to proceedings and orders made under that Act. Section 166(2) cannot reasonably be construed by the concept of ‘publish or cause to be published’ as applying to the exercise of the prima facie right to inspect a court file.

[19] As the Age submitted, there are two reasons why permitting inspection of the court file in this proceeding does not infringe the Family Violence Protection Act. First, the proceeding is not a proceeding under the Act. Secondly, the inspection and copying of a pleading is neither a ‘publication’ nor a ‘report of the proceeding’ or a ‘report about the order’ for the purposes of the Act. The Act defines ‘publish’ by s 4 in these terms: publish means disseminate or provide access to the public or a section of the public by any means, including by—

(a) publication in a book, newspaper, magazine, or other written publication; or

(b) broadcast by radio or television; or

(c) public exhibition; or

(d) broadcast or electronic communication—

and publication must be construed accordingly;

[20] The notion of providing access to a person (the non-party searcher) cannot be conflated with the concept of providing access to the public or a section of the public. What the non-party searcher of the court file does with information gained from the inspection is not governed by the rule. Parliament did not intend to define ‘publish’ in a manner that restricted access defined information from a court file to any person because the text and context of the Act, particularly the notion of providing ‘access to the public’ cannot apply to dissemination of information to individuals as occurs when a court file is searched. The notion of access to the public is different from the notion of access to an individual. Subsequent dissemination of information gained from a court file to the public (which may be publishing) is not a matter governed by the rule or raised for consideration in this application.

[21] Parliament having chosen to use ordinary words of broad import means they should not be given an unduly narrow or technical meaning as would result if the words ‘the public or section of the public’ were read as ‘a person’: see *Cooper Brookes (Wollongong) Pty Ltd v Federal Commissioner of Taxation* (1981) 147 CLR 297, 305, 320- 1; *Mills v Meeking* (1990) 169 CLR 214, 233; *Collector of Customs v Agfa-Gevaert Ltd* (1996) 186 CLR 389, 398.”

In *Legal Services Commissioner v JXL* [2023] QSC 283 the respondent had been found guilty of criminal offences in the Children’s Court of Victoria but no convictions had been recorded. The respondent had not disclosed those findings when commencing work as a lay associate at a Queensland law practice and when subsequently applying for admission as a legal practitioner. The Queensland Legal Services Commissioner had subsequently commenced proceedings against the respondent in the Queensland Supreme Court seeking injunctive and declaratory relief. In support of her case the Commissioner had filed affidavits which provided information and exhibited material confirming the fact of the respondent’s spent child convictions. The affidavits were subsequently read in closed court. In holding that the filing and reading of the affidavits did not constitute ‘publication’ within the meaning of s.3 of the *Open Courts Act 2013* (Vic) and s.534 CYFA and in refusing the Commissioner’s interlocutory applications for–

* pseudonym orders in respect of the names of the persons who had sworn affidavits for the Commissioner in the proceedings; and
* an order that the Commissioner’s substantive application be heard in closed court–

Crowley J said at [27]-[39]:

[27] “JXL’s argument is that once the evidence of his spent child convictions is adduced by the formal reading of the Commissioner’s affidavits, that will amount to a publication of relevant identifying information or material in breach of the restrictions imposed by s 534(1). He says publication involves dissemination of information to another person and that this concept is not confined to the idea of dissemination to the world at large; rather, publication can be to a single person. On his argument therefore:

(a) prohibited publication has already occurred, when the Commissioner read the affidavits she relies upon for the purposes of these interlocutory applications; and

(b) prohibited publication will also occur in the future, if the Commissioner reads any affidavits containing similar information or exhibiting similar material for the purposes of the hearing of the Commissioner’s substantive application; and

(c) prohibited publication has perhaps already occurred, and will further occur, upon the Commissioner filing with the Court any affidavits that contain information or material concerning his spent child convictions.

[28] I reject those arguments.

[29] In my opinion, upon the proper construction of s 534 of the *CYFA*, neither of the above acts would constitute an offence by breaching any of the specified restrictions on publication. I consider JXL’s arguments misconstrue the breadth of the statutory prohibition on publication created by s 534 of the *CYFA*and wrongly equate steps taken to adduce evidence in this proceeding as acts of publication.

[30] The proper construction of s 534 is of course to be determined having regard to the text of the legislation, the context of the provision and the purposes of the *CYFA: Alcan (NT) Alumina Pty Ltd v Commissioner of Territory Revenue* [2009] HCA 41; (2009) 239 CLR 27, 46–47.

[31] The restrictions on publication under s 534 are neither new nor novel. Indeed, s 534 largely replicates the similarly worded prohibition in the now repealed s 26 of the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989*(Vic). These statutory prohibitions on publication reflect the strong, long-standing public policy that children who are brought before the Children’s Court are not to be identified by particulars or material being published that is likely to lead to their identification: *GHJ v Secretary to the Department of Justice and Community Safety*[2019] VSC 89, [15]. In the case of young offenders dealt with in the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court, the evident purpose of s 534 is to enable and promote their rehabilitation. In the case of children who are involved in child protection matters in the Family Division, the purposes of s 534 are therapeutic and protective. In all cases, the public policy rationales for the restrictions on publication necessarily include that children should be shielded from the stigma, shame, embarrassment or harm that may be caused to them by identifying particulars or material becoming publicly known.

[32] However, s 534 does not provide a blanket prohibition on publication. What is prohibited are the kinds of publications that are prescribed by the express terms of the legislation. Relevantly, in the cases of the restrictions imposed by ss 534(1)(a) and (c), what is prohibited is publication of a report of a proceeding in the court, or some other matter, that will identify a child involved in the proceeding. It is the identification of a child involved in the proceeding that is critical to the restrictions on publication.

[33] It is for that reason that pseudonyms are often used to protect the identity of a child who was involved in a proceeding before the Children’s Court. In that respect, I note that in a recently published judgment in the matter of *KDN v The Secretary to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing* [2023] VSC 479 which concerned an appeal against an interim accommodation order made by the Children’s Court of Victoria in respect of two children, various pseudonyms were used to refer to the subject children and their parents. As Gorton J there observed at [2]:

‘Section 534(1) of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*provides that a person must not publish or cause to be published a report of a proceeding that contains any particulars likely to lead to the identification of a witness to that proceeding. For this reason, I have given pseudonyms to those persons who appeared as witnesses in the Children’s Court. The parties will be provided with a version of the judgment in which pseudonyms are not used for witnesses.’

[34] Similarly, in *RP v Foreman* [2021] VSCA 115, an appeal against the refusal of an application for a writ of habeas corpus in relation to a child, where the Children’s Court had made an order conferring parental responsibility and sole care of the child to the Secretary of the Department of Human Services, the Court of Appeal noted that it had replaced the appellants’ names with pseudonyms in order to prevent the identification of the child who was the subject of orders made in the Children’s Court, in accordance with s 534(1) of the *CYFA*.

[35] It is for similar reasons as these that I have now made an order that the respondent in this proceeding is hereafter to be referred to by the pseudonym ‘JXL’.

[36] Depending on the nature and circumstances of the case, the making of a pseudonym order may be all that is required in order to observe the statutory restrictions on publication imposed by s 534. There are, of course, other possible actions that may be taken and orders that may be made by the Court to ensure no breach of s 534 occurs in a proceeding. Once such option would be to make an order that the proceeding be conducted in a closed court. That is what was done for the hearing of these interlocutory applications.

[37] I do not accept JXL’s submission that, irrespective of the fact that the hearing of these applications took place in a closed court, upon the Commissioner’s affidavits being read there was a prohibited publication of restricted information or material.

[38] In my opinion, the reading of the affidavits in closed court does not meet the definition of ‘publish’ in s 3 of the *Open Courts Act*, as the information and material has not been published to ‘the public’ or a ‘section of the public’, as is required. In my opinion, for the purposes of any potential breach of s 534 of the *CYFA*, the references to ‘the public’ or a ‘section of the public’ within the s 3 definition of the *Open Courts Act*plainly contemplate that the term ‘publish’ means publication to a wider audience than the Court, the parties, their lawyers and the court officers and other staff present during the closed court hearing of these applications. Although s 3 refers to ‘disseminate or provide access...by any means’ and then provides a non-exhaustive list of the ways in which information may be disseminated or accessed, in my view the examples provided support the conclusion I have reached.

[39] In my opinion, for the purposes of s 534, the Commissioner has not published, or caused to be published, any restricted information or material by filing the affidavits with the Court or by reading the affidavits and thereby putting them into evidence. I do not consider either act constitutes a publication for the purposes of s 534 of the *CYFA*.”

His Honour went on to note that in reaching the above conclusions he had found two recent Supreme Court of Victoria decisions dealing with issues concerning various statutory restrictions on publication – namely *Taylor v State of Victoria* [2023] VSC 320 and the afore-mentioned *Porch v State of Victoria* [2023] VSC 61 – “to be of assistance”.

For a discussion of the relationship between s.534 CYFA and the *Open Courts Act 2013* [‘OCA’] see **section 2.8.4** below.

### **2.8.2 Suppression orders**

Suppression orders are the antithesis of the open justice principle. In *R v Robert Scott Pomeroy* [2002] VSC 178, a case involving an order suppressing publication of certain aspects of an adult criminal proceeding in the Supreme Court, Teague J said at [7]:

“The open justice principle has been applied in many cases and in many differing situations. It requires that courts must be open, and that what is said and done in the courts can be published with only such restrictions as are necessary in the interests of justice. The media is vigilant to see that it continues to be applied. But the courts, and particularly superior courts, are also vigilant to see that it continues to be applied, because the operation of the principle is an essential attribute of a court. The leading authority on the scope of, and the reasons for, the principle is *Scott v Scott* [1913] AC 417. The application of the principle has often been endorsed as in *Dickason v Dickason* (1913) CLR 50, and *Russell v Russell* (1976) 134 CLR 495.”

## **COMMON LAW POWER TO MAKE A SUPPRESSION ORDER**

The superior courts have an inherent power at common law to make suppression orders but in the absence of express statutory power inferior courts or tribunals do not: *Herald & Weekly Times Ltd v Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria* [1999] 1 VR 267 at 278-292 per Hedigan J. The power of the Supreme Court to make suppression orders under ss.18-19 of the *Supreme Court Act 1986* [now replaced by s.17 of the OCA] is illustrated by the case of *R v SJK & GAS* [2002] VSC 94. Bongiorno J had sentenced each of the child accused to a term of imprisonment of 6 years with a non-parole period of 4 years for manslaughter of a frail 73 year old woman. At the commencement of the plea on 11/10/2001 His Honour had made an order pursuant to the inherent jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and ss.18-19 of the *Supreme Court Act 1986* that “any report of a proceeding in this Court that contains any particulars likely to lead to the identification of SJK and GAS is prohibited until further order”. On a Crown appeal the Court of Appeal increased the sentences to 9 years with a non-parole period of 6 years: see *DPP v SKJ & GAS* [2002] VSCA 131. The Court of Appeal did not interfere with the suppression order. On 15/08/2006 solicitors for the Herald and Weekly Times Ltd, being apparently unaware of the existence of the suppression order of Bongiorno J, applied to the President of the Children’s Court pursuant to s.26(1)(a) of the CYPA [now s.534(1)(a) of the CYFA] for permission to publish the names and photographs of SJK & GAS. Judge Grant dismissed the application, observing, *inter alia*, that he would not consider the application because of the suppression order made by Bongiorno J. On 07/09/2006 solicitors on behalf of the Herald and Weekly Times Ltd filed a summons in the Supreme Court seeking an order that the suppression order made by Bongiorno J on 11/10/2001 be vacated. Gillard J held that the suppression order should not be discharged: see *R v SJK & GAS* [2006] VSC 335. In the course of his decision Gillard J held:

(i) {At [32]-[34]} Section 26 of the CYPA applies to criminal proceedings which have been heard and finalized in the Supreme Court {*DPP v R & T* [Supreme Court of Victoria-Cummins J, unreported, 15/08/1995] referred to}.

(ii) {At [35]-[37]} Section 26 of the CYPA does not oust the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court founded on both ss.18 & 19 of the *Supreme Court Act 1986* and its inherent jurisdiction to make a suppression order. The jurisdiction vested in the President of the Children’s Court by s.26 of the CYPA is a concurrent jurisdiction, it does not “cover the field”.

(iii) {At [39]-[43]} The principle protecting a young person from being identified in a criminal proceeding is well established and applies throughout the common law world. The observations of Rehnquist J in *Smith v Daily May Publishing Company* (1979) US 97 at 106-108 apply with equal force in Victoria:

* “While we have shown a special solicitude for freedom of speech and of the press, we have eschewed absolutes in favour of a more delicate calculus that carefully weighs the conflicting interests to determine which demands the greater protection under the particular circumstances presented.”
* “It is a hallmark of our juvenile justice system in the United States that virtually from its inception at the end of the last century its proceedings have been conducted outside of the public’s full gaze and the youths brought before our juvenile courts have been shielded from publicity.”
* “Publication of the names of juvenile offenders may seriously impair the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile justice system and handicap the youths’ prospects for adjustment in society and acceptance by the public.”
* “By contrast, a prohibition against publication of the names of youthful offenders represents only a minimal interference with freedom of the press.”

(iv) {At [46]} If the Supreme Court order was discharged, the applicant would still have to make an application to the President of the Children’s Court for permission under s.26 to identify the prisoners and publish a photograph of them.

(v) {At [49]} Bongiorno J thought it appropriate that a suppression order ought to be made. When the Court of Appeal increased the sentence, rehabilitation was a factor relevant to the sentencing exercise. The Supreme Court should continue to have control over the question of publication of the names of the prisoners. When each sentence has been fully completed [i.e. not just the non-parole period], a different view may be taken but whilst the sentences are still operating it is inappropriate to remove the control of the Supreme Court over the question of publication of the identity of each prisoner.

As at September 2011, the suppression order made by Bongiorno J in this case remained on foot: see *R v SJK & GAS* [2011] VSC 431.

Any common law power of courts or tribunals other than the Supreme Court to make suppression orders has been “abrogated” by s.5(2) of the *Open Courts Act 2013* [‘OCA’]. Likewise, s.5(3) provides that “A court or tribunal [other than the Supreme Court] has no implied jurisdiction to make an order prohibiting or restricting the publication of information in connection with any proceeding.”

In *DPP v Tuteru (Application for suppression order)* [2023] VSC 241 – in the course of dismissing the application – Forbes J said at [11]-[13]:

[11] “The [Supreme] Court has inherent power to make orders necessary for the fair trial of an accused: *General Television Corporation Pty Ltd v Director of Public Prosecutions & Ors* [2008] VSCA 49; 19 VR 68 [21] citing in part *John Fairfax and Sons v Police Tribunal of NSW* (1986) 5 NSWLR 465 [471]. The applicant sought the order in reliance on the Court’s inherent jurisdiction and not pursuant to the *Open Courts Act 2013* (Vic). There was no issue as to the Court’s power to make the order if it was appropriate to do so.

[12] The relevant legal test for a defence application for a suppression order has been clearly stated on a number of occasions.

The order must be necessary to achieve the purpose of protecting the administration of justice. It will be satisfied where there is a real or substantial risk of prejudice to an accused person’s right to a fair trial that can only be ameliorated or avoided by the making of the order. The requirement for it to be necessary is deliberately a high hurdle: *Roberts v The Queen (No 2)* [2020] VSCA 188 at [35].

[13] Both the applicant [Tuteru] and [Channel] Nine agreed that this is the relevant test to be applied.”

## **STATUTORY POWER UNDER THE OCA TO MAKE A SUPPRESSION ORDER**

The statutory powers to make suppression orders previously vested in the Supreme Court by ss.18-19 of the *Supreme Court Act 1986*, in the County Court by s.80 of the *County Court Act 1958* and in the Magistrates’ Court by s.126 of the *Magistrates’ Court Act 1989* have been repealed by ss.54, 45 & 51 of the OCA respectively. In lieu the Supreme Court, the County Court and the Magistrates’ Court now have power under s.17 of the OCA to make a “proceeding suppression order” to prohibit or restrict the disclosure by publication or otherwise of-

(a) a report of the whole or any part of a proceeding;

(b) any information derived from a proceeding.

In **section 2.8.4** below the writer discusses the basis of and the limitations on the statutory power of the Children’s Court to make suppression orders under the OCA.

Section 4 of the OCA – under the heading “**Principle of open justice prevails unless circumstances require displacement**” – provides:

1. A court or tribunal is to have regard to the primacy of the principle of open justice and the free communication and disclosure of information in determining whether to make a suppression order.
2. A court or tribunal is only to make a suppression order if satisfied that the specific circumstances of a case make it necessary to override or displace the principle of open justice and the free communication and disclosure of information.

## **POWER UNDER THE OCA TO MAKE A “PROCEEDING SUPPRESSION ORDER”**

Provisions relating to “proceeding suppression orders” are contained in Part 3 – ss.17-23 – of the OCA.

The grounds for making a “proceeding suppression order” are set out in s.18(1) of the OCA and are identical to those in s.30(2) for the making of a closed court order. So far as is relevant, s.18(1) provides:

“A court…may make a proceeding suppression order if satisfied as to one or more of the following grounds–

1. the order is necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice that cannot be prevented by other reasonably available means;
2. the order is necessary to prevent prejudice to the interests of the Commonwealth or a State or Territory in relation to national or international security;
3. the order is necessary to protect the safety of any person;
4. the order is necessary to avoid causing undue distress or embarrassment to a complainant or witness in any criminal proceeding involving a sexual offence or a family violence offence;
5. the order is necessary to avoid causing undue distress or embarrassment to a child who is a witness in any criminal proceeding…”

In *IMO an Application by “The Age” and Ors re: R v Carl Anthony Williams* [2004] VSC 413 at [14] Kellam J, citing dicta of McPherson J in *Ex parte the Queensland Law Society* [1984] Qd R 166 at 170 and of McHugh J in *John Fairfax & Sons Pty Ltd v Police Tribunal of NSW* (1986) 5 NSWLR 465 at 477, reiterated the ‘necessity’ test for the application of s.18 of the *Supreme Court Act 1986*:

“That [suppression] orders should be made in cases only of clear necessity is established beyond any argument by the decision of the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Victoria in *An Application by Chief Commissioner of Police (Vic) for leave to appeal* [2004] VSCA 3 when the Court in a unanimous judgment stated that orders suppressing publication of court proceedings should be made only when ‘clearly necessary’ {at [30]}. I observe that that decision was upheld by the High Court.”

In *DPP v QPX* [2014] VSC 211 Bongiorno JA made a 5 year proceeding suppression order preventing disclosure of the identity of the accused who had pleaded guilty to infanticide and the identities of the three related children. His Honour had expert evidence from a psychiatrist who had examined the accused as well as a senior psychologist which expressed opinions, *inter alia*, about the potential negative impact of disclosure on the psychological health of the accused and the surviving children. At [15] his Honour said:

“The grounds upon which a suppression order relevant to this case might be made are set out in s 18 of the [OCA]. They include the ground set out in s 18(1)(c), that the order is necessary to protect the safety of any person. Accordingly, the order must be *necessary*,not merely ‘convenient, reasonable or sensible’: *Hogan v Australian Crime Commission* (2010) 240 CLR 651, [31]–[33]. Without the order, the safety of a person or persons must be endangered. The protection of a person's safety implies the defending or shielding of that person from injury or danger. That danger might involve danger of physical harm or it might involve danger to a person's psychological health or a combination of both. There is no warrant to qualify the meaning of the word ‘safety’ in s.18(1)(c) by confining it to physical safety. Psychological harm to a person may be as serious or worse than physical harm. In any event psychological harm may well create a serious danger of physical harm, as the evidence in this case suggests.”

In *WEQ (a pseudonym) v Medical Board of Australia* [2021] VSCA 343 a proceeding suppression order had been made in disciplinary proceedings in VCAT against the applicant medical practitioner. The order – of lifetime duration – suppressed the identity of participants in a Family Court proceeding, family members and the regulator’s witnesses. Holding that–

* the order was overly broad, going well beyond what was necessary in the interests of justice;
* it applied to significantly more information than was necessary to achieve its purpose and was of longer duration that reasonably necessary; and
* it was unnecessary to duplicate the Family Court suppression regime in s.121 *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth)–

the Court of Appeal (Kyrou & McLeish JJA) allowed the appeal in part and varied the order by revoking the confidentiality orders but making an interim proceeding suppression order in narrower terms. At [59]‑[67] the Court detailed the following principles (citations omitted):

[59] “The principle of open justice is a fundamental rule of the common law and an essential part of the functioning of the Australian justice system. Its purpose is to expose proceedings to ‘public and professional scrutiny’ and inform the public how judicial (or administrative) power is exercised, and on what evidential basis. This enhances accountability, and assists in maintaining public confidence in the integrity and independence of courts and tribunals.

[60] An aspect of the principle of open justice is that what occurs in open court (or an open tribunal) may be publicised. Persons present in an open court or tribunal may disseminate to others who were not present fair and accurate reports of the proceedings, including the names of the parties and witnesses and the evidence given. It has been said that proceedings must be ‘exposed in their entirety to the cathartic glare of publicity’, subject only to limited exceptions ‘sparingly allowed’.

[61] In disciplinary or criminal proceedings, this aspect of the principle of open justice assumes particular importance as there is a special public interest in the community knowing the outcome of such proceedings. The publicity of disciplinary proceedings assists in protecting the public, signals to the relevant profession what is and is not acceptable professional conduct, and serves the purposes of specific and general deterrence.

[62] The Actrecognises and reinforces the principle of open justice, in respect of the Tribunal, as well as the courts. It provides for the primacy of the principle and authorises departure from it only in specified circumstances. Relevantly for present purposes, s 4(2) provides that a court or tribunal ‘is only to make a suppression order if satisfied that the specific circumstances of a case make it necessary to override or displace the principle of open justice and the free communication and disclosure of information’.

[63] It is a particular type of suppression order, a proceeding suppression order, that is now in issue. A proceeding suppression order is defined as an order prohibiting or restricting the disclosure of a report of all or part of a proceeding, or any information derived from the proceeding. The Act specifies the circumstances in which it is permissible to depart from the principle by making such an order.

[64] First, the power to make a proceeding suppression order depends on the court or tribunal being satisfied that the order is ‘necessary’ to achieve at least one of a number of enumerated purposes set out in s 18 of the Act. Necessity is a stringent standard, requiring a high degree of satisfaction; it is not enough that it would be reasonable or desirable to make an order for one of the purposes identified in s 18.

[65] Secondly, the requisite standard is to be satisfied on the basis of evidence or ‘sufficient credible information’ showing that the relevant ground is made out: s 14. This is a substantive requirement applicable even when an application is consented to or not opposed. By reference to such information, the court or tribunal must carefully ‘scrutinise the justification for, and the nature and scope of, the proposed order’.

[66] Thirdly, the duration and scope of any proceeding suppression order must not exceed what is necessary to achieve its purpose. Any proceeding suppression order must not exceed the duration ‘reasonably necessary’ to achieve the purpose for which it is made: s 12(4). Similarly, any order must not apply to (and so restrict the disclosure of) any more information than necessary to achieve the relevant purpose: s 13(1)(b). The information to which the order does apply must be specified with sufficient particularity so that the scope of the order is readily apparent from its terms: s 13(1)(c).

[67] Fourthly, the court or tribunal that makes a proceeding suppression order (other than an interim order) must provide reasons setting out the ground(s) relied on, and justifying the duration and scope of the order: s 14A(1).”

Finally, at [93] the Court of Appeal commented on the relationship between a closed court order on the one hand and any pseudonym and/or proceeding suppression order on the other hand:

“Relatedly, the existence and scope of any pseudonym and/or proceeding suppression order may affect whether it remains necessary to maintain a closed tribunal order in respect of the entire proceeding. A closed tribunal order is subject to the strict necessity standard described above, in respect of the same enumerated grounds: see ss.28(2) & 30(2) of the Act. As a result, the requisite standard may no longer be attainable if a proceeding suppression order and/or a pseudonym order has already satisfied the purpose for which a closed tribunal order might otherwise be thought necessary.”

In *Re WD (No 2)* [2023] VSC 790 an application was filed in the Supreme Court by the Secretary to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for a proceeding suppression order pursuant to ss.17 & 18(1)(c) of the OCA, a closed court order pursuant to s.30(1) of the OCA and declaratory relief. The application sought to prevent disclosure, by publication or otherwise, of information that would tend to identity WD – a 12 year old girl who was the subject of a care by Secretary order and had been charged with murder – as the subject of proceedings in the Children’s Court and in the Supreme Court. At the outset the Secretary withdrew her application for a closed court order under s.30(1) of the OCA and ultimately Elliott J – in a detailed and considered judgment – dismissed the Secretary’s application for a proceeding suppression order and for declaratory relief. At [58]-[59] & [61]-[63] Elliott J discussed the operation of the OCA both generally and in relation to suppression orders as follows–

[58] “The *Open Courts Act* recognises and promotes the principle that open justice is a fundamental aspect of the Victorian legal system. This principle maintains the integrity and impartiality of courts and tribunals, and strengthens public confidence in the justice system: OCA s.1(aa). Accordingly, a court must have regard to the primacy of the principle of open justice and the free communication and disclosure of information in determining whether to make a suppression order: OCA s.4(1). A court may only make a suppression order where it is necessary to override or displace the principle of open justice and the free communication and disclosure of information: OCA s.4(2).

[59] The importance of necessity in the context of the proper administration of justice was explained in an oft-quoted passage from *John Fairfax & Sons Ltd v Police Tribunal of New South Wales* (1986) 5 NSWLR 465, 476G-477B (McHugh JA, with whom Glass JA agreed):

‘The fundamental rule of the common law is that the administration of justice must take place in open court. A court can only depart from this rule where its observance would frustrate the administration of justice or some other public interest for whose protection Parliament has modified the open justice rule. The principle of open justice also requires that nothing should be done to discourage the making of fair and accurate reports of what occurs in the courtroom. Accordingly, an order of a court prohibiting the publication of evidence is only valid if it is really necessary to secure the proper administration of justice in proceedings before it. Moreover, an order prohibiting publication of evidence must be clear in its terms and do no more than is necessary to achieve the due administration of justice. The making of the order must also be reasonably necessary; and there must be some material before the court upon which it can reasonably reach the conclusion that it is necessary to make an order prohibiting publication. Mere belief that the order is necessary is insufficient.’ [emphasis added]

…

[61] Numerous authorities have subsequently discussed the requirement of necessity in the context of section 18 of the Open Courts Act, which were recently summarised as follows in *Director of Public Prosecutions v EN* [2023] VSC 724 at [24]-[25]:

‘Each of the grounds outlined under section 18(1) [of the *Open Courts Act*] require the court to be satisfied that a suppression order is “necessary” in the circumstances. The same test of necessity applies where a suppression order is sought pursuant to the court’s inherent jurisdiction. A suppression order will be necessary where, absent the order, “particular unacceptable consequences will flow that ought be prevented to preserve the proper function of the court”. Necessity in this context is a “stringent standard” requiring a high degree of satisfaction. It is insufficient that the making of a suppression order is merely “convenient, reasonable or sensible”. It is also not enough that a failure to make a suppression order may result in embarrassment, shame or humiliation for an applicant. The applicant bears the onus of persuading the court that the suppression order sought is necessary.

Insofar as the “necessity” test is directed towards the ground of safety of any person, it requires the establishment of a causal link between the absence of the order and some increased risk to the person concerned. Thus, if the level of danger faced by a person would not be materially advanced were a suppression order not to be made, it is unlikely that such an order could truly be considered “necessary”. (Citations omitted)

[62] In relation to what is encapsulated by the phrase “safety of any person”:

‘Safety in the context of section 18(1)(c) is to be given a broad construction, and the provision has been held to encompass risks to both physical and psychological safety. However, an important distinction can be drawn between “harm” and “safety”, the latter concept being a “conclusion informed by the nature, imminence and degree of likelihood of apprehended harm”: ibid. at [27] (Citations omitted).

Accordingly, section 18(1)(c) will not be enlivened unless the court is satisfied of the existence of a possibility of harm of such gravity and likelihood that the risk to the person would range above the level that could reasonably be regarded as acceptable if a suppression order were not made: *AB v CD* (2019) 364 ALR 202, 205-206.

[63] The nature, extent and scope of the order sought will also be germane to the ultimate disposition of any application for suppression or non-publication. In other words, the degree of derogation from the principle of open justice that would be involved in the making of the suppression order that is sought is a relevant consideration: *Attorney-General v Khan (Suppression Order)* [2022] VSC 627, [3]; *ABC v D1* [2007] VSC 480, [36]. The extent to which the subject matter of a proposed suppression order has already been the subject of reporting or other publication may also be a relevant factor. On the question of utility of a suppression order and prior publications:

‘In addition to necessity, the utility or efficacy of a suppression order is also a relevant consideration. If it cannot be said that a suppression order would have the effect of materially reducing the risk to the safety of a person, it is unlikely that the order will be made. Thus, in circumstances where a suppression order would have little practical effect because a proceeding has already garnered significant publicity and it would be difficult to stem any further publication of the matters sought to be suppressed, a court will generally refuse to make a suppression order.’ *Director of Public Prosecutions v EN* [2023] VSC 724 at [26] (Citations omitted.)

Another relevant matter in determining whether a suppression order is necessary to protect the safety of any person is the availability of care and treatment for the person, together with any protective measures that are or can be put in place: *Director of Public Prosecutions v EN* [2023] VSC 724 at [28], citing *Cooper v Herald & Weekly Times Pty Ltd* [2013] VSC 589, [15] (Ferguson J).

At [116]-[125] Elliott J detailed eight separate matters which established that the suppression order sought by the Secretary was not necessary to protect WD’s safety, his Honour stating at [115]:

“For several reasons, even if the court is not precluded from making the suppression order sought by the Secretary by virtue of section 8(1A) of the *Open Courts Act*, I do not consider that a proceeding suppression order in the terms sought by the Secretary is necessary to protect the safety of WD. To the contrary, any risk to WD’s physical and psychological wellbeing that may arise from media reporting on the alleged offending and any increased potential for WD to be identified as the subject of such reporting can be sufficiently mitigated or ameliorated through other means, such that it cannot be said that a suppression order is truly necessary.”

In the afore-mentioned case of *Director of Public Prosecutions v EN* [2023] VSC 724 an application was made by EN for a proceeding suppression order pursuant to s.17 of the OCA. EN – who was suffering from complex mental health conditions – had been charged with murder of her infant son. She had also applied for a pseudonym order providing for both EN and her deceased son to be referred to with the use of pseudonyms. In refusing the former while granting the latter Elliott J said at [19]-[20] & [49]-[50]:

[19] In considering an application for a suppression order, the court is required to have regard to the primacy of the principle of open justice and the free communication and disclosure of information: see s.4(1) of the OCA. The court may only make a suppression order if satisfied that the specific circumstances of a case make it necessary to override or displace these objectives: see s.4(2) of the OCA.

[20] Although the principle of open justice does not provide an absolute requirement that all cases be heard in public, any order restraining, restricting or postponing the report of a court proceeding or any part of a court proceeding will be exceptional: *News Digital Media v Mokbel* (2010) 30 VR 248, 259 [35], [a case concerning] a suppression order made under antecedent legislation, namely s.18 of the *Supreme Court Act 1986* (Vic) (now repealed). Further, because of the salience of the principle of open justice, ordinarily courts must construe any statutory provision which permits suppression of publication of any part of a proceeding narrowly and strictly: *Herald & Weekly Times Pty Ltd v Director of Public Prosecutions* (2007) 170 A Crim R 313,318 [22], citing *Re Applications by Chief Commissioner of Police* (2004) 9 VR 275, 288 [30]. As was observed in *John Fairfax & Sons Ltd v Police Tribunal of New South Wales* (1986) 5 NSWLR 465, 476G-477A:

‘The fundamental rule of the common law is that the administration of justice must take place in open court. A court can only depart from this rule where its observance would frustrate the administration of justice or some other public interest for whose protection Parliament has modified the open justice rule. The principle of open justice also requires that nothing should be done to discourage the making of fair and accurate reports of what occurs in a courtroom. *Accordingly, an order of a court prohibiting the publication of evidence is only valid if it is really necessary to secure the proper administration of justice in proceedings before it.*’” (Emphasis added)

[49] “In summary, I do not consider that a proceeding suppression order in the form sought is necessary to protect EN’s safety so as to warrant the significant departure from the principle of open justice that such an order would entail. It must follow that there is no basis to make an order either pursuant to the *Open Courts Act*, or the inherent jurisdiction of the court as the order sought is not necessary to secure the proper administration of justice with respect to the proceeding: see [20] above.

[50] In relation to EN’s application for a pseudonym order, as acknowledged by both the prosecution and the ABC, different considerations apply in this context. Although the necessity of such an order must be proven, it is generally sufficient to establish a real risk that a person will suffer psychological or physical harm in the absence of the order. Having regard to the opinions and observations of Dr Deacon and the matters disclosed I the subpoenaed medical records from Justice Health, I am satisfied that there is cogent evidence of a genuinely and reasonably held fear of both psychological and physical harm on EN’s part if media reporting of the alleged offending which identifies EN is permitted. Orders for the use of a pseudonym will reduce the risk, as well as the degree and severity, of any such harm.”

In *Director of Public Prosecutions v HR* [2024] VSC 467 HR had been committed for trial on a charge of attempted murder of her daughter D who suffers from severe autism spectrum disorder and attends a specialist school. The DPP applied for a proceeding suppression order under ss.17, 18(1)(d) & (e) of *Open Courts Act 2013* to prevent disclosure in a report of, or information derived from, the Supreme Court trial proceeding or the earlier Magistrates’ Court committal proceeding that contains particulars that would be likely to lead to the identification of the child D. The application was supported by D’s father and was unopposed by HR and any media organisation. Elliott J was satisfied that D was captured by the relevant provisions of the OCA and that an order was necessary to avoid causing her undue distress or embarrassment. Accordingly, his Honour made a proceeding suppression order substantially in the terms sought for a period of 5 years from the date it was made or 12 months after the conclusion of the Supreme Court trial, whichever occurs first. In his judgment his Honour addressed two particular issues relating to the construction of ss.18(1)(d) & (e) in the context of–

* D’s severe disability resulting in her not having made a complaint or any other form of statement to police; and
* the prosecution not expecting to call her as a witness at the trial.

At [22] Elliott J held – for reasons detailed at [23]-[24] – that “there is no basis for construing ‘complainant’ [in s.18(1)(d) OCA] as including someone who has not made a complaint”. However, his Honour held at [33] – for reasons detailed at [28]-[34] – that D “is properly considered a ‘witness’ within the meaning of paragraphs (d) and (e) of section 18(1) of the OCA, notwithstanding that it is not intended that she give any evidence in the proceeding”. In particular his Honour said at [30]:

“The natural and ordinary meaning of ‘witness’ when used as a noun is a person who is present or sufficiently proximate and sees, hears, feels or otherwise perceives an act, occurrence or thing. In a different statutory context, it has been held that the normal meaning of ‘witness’ is a person who is a spectator of an incident or who is present at an incident: *In the Estate of Charles Gibson (dec’d)* [1949] P 436, 436.7 (Pearce J), in determining whether a blind person was a witness to a will. There is nothing in the provisions in question or in the OCA more generally (including the expressly stated main purposes) that would indicate that ‘witness’ should be given a narrower or different meaning to its natural and ordinary meaning.”

In *Mokbel v DPP (Suppression)* [2024] VSC 784 Beach JA had refused an application by police members PM1 & PM2 for a proceeding suppression order prohibiting the publication anywhere in Australia of a report of the proceeding, and any information derived from the proceeding, which identifies them (by name, image or particulars) as being the members whom Fullerton J found in a Reference Determination were party to a joint criminal enterprise to attempt to pervert the course of justice. PM1 & PM2 sought the suppression order on the ground that it was necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice that could not be prevented by other reasonably available means: s 18(1)(a) of the OCA. Beach JA refused the application, holding that the order was not necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice.

In the ensuing appeal in *Police Member 1 (a pseudonym) & Anor v Antonios Sajih Mokbel & Anor* [2025] VSCA 34 the Court of Appeal granted the police members PM1 & PM2 leave to appeal the decision of Beach JA but dismissed their appeal. At [69] & [83] Niall CJ, Emerton P & J Forrest AJA said:

[69] “The order sought by the police members is modest in its effect on the publication of the Reference Determination itself: it involves little more than the redaction of names and limited parts of what is a very long and detailed judgment. However, its scope is breathtaking. The proposed order seeks to prevent the media (or anyone else) from any reporting disclosing the identities of the persons found by Fullerton J to have engaged in the impugned conduct, and to do so until their deaths. It has potentially far-reaching effects. Compliance would require vigilance, potentially over decades, in the reporting of what occurred in April 2006 to secure Mr Mokbel’s convictions. That conduct, involving Ms Gobbo and several members of Victoria Police, forms part of a scandal of sizeable proportions that has significantly impacted public confidence in the administration of justice in this State.”

[83] “Both of the police members must feel that there is no end to their vulnerability to the public excoriation that has been directed to many who had the misfortune to come within Ms Gobbo’s orbit. The events giving rise to Fullerton J’s finding are almost 20 years old. Neither of them is well, and both fear, no doubt correctly, that their reputations and wellbeing will be damaged by publication of the finding. However, the existence of those fragilities is not enough, even in combination with the ‘unconventional’ approach taken to remedy the (possible) breach of the rule in *Browne v Dunn* [see **section 3.5.13**] to necessitate the making of a suppression in order to avoid a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the administration of justice.”

For a further discussion (partly redacted) of ss.17(b) and 18(1)(a) & (c) of the *Open Courts Act 2013* – including whether or not a non-publication order was necessary to prevent prejudice to the administration of justice or was necessary to protect safety of any person – see *AB (a pseudonym) v CD (a pseudonym) & EF (a pseudonym)* [2019] VSCA 28 esp. at [64]-[80] & [85]-[89]. See also *Madafferi v The Queen* [2022] VSCA 189; *Attorney-General v Khan (suppression order)* [2022] VSC 627; *Arico v The King* [2023] VSCA 31; *Stewart v Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand* [2023] VSC 351; *Attorney‑General v Hadashah Sa’adat Khan (No 5)* [2024] VSC 92.

Section 19 of the OCA allows a “court” to make a “proceeding suppression order”–

* on its own motion; or
* on application of a party to the proceeding; or
* on application by any other person considered by the court to have a sufficient interest in the making of the order.

In *Re Williams (a pseudonym) (No 2)* [2016] VSC 364, in the course of hearing a bail application by an adult facing serious criminal charges Maxwell ACJ on his own motion concluded that a “proceeding suppression order” should be made under s.19(1)(a) of the OCA in order “to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice [which] cannot be prevented by other reasonably available means”: s.18(1)(a). Exercising a right under s.19(2)(e) to appear and be heard on the hearing of the subsequent application by the DPP for a suppression order, counsel for The Herald and Weekly Times Pty Ltd ingenuously advised the Court that his client “only had an interest in opposing the [suppression] application in the event that bail was to be granted”. At [14] & [16] Maxwell ACJ was strongly critical of this one-sided approach to reporting:

“If it is important for the community to know that bail has been granted in a case where there are concerns about interference with witnesses, it must be equally important for the community to know that bail has been refused precisely because of those concerns...

The public interest would be much better served, in my view, if the community was made aware of the full range of bail decisions which are made including, in particular, decisions to refuse bail and decisions to grant bail subject to onerous conditions. Promoting that awareness is a shared responsibility of the Court and the media: *WCB v The Queen* (2010) 29 VR 483, 492 [27]. Properly informed in that way, the community would be entitled to have a high degree of confidence in the careful and conscientious decision-making undertaken on their behalf.”

Section 20 of the OCA empowers a “court” to make an interim order in any application for a “proceeding suppression order”.

Section 21(1) provides that a proceeding suppression order or an interim order applies only to the publication or disclosure of information in a place specified in the order. Under ss.21(2) & 21(3) a proceeding suppression order or an interim order may be made to apply anywhere in Australia but must not be made to apply outside Victoria unless the court or tribunal is satisfied that having the order apply outside Victoria is necessary for achieving the purpose for which the order was made.

For a discussion of some relevant authorities and relevant considerations for the exercise of a judicial discretion to order suppression pursuant to s.17 of the OCA [formerly s.126 of the *Magistrates’ Court Act 1989*], see the judgment of Williams J in *The Age Company Ltd v Dupas* [2003] VSC 312 at [10], [21], [28]-[33] & [34]-[40], the judgment of Hansen J in *AB v The Magistrates' Court of Victoria* [2003] VSC 378 at [22] & [30]-[37], the judgment of Kaye J in *The Age Co Ltd & Ors v The Magistrates' Court of Victoria & Ors* [2004] VSC 10 at [12]-[13] & [19]-[20]; the judgment of Kaye J in *DPP (Cth) v Corcoris and The Age (No.2)* [2005] VSC 142 and the judgment of Whelan J in *Herald & Weekly Times Ltd v Magistrates' Court of Victoria* [2004] VSC 194 at [10]-[18] & [22]. See also *Herald & Weekly Times Ltd & Others v Magistrates' Court of Victoria* [1999] 2 VR 672; *Commonwealth DPP v Magistrates' Court of Victoria* [2011] VSC 593.

For a discussion of the powers of a Supreme Court judge to make suppression orders whether pursuant to s.17 of the OCA [formerly ss.18-19 of the *Supreme Court Act 1958*] or in its former inherent jurisdiction, see the joint judgment of Winneke P, Ormiston & Vincent JJA in *In the Matter of an Application by Chief Commissioner of Police (Vic.) for Leave to Appeal* [2004] VSCA 3 at [2]-[3] & [23]-[47] and its references to judgments of the Supreme Court of Canada in *R v Mentuck* [2001] 3 SCR 442 & *R v O.N.E.* [2001] 3 SCR 487. [This decision of the Victorian Court of Appeal was upheld by the High Court of Australia.] See also *BK v ADB* [2003] VSC 129 per Nettle J; *R v Goldman* [2004] VSC 167 at [15]-[31] per Redlich J; *DPP v Carl Williams & Ors* [2004] VSC 209 at [15]-[20] per Cummins J; *AB v Attorney-General* [2005] VSC 180 per Hargrave J; *R v Condello (Ruling 2)* [2006] VSC 27 per Osborn J; ANN v ABC & XYZ (No 1) [2006] VSC 348 per Hollingworth J; *R v Strawhorn (No 2)* [2006] VSC 433 (Habersberger J); *The Queen v G* [2007] VSC 503 [Edited Version] (Whelan J); *General Television Corporation Pty Ltd v DPP & Others* [2008] VSCA 49 at [21]-[22]; *AX v Stern* [2008] VSC 400 at [4]-[7] per Warren CJ; *BY v Australian Red Cross Society & Others* [unreported, Supreme Court of Victoria-Vincent J, 31/10/1991]; *ABC v D1 & Ors; Ex Parte The Herald & Weekly Times Limited* [2007] VSC 480 at [65]-[71] per Forrest J; *AB v D1* [2008] VSC 371 per Kyrou J; *R v Mokbel (Ruling No.2)* [2009] VSC 652 per Kaye J; *R v Mokbel (Ruling No.3)* [2009] VSC 653 per Kaye J; *Lew v Priester (No.2)* [2012] VSC 153 per Davies J; *Victorian Institute of Teaching v QDP* [2021] VSC 844 per McDonald J; *Peers v AHPRA* [2024] VSC 110 at [17]-[32] per Gorton J; *Mongan v The King (suppression application)* [2024] VSCA 125 at [12]-[13].

## **POWER UNDER THE OCA TO MAKE A “BROAD SUPPRESSION ORDER”**

Provisions relating to “broad suppression orders” are contained in Part 4 – ss.24-27 – of the OCA.

Section 26(1) of the OCA gives the Magistrates’ Court power to make a “broad suppression order” prohibiting the publication of any specified material, or any material of a specified kind, relevant to a proceeding that is pending in the Court if the Court is satisfied that–

(a) the order is necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice that cannot be prevented by other reasonably available means; or

(b) the order is necessary in order to protect the safety of any person.

Section 26(2) provides that an order under s.26(1) applies only to the publication of material in a place specified in the order. Under ss.26(3) & 26(4) an order under s.26(1) may be made to apply anywhere in Australia but must not be made to apply outside Victoria unless the Magistrates’ Court is satisfied that having the order apply outside Victoria is necessary for achieving the purpose for which the order was made.

The fundamental distinction between a “broad suppression order” and a “proceeding suppression order” appears to lie in s.26(1) which prohibits the publication of material **relevant to** a proceeding whereas s.17 prohibits or restricts publication of a **report** of a proceeding or **information derived from a proceeding**. On its face the s.26(1) prohibition is broader than the s.17 prohibition.

## **PROVISIONS RELATING TO EXCEPTIONS AND OFFENCES IN RELATION TO CONTRAVENTION OF SUPPRESSION ORDERS**

The following provisions of the OCA apply to “proceeding suppression orders” and “broad suppression orders”:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **SECTION** | **SUBJECT MATTER** |
| 21 | Where a suppression order applies. |
| 22, 26(5) | Provides exceptions for the conduct of the proceeding, recovery or enforcement of any penalty imposed in the proceeding or informing persons of the existence of suppression orders or interim orders |
| 23, 27 | Offence to contravene proceeding suppression order, broad suppression order or interim order. Maximum penalty for an individual is level 6 imprisonment or 600 p.u. or other. Maximum penalty for a body corporate 3000 p.u. |

## **OTHER STATUTORY POWERS TO MAKE A SUPPRESSION ORDER**

Section 93.2 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) provides a court exercising federal jurisdiction with both a suppression order power and a closed court power in circumstances where the exercise of the power is in the interests of Australia’s national security: see **section 2.7.2** above. For a discussion of the power to make suppression orders under section 93.2 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) see *Attorney-General v Temssah* [2024] VSC 172 at [12]-[36]; *R v Benbrika & Ors (Ruling 1)* [2007] VSC 141; *R v Lodhi* [2006] NSWSC 596 upheld on appeal (2006) NSWLR 573.

For a discussion of the power to make suppression orders under s.75 of the *Crimes (Mental Impairment and Unfitness to be Tried) Act 1997* (Vic) see *Re XY* [2018] VSC 456 at [8] per Croucher J; *Re XY (No 3)* [2020] VSC 195 at [61] per Taylor J; *Re XY (No 4)* [2022] VSC 21 at [41]-[48] per Elliott J; *Re AB* [2022] VSC 235 at [30]-[48] per Tinney J.

In *AB (a pseudonym) v CD (a pseudonym); EF (a pseudonym) v CD (a pseudonym)* [2019] HCA 6 Nettle J invoked s.77RE(1)(a) of the *Judiciary Act 1903* (Cth) to make non-publication orders in circumstances where the risk of harm to children associated with a party to the proceeding were held to be “acute”.

In *Chairperson of the Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants v Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police* [2019] VSCA 154 the Court of Appeal (Whelan, Beach & Weinberg JJA) allowed in part an application to vacate or vary suppression orders, holding that revocation of the orders entirely would increase risk but varying the orders to permit disclosure to and by the Royal Commission in accordance with the *Inquiries Act 2014* and the *Witness Protection Act 1991*. In this process the Court applied *AB v CD* [2019] VSCA 28 and *AB v CD; EF v CD* [2019] HCA 6.

### **2.8.3 ‘Take-down’ orders**

A ‘take-down’ order is an order that a person remove material that has been published in print or on‑line. A detailed discussion of ‘take-down’ orders may be found in Chapter 14 of a report entitled “**Contempt of Court**” which was published by the Victorian Law Reform Commission [VLRC] on 22/11/2021: see <https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/publication/contempt-of-court-report/14-take-down-orders/>. The primary purpose of a take-down order is to limit the harm caused by a breach of a restriction on publication. It is a remedy rather than a form of punishment.

Take-down orders can be used to require material to be taken down that was lawful when first published but which now breaches a restriction on publication (for example, because a child referred to in the publication has now been charged with a criminal offence). Take-down orders are also used to remove material proved to be in breach of a restriction on publication. For example, the Supreme Court of Victoria and the County Court of Victoria can make take-down orders under their powers to control court proceedings and protect a fair trial: see *DPP (Cth) v Brady* [2015] VSC 246 [75], (2015) 252 A Crim R 50; *News Digital Media Pty Ltd v Mokbel*[2010] VSCA 51, (2010) 30 VR 248 [63]–[67].

In its overview of **‘take-down’ orders** the VLRC report noted [emphasis added]:

* **Courts can order a person to remove material that has been published.**
* Take-down orders can limit the harm caused by breaches of restrictions on publication. They may be more useful in the online age as it becomes harder to prevent publication.
* Take-down orders require the removal of material by online intermediaries and owners of public websites where third parties can comment.
* The *Open Courts Act 2013* should state the powers of courts to order that publications be taken down and the procedure for applying for such orders.
* Since they restrict freedom of expression, such orders should only be made when necessary and no other measures can be taken.
* These powers should be available to take down material breaching a restriction on publication or on the grounds currently in the OCA in respect of suppression orders.
* A court should be able to make an interim take-down order in urgent cases.

As the VLRC report noted at [14.6]:

“A suppression order made under the *Open Courts Act 2013* could also operate as a ‘take-down’ order, on the basis that ‘publication’ is interpreted as continuing for as long as the material is made available: see, for example, *News Digital Media Pty Ltd v Mokbel* [2010] VSCA 51 [63]-[67]; Judicial College of Victoria, ‘6.3 Broad Suppression Orders’ 06/02/2019) [16]–[20]: <<http://www.judicialcollege.vic.edu.au/bench-books-open-courts-bench-book>>. Therefore, a suppression order made under the OCA may require material maintained on the internet to be taken down: see ss.3, 17 & 26.”

The VLRC report noted at [14.7] that “courts consider a number of factors in deciding whether a take-down order is needed:

* when the original publication was published and the currency of the material;
* whether the article is forced upon a visitor to the website;
* the permanency of the publication and whether a cached version would be available after the publication is taken down;
* if the material is taken down from a more reliable website subject to the take-down order, whether more obscure publications may be given greater prominence in a search result;
* the likelihood that jurors, subject to criminal sanction, will undertake research about the trial and will comply with jury directions;
* the impossibility of identifying all websites which might have published the material, some of which would be unidentifiable or controlled from overseas.

See, eg, *Nationwide News Pty Ltd v Qaumi*[2016] NSWCCA 97, (2016) 93 NSWLR 384 [83]–[90]; *DPP (Cth) v Brady* [2015] VSC 246 [75]; *Fairfax Digital Australia and New Zealand Pty Ltd v Ibrahim*[2012] NSWCCA 125, (2012) 83 NSWLR 52 [74]–[79]; *News Digital Media Pty Ltd v Mokbel*[2010] VSCA 51 [74]–[77]; *R v Rich (Ruling No 7)*[2008] VSC 437 [20]–[22].”

The VLRC concluded at [14.12]:

“**Courts should retain the power to make take-down orders.** Despite the challenges posed by modern media technology including the internet, there are times when that power will be useful.” [emphasis added]

Ultimately the VLRC recommended at [14.24]-[14.27]:

* For the purposes of consistency, accessibility and clarity in the law, legislation should set out the courts’ power to make take-down orders.
* Under the legislative provisions, courts should be able to order material to be taken down on the same grounds and subject to the same tests as for suppression orders under ss.18 & 26 of the OCA. The legislation should also empower the courts to order material to be taken down after it has been proved to breach a restriction on publication.
* These powers should extend to online intermediaries or the owners of public websites where third parties can post material.
* A take-down order should only be made against a party with the capacity to do so. For example, if a person publishes a comment on a public website, they may not be able to delete the material. It is unfair to impose liability when the party cannot comply, and this should be expressed in the legislation.

### **2.8.4 Relationship between s.534 CYFA and the Open Courts Act 2013**

As discussed in **section 2.7.2** the *Open Courts Act 2013* (‘OCA’) does not expressly refer to the Children’s Court: see the definition of “court or tribunal” in s.3. Nor has the Children’s Court been prescribed in subordinate legislation as a court falling within limb (f) of the definition. However, a Director of Criminal Law Policy of the Department of Justice and Community Safety has advised the Principal Registrar of the Children’s Court that–

“The Children's Court was considered as the [OCA] was drafted. It was not specifically listed as a 'court' able to make suppression orders, as the provisions of the CYFA already provided a statutory ban to the publication of material coming out of the Court – rather than providing the power to make a suppression order.

In developing the provisions about broad suppression orders, the aim was generally to replicate the current powers of the Courts, rather than to create any new powers. So in so far as the Children's Court can exercise the powers of the Magistrates' Court under s.528(1), it retains the power to make any order that the Magistrates Court can make. There was certainly no intention for the OCA to be interpreted as narrowing s.528(1) of the CYFA.”

It should be noted that this advice was provided prior to the amendments to the OCA made by the *Open Courts and Other Acts Amendment Act 2019*. Those amendments include s.8 which as far as is relevant provides:

1. This Act does not limit or otherwise affect the operation of a provision made by or under any other Act, including an Act of the Commonwealth, that—
2. prohibits or restricts, or authorises a court or tribunal to prohibit or restrict, the publication or other disclosure of information for or in connection with any proceeding; or
3. requires or authorises a court or tribunal to close any proceeding to the public.

(1A) If a provision of an Act referred to in subsection (2) prohibits or restricts, or authorises a court or tribunal to prohibit or restrict, the publication or other disclosure of information for or in connection with any proceeding, a court or tribunal must not make a suppression order that prohibits or restricts the publication or other disclosure of information which is already prohibited or restricted by that other provision.

1. Without limiting the generality of subsection (1), this Act does not limit the operation of the following provisions—
2. …;
3. **section 534 of the** ***Children, Youth and Families Act 2005***;…
4. section 75 of the *Crimes (Mental Impairment and Unfitness to be Tried) Act 1997*;…
5. sections 32F or 42BQ of the *Evidence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1958*;
6. sections 166 or 167 of the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*…
7. A suppression order that prohibits or restricts the publication or other disclosure of information which is already prohibited or restricted by the operation of a provision made by or under any Act, including an Act of the Commonwealth, is not invalid merely because it covers the same prohibition, restriction or disclosure as the provision of an Act.

It is clear enough from ss.8(1) & 8(2)(b) that the OCA does not limit or otherwise affect the operation of s.534 CYFA or for that matter of s.523. The position in relation to ss.8(1A) & 8(3) of the OCA is not so clear. This issue arose as a central aspect of *Re WD (No 2)* [2023] VSC 790 in which the Court dismissed the application of the Secretary DFFH for a proceeding suppression order. At [100]-[102], [107] & [110] Elliott J said (emphasis added but footnotes omitted):

[100] “In the absence of any prior judicial consideration of the interaction between section 8(1A) and (3), general principles of statutory interpretation must be considered. The central focus should be on the text of the provision, with its words given their natural and ordinary meaning unless a contrary legislative intent is plain: *Masson v Parsons* (2019) 266 CLR 554, 572 [26]; *Project Blue Sky Inc v Australian Broadcasting Authority* (1998) 194 CLR 335, 384 [78]. The text of the provision must also be considered in context, including by having regard to the Act as a whole, its purpose and object, and any relevant extrinsic material: *Project Blue Sky Inc v Australian Broadcasting Authority* (1998) 194 CLR 335, 384 [78]; *CIC Insurance Ltd v Bankstown Football Club Ltd* (1997) 187 CLR 384, 408. A construction of legislation which promotes its underlying purpose or objective is to be preferred to one that does not: *Interpretation of Legislation Act 1984* (Vic), s.35(a).

[101] With this in mind, the position so far as section 8(1A) is concerned is relatively straightforward. As is clear from the text of the provision, it operates to preclude a court from making a suppression order in relation to information the publication or disclosure of which is already prohibited or restricted by the operation of a provision referred to in section 8(2). Thus, on its face, **section 8(1A) precludes the court from making the suppression order sought by the Secretary, which proposes to prohibit the publication or disclosure of information that is already captured by the restriction on publication in section 534 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005***.

[102] However, the operation of section 8(3), and particularly the manner in which this subsection interacts with section 8(1A) is less clear…”

…

[107] “Ultimately, it is unnecessary to determine the precise scope and operation of section 8(3) for present purposes. Whatever the position might be, it is clear that the subsection does not operate as an empowering provision. The language used in the provision does not in any way evoke a power on the court’s part to make suppression orders where specialised regimes prohibiting or restricting the publication of the relevant information are already in place. Further, the explanatory memorandum to the Open Courts and Other Acts Amendment Bill makes clear that the function of section 8(3) is ‘*ensuring* that a suppression order made … *contrary to the statutory requirement* in section 8(1A) *is not invalid*’ as a result of covering the same subject matter (emphasis added). This again makes clear that section 8(3) is a safeguard against invalidity, rather than a source of power. In this way, the provision stands in stark contrast to the strong prohibitive language adopted in section 8(1A), which provides that a court ‘must not’ make a suppression order where the publication or disclosure of the relevant information is already prohibited or limited by the operation of a provision referred to in section 8(2).”

…

[110] “In light of the above, it is not appropriate that a suppression order in the form sought by the Secretary be made. As is clear from the terms of the proposed order, the information that it seeks to suppress the publication or disclosure of is already captured by the restriction on publication found in section 534 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act*. To make a suppression order in these circumstances would be in direct contravention of the statutory prohibition in section 8(1A) of the *Open Courts Act*. Even if section 8(3) would be enlivened in the circumstances to prevent such an order being rendered invalid, clearly, this provision could not authorise the making of a suppression order in wilful and flagrant disregard of section 8(1A).”

Although it is clear that s.8(1A) of the OCA prohibits the Children’s Court from making a suppression order under the OCA which replicates any of the express prohibitions in s.534 CYFA, the writer considers it probable that s.8(1A) is not intended to prevent the Children’s Court from making a suppression order under the OCA which contains prohibitions additional to those in s.534 CYFA.

In a case in which a number of young co-accused had been arrested and charged with a very serious offence and one suspect was still at large, Victoria Police applied for a suppression order on the basis that publication of the material prohibited by the order was likely to hinder the police attempts to locate and arrest the remaining suspect. Being satisfied under s.18(1)(a) OCA that the order was necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice that could not be prevented by other reasonably available means, a Children’s Court magistrate made an interim proceeding suppression order on 24/03/2022 in the following terms:

1. Under Section 20(1) of the Act, the Court makes an interim proceeding suppression order, being satisfied the order is necessary under s18(a) of the Act:

The order prohibits publication of any part of the application in Court for a final suppression order other than the charge sheets and the prosecution summary of the factual allegations against the accused.

1. The prohibition on publication in paragraph 1 applies in Australia
2. The order is necessary to prevent a real and substantial risk of prejudice to the proper administration of justice.
3. For the purposes of this order, publication means the dissemination or provision of access to the public by any means including, publication in a book, newspaper, magazine or other written publication; or broadcast by radio or television; or public exhibition; or broadcast or electronic communication; pursuant to s3 of *the Open Courts Act 2013*.
4. The interim proceeding suppression order operates until further order unless otherwise ordered.

### **2.8.5 Section 10(5) of the *Witness Protection Act 1991***

Section 10(5) of the *Witness Protection Act 1991* prohibits – under a penalty of level 5 imprisonment – a person without lawful authority from disclosing information about the identity or location of a person who is or has been a participant in the witness protection program or that compromises the security of such a person. In *DPP & Anor v Dale & Ors* [2010] VSC 88 Beach J analysed the proper construction and operation of s.10(5) and its relationship with s.126 of the *Magistrates’ Court Act 1989* [now s.17 of the OCA]. At [48]-[49] his Honour said:

“A potential or threatened breach of s 10(5) of the *Witness Protection Act* does not mandate that in all circumstances the Court must make a non-publication order under s 126 of the *Magistrates’ Court Act* (or its equivalent, ss 18 and 19 of the *Supreme Court Act*). It remains necessary in each case for the Court to consider the terms of s 126 of the *Magistrates’ Court Act*. That is, the question is whether, in all the circumstances that have been established, is it necessary to make a non-publication order in order not to prejudice the administration of justice or endanger the physical safety of any person (referring only to paragraphs (b) and (c) as relevant in this case).

However, it must be said that it would be a very unusual case where a threatened breach of s 10(5) did not lead to the conclusion that a non-publication order was necessary (giving full allowance to the fact that the requirement that the order be ‘necessary’ imposes a high standard).”

## **2.9 Bail justices**

Under s.14(1) of the *Honorary Justices Act 2014* [replacing s.120(1) of the *Magistrates' Court Act 1989*] the Governor-in-Council may appoint eligible lay persons as bail justices. Eligibility criteria are set out in s.14(2).

Under s.18 members of the public service who hold a "prescribed office" classification are bail justices without the need for any other appointment provided they have completed a course of training prescribed for the purposes of this section to the satisfaction of the Attorney-General. The "prescribed office" classifications are set out in reg.10 of the *Honorary Justices Regulations 2014* [S.R.No.110/2014].

The functions and powers of bail justices are set out in the *Bail Act 1977* [No.9008] and in the CYFA and include the hearing and determination of out-of-sessions applications:

* for remand or bail in relation to adult & child accused; and
* for interim accommodation orders in relation to children who have been taken by DFFH into safe custody but whose cases cannot be heard by the Children’s Court for more than 24 hours.

Although their role is of importance for the Children’s Court, bail justices do not fall within the definition of “Court” in s.504(2) of the CYFA, namely that “the Court consists of the President; the magistrates, the judicial registrars and the registrars of the Court.”

For more information about the roles of bail justices and Justices of the Peace see:

* <http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/justices> (maintained by the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety);
* <http://www.rvahj.org.au> (maintained by the Royal Victorian Association of Honorary Justices).

## **2.10 Court services**

For many years the **Salvation Army** had maintained a daily information and support service at the Melbourne Children's Court and some suburban & regional Children's Courts. The Salvation Army has now reprioritised its mission and no longer provides services at the Court. Special tribute should be paid to Brigadier Doreen Griffiths who provided generations of clients with support and succour at Melbourne Children's Court and to Major Vicki McMahon who was transferred to Bridgehaven after supporting children, parents and family members at Melbourne Children’s Court for 13 years.

However, the Salvation Army still provides a wide range of services for clients of the Court. These services – described in more detail on the Children’s Court website [tab “Help and Support” 🡺 “Support Services at Court” 🡺 “Salvation Army”] – include–

* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs;
* Homelessness services;
* Alcohol and other drug services;
* Employment Plus;
* Youth support networks and programs.

The following three court organisations provide free services at various Children’s Courts:

The **Court Registry** is where all documents relating to a case in that venue of the Children’s Court are filed. Registry staff cannot give legal advice or complete court forms on a person’s behalf but can provide assistance such as–

* help with finding forms and court lists;
* explaining court processes and procedures;
* explaining legal phrases or terms, rules and practices;
* giving information about how the Victorian court system works;
* providing general advice to enable a person to complete court forms;
* providing suggestions about other agencies that can give legal advice.

A **Court Support Coordinator** [CSC] is a specialist court staff member who has a background in social work and is available to provide information and to support court users whose cases are listed at Melbourne, Broadmeadows and Moorabbin Children’s Courts. A CSC’s role includes provision of–

* referrals to community support services, including drug and alcohol, housing, youth support and family violence;
* information about court processes and procedures to people who do not have legal representation;
* physical and emotional support to people who are distressed or seeking help;
* assistance to join online hearings and support during hearings.

In the 2022/23 financial year CSPs provided support to over 1,844 court users, including 1,292 self-represented parties.

A **Family Violence Practitioner** [FVP] is a specialist court staff member who provides support and assistance to persons attending the Melbourne Children’s Court for proceedings related to family violence. If a person is attending the court either as a result of experiencing or using violence, the FVP can assist the person–

* to understand the court process including what will happen at the court hearing and the different types of orders that can be made;
* to prepare a plan to keep the person safe at home and in and around the court buildings;
* to access available services in the community, including education, employment, crisis accommodation, counselling and wellbeing services;
* to access available services and programs in the community to stop using family violence.

However, the FVP is not able to provide mental health assessments, financial support or legal advice and is unable to negotiate matters with other parties.

A number of other organisations provide services for and/or at the Children's Court. These include the following:

### **2.10.1 Youth Justice**

At Melbourne Children's Court and at many other Children's Courts the Youth Justice Division of the Department of Justice and Community Safety has officers in attendance on each court sitting day to provide support, advice and practical assistance (which may include assistance in arranging accommodation) for young accused attending or brought before the Court. The officers also coordinate arrangements between regional offices of the Department and young persons who have been placed on supervisory sentencing orders by the Court or in respect of whom a deferral of sentence has been ordered. Youth Justice officers are also involved in the diversion process. There is also a dedicated diversion officer – entitled Children’s Court Youth Diversion Coordinator – present at each Children’s Court Criminal Division sitting. The role of the diversion officer is to undertake diversion assessments and make recommendations to the presiding judicial officer in relation to individual diversion plans.

### **2.10.2 Child Witness Service**

The Child Witness Service [‘CWS’] – which commenced operation in 2007 – is a specialist agency of the Department of Justice and Community Safety but is separate from the courts. The role of the CWS is to offer specialised support and practical preparation to assist children and young persons under the age of 18 years who are victims of or witnesses to a criminal offence and who may be required to give evidence in the Magistrates’ Court, the Children’s Court, the County Court or the Supreme Court.

The CWS’ specialist team of six social workers and psychologists help prepare child witnesses for court and support them during and after the case, fully explaining the case and providing a link with police and prosecutors and victims’ services. The CWS aims to reduce the trauma and stress which may be experienced by a child witness by:

* preparing the witness for the process of providing his or her evidence;
* familiarising the witness with the court process and personnel;
* supporting the witness through the criminal proceedings and court hearing; and
* supporting the principal carer throughout the legal process.

However, although the CWS supports and prepares child witnesses on an individual basis, the evidence is never discussed.

A dedicated unit, with child-friendly surrounds, the CWS also provides remote witness facilities by means of which a child witness is able – if the court so orders – to give evidence without being in the presence of the accused person in the courtroom or to have his or her evidence pre-recorded by a court officer.

The CWS does not provide a counselling service but can make referrals to appropriate agencies if additional support is requested.

Although the CWS is based in the Melbourne legal precinct, the service is state-wide and will support children giving evidence in rural regions as well as those giving evidence in metropolitan Melbourne.

Referrals to the CWS can be made by anyone. This includes Victoria police members, the Office of Public Prosecutions, legal professionals, other professionals or directly by the child or young person or his or her family. This can be done by phone, fax or email:

Phone: 1300 790 540

Fax: 9603 9202

Email: [childwitnessservice@justice.vic.gov.au](mailto:childwitnessservice@justice.vic.gov.au).

The CWS considers it important that a child or young person who may be required to give evidence is referred to the service as soon as possible after charges have been laid. It does not matter whether a decision has been made about whether the child or young person will need to give evidence.

The CWS has been assisting approximately 500 child witnesses in Victoria each year, many of whom are victims of serious crimes such as sexual assault or physical assault.

### **2.10.3 Court Network**

Since 2003 Court Network has provided volunteer "Networkers" each sitting day at Melbourne Children’s Court and most other Children’s Court locations to give information, assistance and support to court users.

### **2.10.4 Victoria Legal Aid**

There are duty lawyers from Victoria Legal Aid at all Children's Courts in the Melbourne metropolitan area and on mention days at all other Children's Courts in Victoria. They are available for children in family or criminal cases, and parents of children in family cases who need legal advice or representation in court. Most children are able to obtain legal aid free of charge.

For more information, call Victoria Legal Aid on (03) 9269 0120 or 1800 677 402 (for country callers) between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm. Multilingual telephone information is provided in English and 11 community languages at certain times each week.

### **2.10.5 Interpreters**

Section 526 of the CYFA prohibits the Court from hearing and determining a proceeding without an interpreter if the Court is satisfied that a child, a parent or any other party to the proceeding has a difficulty in communicating in the English language that is sufficient to prevent him or her from understanding or participating in the proceeding. The role of a court interpreter and the effect of an alleged mistranslation were explained by the High Court in *DVO16 v Minister for Immigration and Border Protection; BNB17 v Minister for Immigration and Border Protection* [2021] HCA 12 at [4]‑[8]. Qualified and accredited interpreters are available when needed and can be booked through the registry of the relevant Children’s Court. Arrangements must be made with as much notice as possible to ensure that an appropriate interpreter is available.

### **2.10.6 Mental Health Advice and Response Service [MHARS]**

The Children’s Court Mental Health Advice and Response Service is a specialist mental health service delivered by Orygen Youth Health at Melbourne Children’s Court. The MHARS clinician is available–

* to provide mental health assessments for eligible young people appearing before the Children’s Court who present with suicidality, acute mental health concerns and/or distress while awaiting their court appearance;
* to advise the Court whether mental health concerns are present or whether factors related to mental health may have a bearing on the proceedings;
* to facilitate timely access for an eligible child to appropriate treatment and mental health support.

To be eligible for assistance by MHARS a young person–

* must be aged 10-18; and
* must be an accused in proceedings in the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court or be subject to Family Division proceedings in which a secure welfare placement is possible; and
* at least one of the following criteria must also be met–
* there are concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of the young person; or
* the young person is engaging in expressing a desire to engage in deliberate self-harming behaviours, or is expressing suicidal ideation, or is having thoughts to harm others; or
* the young person’s judgment is severely impaired due to the effects of drugs and/or alcohol use or any undetermined reason.

Referrals to MHARS may be made by phone or email and may be initiated by a wide range of people, including–

* judicial officers and Court personnel;
* legal practitioners;
* Victoria Police, DFFH and Youth Justice;
* family, support people and self-referrals.

On the Children’s Court website tab “Help and Support” 🡺 “Support Services at Court” 🡺 “MHARS”.

### **2.10.7 Education Justice Initiative**

The Victorian Government’s Education Justice Initiative [EJI] is a program run by the Department of Education and Training [DET] and supported by the Children’s Court of Victoria. It re/connects young people appearing before the Criminal Division of the Children’s Court with supported educational pathways that suit their needs and interests.

In *DPP v Nelis* [2022] VSC 50, in the context of sentencing a 38 year old offender on a charge of manslaughter based on criminal negligence, Lasry J said at [22] [emphasis added]:

“Your childhood was affected by violence and instability. As a teenager you lived in Geelong and Perth. You were in the latter city because of your mother’s new relationship. You suffered at the hands of both your mother’s partner and an uncle while you were there. You returned to Victoria after spending six months in Perth. Your education finished after year 11, having been intermittent for several years. I pause to note that this is a typical scenario**. It is the case that a very large number of troubled individuals who find themselves in the criminal justice system have an incomplete and unsatisfactory education.** **Those who are vocal about reducing criminal activity should pay careful attention to education as a means of diverting young people away from being tempted to commit criminal offences, particularly when a drug habit has become entrenched in their lives.**”

It was precisely this philosophy that led to the setting-up of the EJI as an initiative of Judge Couzens, a former President of the Children’s Court, in August 2014.

The EJI is available to young people who are 10-17 years of age and who currently have a matter before the Criminal Division of a Children’s Court at locations listed below or at any Koori Children’s Court.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CHILDREN’S COURTS WITH EJI SERVICE** | |
| **MAINSTREAM CHILDREN’S COURT** | **KOORI CHILDREN’S COURT** |
| Melbourne | Melbourne |
| Bairnsdale | Bairnsdale |
| Ballarat |  |
| Benalla |  |
| Bendigo |  |
| Broadmeadows |  |
| Dandenong |  |
| Geelong | Geelong |
|  | Hamilton |
| Latrobe Valley | Latrobe Valley |
| Mildura | Mildura |
| Moorabbin |  |
|  | Portland |
| Robinvale |  |
| Sale |  |
| Shepparton | Shepparton |
| Swan Hill | Swan HIll |
| Warrnambool | Warrnambool |
| Wodonga |  |

On receipt of a referral, EJI will work with the young person and their family or support person and/or case worker to link with the most appropriate school, education or training provider. The EJI accepts referrals from:

* young people and/or their families;
* judicial officers;
* Victoria Police;
* Department of Justice and Community Safety officers;
* Department of Families, Fairness and Housing officers;
* other relevant support services the young person may be involved with;
* legal representatives;
* past schools or training providers;
* other Department of Education staff.

To make a referral to EJI, download and complete an EJI referral form from the Department of Education website, ensuring that the child (if a mature minor) or the child’s parent or person who has parental responsibility for the child (in any other case) has read, understood and signed the form.

On the Children’s Court website tab “Help and Support” 🡺 “Support Services at Court” 🡺 “EJI”.

