

First Virtual Justice Network to be set up for Honiara Courts

New ICT equipment will enable participating agencies to use resourcing more efficiently, helping to reduce growing caseloads and deliver law and justice services more broadly to people across the country. In the event that Honiara is locked down due to a COVID-19 outbreak, the digital network would be even more important, allowing agencies to continue their work without disruption.

The establishment of the country's first virtual justice network is being jointly funded by the Australian and British Governments, following a joint request from the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (MJLA) and the Ministry of Police, National Security and Correctional Services (MPNSCS).

Welcoming the initiative, MJLA Permanent Secretary Dr Paul Mae said the primary aim of the virtual justice network was to put in place the infrastructure that would allow the courts and justice agencies to continue to function during a lockdown in Honiara.

He added:

Faced with preparing for the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a consensus in the sector that the best and fastest solution would be to set up equip each agency to be able to take part in court hearings remotely.

Given the constraints on the government's finances at this time, it is the positive response of the Governments of Australia and the United Kingdom that has made this possible.

The equipment being provided including computers, large screens, cameras, microphones, and speakers, was formally handed over to the agencies at the Solomon Islands Government Information Communication Technology Services on Thursday 28 January 2021.

SIG ICT Services will be responsible for installing the equipment in the participating agencies over the coming weeks. This includes the RSIPF Rove Watch house, the Correctional Services, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and Police Prosecutions Department, as well as the Public Solicitor's Office and the Attorney General's Chambers.

Last year, the High Court was able to host the final session of the 2020 Court of Appeal remotely after Australia's Justice Program provided the equipment necessary to establish the Court's virtual capability.

Speaking at the Opening of the Solomon Islands 2021 Legal Year last week, the Chief Justice, Sir Albert Palmer, said this had greatly assisted in the court in the efficient discharge of judicial and legal duties, including being able

to convene meetings, workshops, conferences and court hearings on a digital platform.

He said:

The assistance has been timely and substantive in allowing much needed court services, trainings and scheduled activities to proceed in a very restricted environment as a result of the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Australia recognised the importance of keeping the courts and justice agencies functioning despite the restrictions caused by COVID-19, the Australian High Commission Dr Lachlan Strahan said.

He further added:

As Australia has found, this virus is unpredictable, so we were happy to support the justice sector's forward thinking to support the rule of law and facilitate Solomon Islanders access to justice in the face of the pandemic.

The challenges facing justice systems in so many countries – especially growing caseloads and resource constraints – mean that we have to find more efficient ways of doing things. Being able to operate virtually is one part of addressing these challenges even in normal times. It has become even more important in these COVID times.

British High Commissioner to the Solomon Islands and Nauru, Dr. Brian Jones said the UK recognises that responding to the pandemic requires a global approach, including supporting countries to deliver essential services and keep vital institutions such as the courts open.

Dr Brian said:

This pandemic is not just a medical crisis, but its dire impact continues to extend to all areas of life. The UK is therefore very pleased to be able to support the Solomon Islands Justice Sector to establish the capacity to operate remotely at this time.