

Tena koutou

Court and tribunal operations in Level 2 – Family Services

I am writing to thank you all for your assistance in continuing to deliver essential public services during this time. As our services continued to expand through Alert Level 4 and 3, you have persevered through a lot of unknowns as we figured out this new operating environment. Your commitment to access to justice is deeply appreciated.

On Monday 18 May, we will begin operating in Alert Level 2. I am writing to share information that may be of use to you as we make this transition.

As it was in Alert Level 3 and 4, while access to justice is important, so is health and safety. Everything we do will be in a way that supports this.

The judicial heads of bench have released updated protocols for Alert Level 2. This is available here: <https://courtsfnz.govt.nz/publications/announcements/covid-19/court-protocols/district-court/>

Increasing public access

While our sites will be busier than Alert Level 3 and 4, it will be different than going into buildings before COVID-19. Everyone entering the building will be required to sign a register for contact tracing and public access will be managed safely. Please note that our sites are exempt from the current gathering limits. There are also thermal imaging scanners at the entrance.

Counters will reopen once site managers are satisfied the appropriate health and safety requirements are in place. For Auckland District Court I can confirm the Family counter on Level 6, will not be open on Monday, but we are working towards them being open on Tuesday 19 May. The drop boxes will remain in place for filing of documents, and for anything urgent queries our Service Managers will be available. I attach the Contacts List again also.

Please continue to file everything electronically (where possible) and where not possible, please use either mail or the drop-boxes that are located near security screening.

Physical distancing

Managing physical distancing is a challenge across all organisations and business in NZ, and we are no different. At Alert Level 2, the Government has advised that in environments such as our courts and tribunals, physical distancing of 1-metre is required.

Thank you for your personal attention to ensuring that distancing is maintained as required. While we expect participants to take personal responsibility for their safety, we will also be using private security to help manage this. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is also available for all participants on request. Alternative methods of submitting documents have been introduced to allow for less physical contact, such as using drop boxes or email. Please follow the directional markings at all times – either in the courtrooms, waiting rooms, interview rooms or at the counters. Additionally, seating in the waiting rooms, courtrooms and interview rooms, including counsel benches have been set up to follow the distancing requirements. Please follow these directions and the direction of your court-taker at all times.

Hygiene and cleaning

Our sites are maintaining extensive standards of cleanliness and hygiene. The cleaning regime is based on Ministry of Health recommendations. For more information, please see our health and safety

factsheet available on our website here: <https://www.justice.govt.nz/covid-19-information/information-for-all-court-users/>

Site operations

Site operations may differ slightly as building restrictions and capacities of the different court sites across Auckland. The operations for Waitakere and North Shore will be sent out separately.

Judges de Jong and Goodwin have advised that all exhibits must be filed in an electronic way and there are to be no hand-ups in court.

Judge de Jong has also advised that all Mental Health hearings across metro-Auckland will continue to be heard via VMR link and that counsel may join remotely as well.

South Auckland Family Courts:

For South Auckland Family Courts, please see the attached letter from Judge Goodwin, Liaison Family Court Judge.

Auckland Family Court:

Judge de Jong has advised that all Judicial conferences, submissions only hearings and other hearings that may be appropriate to be heard remotely, will continue to be heard via teleconference or VMR link.

Raising concerns

You may have questions about protocols, increasing public access, and health and safety standards. In the first instance, your local Service Managers or myself, are the appropriate channel to answer questions and alleviate concerns about health and safety. The Family Liaison Judges can address any protocol concerns.

Operational recovery

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Justice are continuing to work with the judiciary on how to address backlogs. We are also making sure we are well prepared to adjust should the alert levels change again.

Thank you for your support during this time.

Ngā mihi nui