

A new way of working for District Courts in Auckland

The Ministry of Justice has developed a new way of working across the District Courts in Auckland so that it can provide quality, sustainable services in the region through the next 20 years.

One-third of the demand for court services nationally is from within the greater Auckland region, resources are stretched in some areas, and projections point to both population growth and changing needs.

The main costs in the justice sector are around buildings and people. The key to moving cases faster through courts, delivering the services people need and getting better value for money is to make the best use of courtrooms and staff.

The unique characteristics of Auckland's six District Courts – with more than 300 staff and 79 court and hearing rooms across the region – means there is an opportunity to use resources more effectively and provide services that are not simply based around individual buildings. The Auckland regional service delivery model is designed to provide better services at a local level, by managing resources regionally. It will take effect from the end of January 2012.

Why we are changing the way we work

In 2008 the Ministry received Cabinet approval to start a programme of work to look at Auckland's long term needs to ensure that the Ministry can provide sustainable services across the region out to 2030.

Issues of capacity and structure were revealed during a fundamental review of the way services have been delivered.

Capacity - The Auckland region presents unique challenges given its size, diverse ethnic population and projected growth rate. Four of the largest courts in New Zealand are located within a 40km area and more than 30% of the Ministry's case workload is in the region. While a number of initiatives across the justice sector should reduce demand for some court services, waiting times are increasing and demography and growth need to be planned for – the volume of work in Auckland is expected to increase more than in any other region. Several courthouses in the region are no longer fit for purpose.

Structure - The existing operating model is de-centralised with each location operating independently yet delivering broadly the same suite of services. This means the quality of services can vary across sites and there is limited regional overview of how resources are used. The capacity of the region as a whole is not leveraged and activities are duplicated across multiple locations. This makes it difficult to get the best use out of the courtrooms we have and ensure meaningful steps are taken to progress cases through the court system.

User satisfaction - Increasingly people using our services find them inflexible and out of step with their expectations. A 2009 survey of Civil Jurisdiction and Family Court customers found they wanted an increase in the availability of hearing dates and improvement in overall service levels.

The new way of working

The new regional operating model takes advantage of the scale and close proximity of the Ministry's Auckland operations. It comprises four services groups, each with a regional focus, to manage services centrally but deliver them locally. It will help the Ministry better use people, property and technology across the region and provide courts with the flexibility to adapt to changing capacity requirements as workloads change over time.

Improving case disposal rates requires improved case and resource management across the region. This will improve the way we use courtrooms and, coupled with reduced volumes from other initiatives such as reforms to simplify criminal procedure, will allow a smaller future investment in new property.

The new regional structure

The new regional structure involves centralised management of jurisdictions to help us better use our resources across the region, and specialist teams providing case management, case processing and counter services.

- Civil jurisdiction and Family Court services, and other specialised services across the region, will be managed from two operational hubs at the Auckland and Manukau District Courts.
- Case management services will also be based at these hubs. Case management is a critical task in helping to progress cases through the court system. As court taking and counter services are necessarily given priority by registry staff, the creation of specific, centralised case management teams will provide a dedicated resource for this function.
- "High volume processing" activities for the whole of Auckland will be sited at one location, providing a more flexible, responsive team with the required knowledge.
- Frontline services teams will continue to be based at all courts providing counter and court taking services to customers. The separation of case management and case processing functions from customer-facing functions will enable court officers to focus on providing quality customer service.
- Family Court Co-ordinator teams will be based at both the Auckland and Manukau District Court hubs. They will manage service provider referrals and oversee service provider administration. Centralising these services enables sharing of specialist knowledge and best practice. Community education and liaison functions will be delivered by team members travelling to communities.

The new structure provides a senior manager for the Criminal jurisdiction across the region. Other than this, arrangements for criminal services are unchanged. This area will be looked at in the future as part of implementing the criminal procedure simplification legislative changes.

Resource optimisation

Court rostering is a registry function, performed on behalf of, and in conjunction with, the Judiciary. This function is extremely important to the overall efficiency of court operations and directly impacts on the utilisation of high cost resource, such as courtrooms. A new centralised team will be established to take a regional approach to rostering. This will also mean judicial rostering can be more responsive to where demand is in the region, rather than following established routines.

National initiatives

The new operating model will allow the region to take the best advantage of a number of national initiatives, such as criminal procedure reforms, electronic court records and electronic case filing. It will also provide the region with the flexibility to adapt to any findings that come out of the current review of the Family Court.

In summary, from 31 January 2012, District Court users in Auckland can expect:

- more consistent service
- shorter waiting times
- quicker disposal of cases.