



The Right Honourable Dame Helen Winkelmann

CHIEF JUSTICE OF NEW ZEALAND | TE TUMU WHAKAWĀ O AOTEAROA

4 March 2022

## MEDIA STATEMENT

**EMBARGOED UNTIL FRIDAY 4 MARCH, 2PM**

# Chief Justice's inaugural Annual Report released today

Chief Justice Helen Winkelmann has today released a public report about the operation of the courts, and how they are responding to challenges such as COVID-19.

“We have taken this initiative in the interests of transparency – the courts are a public institution. It is important for people to see the work that goes on within the judiciary, together with the Ministry of Justice, to try to ensure our courts meet the needs of our society and that they are resilient in the face of disruption and change.”

The Chief Justice this afternoon held a media conference with the Chief High Court and Chief District Court judges to release the inaugural public report on judicial administration and how the justice system works in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The report provides information on how the judiciary organises itself to operate the courts and improve court processes, and the work that has been done to ensure the courts continued to operate throughout the pandemic.

It has been a period of rapid change, the Chief Justice said today. “When the country went into the first lockdown, many of the courts’ operating systems were “Dickensian” in that they would have been familiar to a lawyer in the 19th century, she said. That was due to a lack of investment in the courts which stretched back decades.”

“We had paper files, no electronic payment, and limited Audio-Visual Links. So when the pandemic hit New Zealand and we were in lockdown we had to quickly move to avoid bringing people into the courts, to avoid bringing defendants into courthouses from prisons – to operate remotely wherever possible.

The Ministry of Justice provided outstanding support in the response which included providing capacity for remote hearings, electronic payments and filing of papers, and now Rapid Antigen Testing to support the ongoing conduct of jury trials.

All of these changes have enabled us to minimise the disruption caused by lockdowns, and now by the Omicron wave. The plans we make are framed around health and safety but front of mind for judges is the human cost of any disruption and delay,” the Chief Justice said.

The courts are working with the Ministry of Justice to address a legacy of delay, said Chief Justice Winkelmann. Initiatives are underway to improve court processes and make sure that every court appearance was useful.

“The courts also have to work to ensure we deliver justice that meets the needs of society and, in particular, that meets society’s fundamental concern for just outcomes.”

The Annual Report is available on the Courts of NZ website from 2pm today.

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