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| **Joint Statement**  **Victorian Courts and VCAT**  **FURTHER EASING OF COVID-SAFE SETTINGS** |
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**Thursday, 22 April 2021**

**MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE**

**The following update is from the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria and Chair of Courts Council, Anne Ferguson, on behalf of the Victorian courts and the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).**

Public health officials have now advised that, in addition to the removal of the COVID-19 density quotient, when in use for their ordinary purposes courts and tribunals can operate with no physical distancing including jury trials.

There remains only a recommendation for 1.5m distancing where members of the public are roaming for general visitation purposes and not for the operations of the courts.

Record keeping and cleaning requirements will remain as part of the COVID-Safe plan for Victorian Courts and VCAT, together with other hygiene measures and existing practices to ensure that anyone with COVID-19 symptoms does not enter a court or tribunal building.

The ability to safely return to in-person hearings without the constraints of physical distancing will allow the Courts to restore hearing capacity in the areas most impacted by COVID-19 restrictions over the past year, including jury trials. VCAT will continue to work towards a gradual and managed opening up to in-person hearings in addition to telephone and online hearings.

Changes will be implemented progressively. We will look to retain innovations developed through necessity where they have been shown to have ongoing benefit.

We will work with the legal profession and members of the many agencies who contribute to the work of the Courts and VCAT as we chart the way forward.

I will reconvene the civil and criminal justice forums brought together at the beginning of the pandemic as part of that process. This will provide an opportunity for system-wide discussion to achieve the best outcomes for the community.

The Courts and VCAT will continue to act in accordance with public health advice and remain mindful of our responsibility to all court and tribunal users and the community.