

# BUILDING A BETTER VCAT

STRATEGIC PLAN 2014–17



**VCAT**

victorian civil &  
administrative  
tribunal

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) is Australia's largest tribunal and its responsibility and jurisdiction continues to grow.

Last financial year, the number of VCAT applications lodged exceeded 90,000 for the first time in our history. Over the same period, we finalised more than 88,000 cases and made the adjustments necessary to accommodate seven new statutes and two major sets of regulations.

This increasing demand for our services, and conferral of new jurisdictions by Government, is a great reflection of the Tribunal's success and is expected to continue. Whilst we must anticipate and plan for changes in our operating environment, there is also a need to drive our own improvements.

Our plan for the next four years builds on the achievements of our previous strategic plan *Transforming VCAT 2010-13*. It is the result of considerable reflection and consultation on where we want to be as an organisation by 2017, what areas we need to focus on to get there, and what factors are likely to influence our progress.

Our vision is to serve the community by resolving disputes in a timely, cost effective and efficient way. Our goal is to be an outstanding civil and administrative tribunal.

Holding true to our values of fairness, professionalism, integrity, impartiality, independence, efficiency, approachability and accessibility, VCAT is planning for a future that includes better access to our services, ongoing community involvement and engagement, modernised service delivery, the most efficient use of resources, and greater investment in the development of our people.

To achieve this, it is necessary to embrace change. Our service delivery can be improved with greater use of technology. Paper-based systems will become even more unacceptable and unaffordable in the future, so plans are underway to modernise these systems as quickly as possible.

Although we've made a start by providing online forms and portals for payment of fees, there is much more we can do to use technology to our advantage and meet community expectations around online services.

Alternative forms of dispute resolution will continue to be explored, as they provide a more flexible and cost-efficient alternative to tribunal hearings. We will drive process improvements and streamline our back-end operations, to help reduce waiting times for hearings. The changed governance structure for courts and tribunals, supported by Court Services Victoria, will also be important.

To improve efficiency we will focus on reviewing and improving our governance arrangements, and identifying areas of duplication, unnecessary processes and out-dated systems, whilst embedding a culture of continuous improvement. We will actively plan for our future accommodation needs, including supporting the development and use of multi-jurisdictional facilities. Opportunities for improvement will also be identified through increased engagement with the community and our stakeholders.



We aspire to be an employer of choice and there are responsibilities and commitments that go along with that aspiration. Improved training and development opportunities, more sophisticated ways of managing our workforce and increased focus on the individual needs of our Members and staff will help us create a more supportive, flexible and inspiring workplace.

As we move into this exciting new period in VCAT's history, I am delighted to share our vision for the next four years and into the future. Our Tribunal's services are important for Victorians. We are committed to making them the best they can be.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Greg Garde".

Justice Greg Garde AO RFD  
President

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1

# BETTER ACCESS

VCAT holds regular hearings at 11 metropolitan and 27 regional locations. In addition, we regularly hear guardianship matters at hospital bedsides and extended care facilities to avoid transporting people who are ill or frail. We will continue to explore new locations for VCAT to hear matters, whilst ensuring we make the best use of existing facilities.

### KEY FOCUS AREAS

#### Improved support for people who represent themselves at VCAT

More than 80 per cent of people who have a matter before VCAT represent themselves. VCAT is deliberately informal and its processes support self-representation, enabling Victorians to access justice without incurring significant legal fees. We will identify where we could improve access to our services, information and advice, and practical support to self-represented parties. We will also work more closely with support services such as Victoria Legal Aid, Office of the Public Advocate and Court Network. In particular, we will focus on improving our support for vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Indigenous communities, people with a disability or with other factors that make being involved with a matter at VCAT more challenging.

#### Plan for future accommodation needs

It is essential that we plan for our future accommodation needs, given the increasing demand for our services, the regular conferral of new jurisdictions on VCAT, and our commitment to increase access to our services throughout the state. We will develop a strategy that helps us identify where the greatest demands for our services are, whilst making the best use of our existing facilities. As part of our planning, we will optimise the locations of our hearing facilities in suburban and regional areas, to ensure we cater for community needs in expected growth areas.

#### Support the development and use of multi-jurisdictional facilities through Court Services Victoria

We will work with other Victorian courts to identify opportunities where venues could be expanded and used as multi-jurisdictional facilities. This will maximise the use of facilities already operating as state institutions and enable VCAT to hear more cases, reducing waiting times and increasing access to our services where they are most needed.

#### Modernise hearing room facilities and improve security at 55 King Street

Our main hearing facility is 55 King Street, Melbourne. As part of lease re-negotiations for the building, we have secured funding to refurbish and reconfigure the hearing rooms, Member facilities and some staff work areas. Refurbishment works commenced in October 2013 to improve the functionality of hearing rooms and ensure they are appropriately sized and have more natural light. Audiovisual and recording equipment, including facilities for people with hearing impairments, will be updated. Security will also be enhanced. The refurbishments will make 55 King Street a more inviting, modern and comfortable place to work and visit.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2

# COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

We will continue to engage with our stakeholders and the wider community to ensure we remain responsive and relevant to their needs. This includes seeking public feedback on the experience of dealing with VCAT, with a view to identifying opportunities for improvement. We will also improve the way we provide information and build knowledge about how VCAT works.

### KEY FOCUS AREAS

#### Work in partnership with our stakeholders

VCAT delivers services on behalf of a range of government departments and agencies. As we become a constituent partner in CSV, we will continue to build relationships with these key partners and stakeholders. We will develop a stakeholder engagement strategy that identifies ways to build closer working relationships with our partners to ensure efficient and responsive service delivery and direct feedback on the effectiveness of legislation and how it is being applied.

#### Review and improve community engagement and user group forums

In most Lists, we conduct regular user group forums. At these meetings, representatives from community and industry groups, and the legal profession, have the opportunity to provide valuable feedback. VCAT will continue to hold regular forums and will identify areas where we need to improve our consultation processes and engagement with the community. This includes better engagement with Koori and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure we are meeting their needs.

#### Seek feedback from people who have had a matter heard at VCAT

VCAT will conduct regular customer satisfaction surveys, to provide us with valuable insights into parties' experience of the Tribunal and our performance. We will identify and explore opportunities and new technologies to allow this feedback to be gathered and assessed. We will also review and evaluate our complaints processes. Any opportunities for improvement we identify will be incorporated into our process improvement strategies, to ensure that we are being responsive to the needs of the community.

#### Improve the way we provide information and build knowledge about VCAT

VCAT aims to provide easy access to high-quality information about our services, news, and the way we do business. We will develop an external communications strategy that identifies and implements areas for improvement in the way we communicate with external audiences, including the media. This includes strategies to build knowledge about our services and how VCAT works. We will also review the way we present information on our website, to ensure the content is relevant, easy to read and locate, and is compliant with Government web accessibility guidelines. This includes introducing a mobile website, social media channels and other electronic tools that improve access to information.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3

# MODERNISING SERVICE DELIVERY

VCAT is committed to providing a modern, responsive and efficient tribunal service that meets the needs of all Victorians. Significant projects are underway to modernise and streamline our processes, with the aim of reducing waiting times for hearings and providing a better experience for people who use our services. This includes improvements to online services and support for Court Services Victoria.

### KEY FOCUS AREAS

#### Review and update the VCAT Act and enabling provisions

We will constantly review the Act to identify opportunities for legislative reform, making recommendations to the Attorney-General in areas where changes could deliver more modern, relevant and effective provisions. We will continue to develop rules of practice and procedure, and practice notes, to help parties make applications and prepare for hearings.

#### Support the development of Court Services Victoria

VCAT is actively supporting the establishment of, and transition to, the new governing structure for courts and tribunals – Court Services Victoria. This includes participation on the Courts Council and committees set up to ensure its effective management.

#### Engage earlier with government stakeholders in the legislative process

We will engage with government stakeholders earlier in the process of developing legislation, so we are ready when new laws are introduced. We will provide timely information to the community on legislative change and its impact on VCAT's processes.

#### Review and expand the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution

VCAT's Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) services, such as the short mediation and hearing program, provide a faster, more flexible and cost-effective alternative to full Tribunal hearings. We will evaluate the effectiveness of our current mediation and arbitration services, with a view to expanding their use into areas where ADR has not traditionally been used.

#### Drive process improvements in Registry

We are reviewing and modernising our Registry processes and procedures, so we can respond faster when new legislation and policy is introduced that affects our services. We are also working to identify areas where there is a need to improve efficiency. This includes considering the benefits of adopting end-to-end processing in the regions.

#### Expand our use of information technology

As part of our drive to modernise VCAT, we will focus on improving our use of information technology (IT) to meet community expectations. This includes moving towards a paper-free environment by 2017, consistent with the direction being taken by other Victorian courts, noting that we also need to cater to individual needs. Our improved online services will include more online forms for applications and payments and automated behind-the-scenes processes that enable us to work more efficiently. We will also pilot iManage software to help us reduce manual handling and paper use.



## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 4

# IMPROVING EFFICIENCY

It is critical that we continue to find new ways to improve efficiency, by managing our resources in a more effective and strategic way and by encouraging innovation. Funding constraints will continue to be a challenge and jurisdictional growth is likely to continue. We need to embed a culture of continuous process improvement and identify opportunities to eliminate duplication and unnecessary processes.

### KEY FOCUS AREAS

#### Improve governance arrangements

We will continue to review and improve our governance arrangements to ensure we meet our obligations as a public institution. This includes making sure issues are being considered by the relevant VCAT committee. We will develop a sound risk management capability and an internal compliance, audit and evaluation program that keeps us on track. We will also work in closer partnership with our funding bodies to identify opportunities for efficiencies and improved financial outcomes.

#### Drive process improvements for Listings

After a recent internal review of our Listings practices, we have identified areas where process improvements could help reduce waiting times and maximise the number of cases we hear. This includes introducing a more automated case scheduling system that will simplify and improve the allocation of resources.

#### Review performance measures and ensure data integrity

Being able to reliably record and report on information is critical in helping us monitor our performance and make good decisions about our operations. We will develop and implement a performance management and reporting framework that makes sure we are using the most appropriate ways to measure our success. Our data needs to align with our IT strategy to deliver the operational intelligence we need. We will also upgrade our case management systems to improve functionality and data integrity. We will also identify specific projects and resources that align with our strategic directions and monitor their progress through annual business plans.

#### Monitor the impact of fee regulations

We will monitor the impact of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (Fees) Regulations 2013, which were made for three years and will sunset on 30 June 2016. This will enable us to evaluate the direct costs associated with hearing and determining matters brought to VCAT. This evaluation will help inform the Regulatory Impact Statement and future fee regulations.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 5

# INVESTING IN OUR PEOPLE

VCAT aspires to be an employer of choice and is committed to putting the necessary steps in place to create a flexible, supportive and inspiring workplace. We will increase investment in our people and encourage professional development as a way of maintaining highly skilled Members and staff. We will also strengthen our personnel systems and processes and explore how to best attract, recruit, train and retain Members and staff.

### KEY FOCUS AREAS

#### **Improve the way we manage our workforce**

We will develop and implement a workforce planning strategy that includes recruitment, retention and succession strategies and more sophisticated processes for managing leave and flexible working arrangements. We will review and improve the way we induct new staff into VCAT, and will develop and implement an internal communications strategy to improve the way we communicate with Members and staff. Our aim is to create a flexible and contemporary workplace, whilst maintaining high professional standards.

#### **Improve training and development opportunities for Members and staff**

We will develop and promote a Learning and Development Plan that supports our staff training needs, with a particular focus on leadership and management training for future leaders of VCAT. Our Member Professional Development Group will be supported in its brief to identify and address the unique training needs of Members.

#### **Maintain transparent appraisal processes**

The current staff appraisal system provides important feedback on individual performance. We will maintain the current Personal Development Plan process for staff and look at new ways to provide Members with feedback on their performance.

# OUR MEASURES OF SUCCESS

VCAT's vision includes a commitment to resolve disputes in a timely and cost-effective manner. Our key measures of success will include finalising cases within agreed timeliness targets. We will also measure our success by regularly reviewing our performance data and the feedback received through our customer satisfaction surveys and complaints program.

## OUR REPORTING TOOLS

We will report against the progress of our strategic plan via:

- an independent review
- Tribunal Excellence Framework Assessment
- the VCAT Annual Report.

### Independent review

We will engage an independent third party to conduct an external review of our performance against our strategic priorities, about midway through the program of work. The outcome of this report will be communicated to our key stakeholders and the community.

### Tribunal Excellence Framework Assessment

The Tribunal Excellence Framework rates our performance against eight key areas of excellence:

- Independence
- Leadership
- Fair Treatment
- Accessibility
- Professionalism and Integrity Measures
- Accountability
- Efficiency
- Client Needs and Satisfaction.

We invite key stakeholders to complete a questionnaire that rates our performance against these criteria, then evaluate the total scores against set benchmarks. Our most recent assessment under the framework was in February 2012.

### VCAT Annual Report

We produce our annual report in accordance with the requirements of s.37 of the *Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998*. The report includes a review of VCAT operations, financial data and a summary of rules and practice notes made by VCAT's Rules Committee. We will report on our progress against the Strategic Plan in our annual report.



# VCAT CUSTOMER SERVICE CHARTER

VCAT provides Victorians with a low-cost, accessible, efficient and independent tribunal that delivers high-quality dispute resolution, including the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution processes. We aim for service excellence by being cost-effective, accessible, informal, timely, fair, impartial and consistent. VCAT's Customer Service Charter states that:

## **When you contact VCAT, you can expect:**

- answers to your queries about our jurisdictions and processes
- appropriate forms, brochures and information
- assistance with VCAT application forms
- appropriate contacts for other agencies about your enquiry
- compliance with VCAT's privacy policy.

## **We aim to help, but there are certain things we cannot do for you. We cannot:**

- provide advice about what to say in your VCAT hearing
- give you legal advice
- complete a VCAT application on your behalf
- speak to VCAT Members on your behalf.

## **We exist to serve the community and aim to:**

- serve 95 per cent of people within 5 minutes of them attending a VCAT enquiry counter
- respond to 95 per cent of callers within five minutes of them contacting VCAT
- greet you in a polite and courteous way
- deal with your enquiry professionally
- provide you with clear and accurate information and assistance.

## **We respect your right to:**

- fair and helpful assistance, including appropriate arrangements for people with disabilities, special access needs or cultural requirements
- an interpreter, if necessary
- respectful and equitable treatment in accordance with the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities
- a fair and just mediation and/or hearing in a safe environment
- timely decisions.

## **To deliver you a high-quality service, we expect you to:**

- provide us with complete and accurate information
- comply with any VCAT directions or orders
- behave courteously and peaceably with staff, parties and Members at all times.

# VCAT STRATEGIC PLAN 2014–17

## OUR VISION

To serve the community by resolving disputes in a timely, cost effective and efficient way

## OUR VALUES

Fairness, professionalism, integrity, impartiality, independence, efficiency, approachability, accessibility

## OUR GOAL

To be an outstanding civil and administrative tribunal

## OUR COMMITMENTS / OBJECTIVES

Effectively anticipate and meet demand for dispute resolution	Continue to raise awareness of our services and improve service delivery	Achieve service excellence	Fair and efficient decision making	Invest in the development of flexible, satisfied and skilled Members and staff
<b>OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES</b>				
<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1 BETTER ACCESS</b>	<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2 COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3 MODERNISING SERVICE DELIVERY</b>	<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTION 4 IMPROVING EFFICIENCY</b>	<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTION 5 INVESTING IN OUR PEOPLE</b>
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