

**In-confidence**

Office of the Minister for Disability Issues  
Chair, Cabinet Social Outcomes Committee

**New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy - Approval to release**

**Proposal**

- 1 I seek agreement to officially release the New Zealand Sign Language Strategy (NZSL Strategy), in conjunction with the New Zealand Sign Language Board (the Board).

**Relation to government priorities**

- 2 Promoting and maintaining New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) supports better outcomes for NZSL users, including the Deaf community. The NZSL Strategy supports the Government's focus on achieving improved results in several areas including health, education, and delivering public services.
- 3 The NZSL Strategy complements the New Zealand Disability Strategy. NZSL is an official language of New Zealand but is also vital for the inclusion of Deaf people and NZSL users. Without having a strong NZSL foundation, Deaf people and some non-speaking people will experience exclusion, reflected in poor education, employment, health, and mental health outcomes.

**Executive Summary**

- 4 The NZSL Act 2006 declared NZSL to be an official language of New Zealand. The Act also provided for the use of NZSL in legal proceedings and set out principles to guide government departments in the promotion and use of NZSL. The Act is administered by the Ministry of Disabled People (the Ministry).
- 5 NZSL is more than an official language, it is also the primary (and preferred) way of communication for many Deaf and hard of hearing people, non-speaking people, and people who use NZSL rather than spoken languages. For some people, NZSL is their only language, and is vital for inclusion.
- 6 NZSL users, such as the Deaf community, experience barriers to access services and their community. This impacts on their ability to participate in and contribute to society, impacting their overall life outcomes, including education, employment, health, and mental health.
- 7 In 2014, the National-led Government set up a Minister-appointed Board for the promotion and maintenance of NZSL [CAB Min (14) 18/4; SOC Min (14) 9/7 refers]. Concerns that NZSL was a language at risk led the Board to develop a NZSL Strategy in 2018. That strategy expired in 2023.

- 8 The attached refreshed NZSL Strategy aims to set in motion the change needed to enable people to fully participate in society using NZSL. It also aims to support Turi Māori (Deaf Māori) to navigate te ao Māori.
- 9 The strategy takes a new approach by targeting actions and activity towards NZSL users (people who use NZSL as their only, first or preferred language), as well as all non-NZSL users.
- 10 The Board and the Ministry conducted a six-week public consultation on the draft NZSL Strategy. Feedback from the public consultation was largely supportive of the strategy's ambition.
- 11 Given the ambition set out within the strategy, the Board proposes extending the strategy to 10 years, allowing for progress to be made on long standing issues. I seek agreement to release the strategy, alongside members of the Board, during the week of 17 – 21 November.
- 12 An initial NZSL action plan under the strategy is planned for release in April 2026 as part of the 20-year celebrations of NZSL as an official language of New Zealand. This plan will be developed by the Ministry, supported by the Board, government agencies, and key stakeholders.

## **Background**

- 13 NZSL is the primary (and preferred) way of communication for many Deaf and hard of hearing New Zealanders. NZSL can also be the preferred language for non-speaking people or people who use signed language to communicate.
- 14 Concerns about outcomes for Deaf people led to the development of the NZSL Act 2006, which declared NZSL to be an official language. The Act also provided for the use of NZSL in legal proceedings and set out principles to guide government departments in the promotion and use of NZSL.
- 15 In 2014, the National-led Government set up the Board for the promotion and maintenance of NZSL [CAB Min (14) 18/4; SOC Min (14) 9/7 refers].
- 16 In response to concerns that NZSL was a language at risk, the Board released a NZSL Strategy in 2018 (which expired in 2023). Census information indicates NZSL is still at risk. While the number of NZSL users has increased between 2013 and 2023, the proportion of the total population using NZSL has remained at approximately 0.5 percent.
- 17 As NZSL is not widely used in New Zealand, it is difficult for Deaf people and NZSL users to be able to learn NZSL or access services or community spaces. Turi Māori (Deaf Māori) face additional barriers to access te ao Māori.
- 18 Deaf people and NZSL users in New Zealand also face the risk of language deprivation if they do not learn NZSL as children. Overseas research indicates that language deprivation results in poor life outcomes, particularly in education, employment, health, and mental health.

- 19 Refreshing the strategy will support the health of NZSL. It will also support the Ministry in its broader NZSL stewardship role. The strategy will guide the work priorities of the Board, including decisions on Community Grants, contracts, and maintaining the NZSL dictionary. More than \$650,000 will be invested in community initiatives, and almost \$250,000 in grants to maintain and promote the use of NZSL during the 2025/26 financial year.
- 20 In March 2025, Cabinet approved public consultation on a draft NZSL Strategy. Cabinet also agreed government agencies would report on NZSL use or service availability in their annual reports, and that the Minister for Disability Issues would provide an annual report back to Cabinet on progress on delivering the strategy [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers].

## Public consultation on the draft strategy

### *Submissions and consultation events*

- 21 Eighty submissions were received, including 19 submissions in NZSL. Most submissions (65) were from individuals or families, with 15 submissions from organisations. Thirty-nine submissions of the individual respondents indicated being deaf / Deaf or hard of hearing, one indicated it was from a family with Deaf and non-Deaf members, and 15 identified as hearing. Ten submissions did not specify.
- 22 The consultation included twenty-six events, both community and targeted, with over 300 participants. These included events at regional Deaf clubs, events specifically targeted at Turi Māori, Pacific Deaf, Deaf with Disability / Deaf plus, and CODA (Children of Deaf Adults). There were also targeted events for Ko Taku Reo (two included children / young people), and other Deaf / NZSL stakeholders.

### *Summary of consultation feedback*

- 23 **Vision:** most people were supportive of the strategy's vision and ambition. The proposed new vision is '**New Zealand Sign Language - everyone, everywhere, every day**'.
- 24 **Reflecting all NZSL users:** People wanted the strategy to be more inclusive of diverse groups that benefit from using NZSL, as well as CODA. While NZSL is important for Deaf and hard of hearing communities, other groups also rely on NZSL for communication and access, including deafblind people, non-speaking people, and people who use NZSL to communicate. The strategy has been updated to reflect these broader groups.
- 25 **Two approaches:** The draft consultation strategy set out two approaches: one aimed at NZSL users (people for whom NZSL is their only, first or preferred language) in which the language needs to survive, and one aimed at the general population (including government agencies), who can support NZSL to thrive. These two approaches are called '**energise**' and '**integration**' respectively in the attached strategy.

- 26 Most submitters supported the first approach as this ensured the survival of NZSL and its transmission to future generations. The second approach raised some concerns that it would remove focus and / or resources away from people who need NZSL. Others considered this approach would raise awareness, uptake, and status of NZSL, benefiting everyone.
- 27 The Board considers having the two approaches is important, especially as many of the barriers experienced by Deaf people and NZSL users reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding from non-NZSL users. However, the prominence of the first approach has been increased in the attached strategy, reflecting the need for a strong base for NZSL, and the importance of children acquiring and learning NZSL.
- 28 **Five Priority areas:** The five priority areas and corresponding actions are aimed at creating real change. They reflect the key barriers to accessing NZSL (such as Deaf and NZSL workforce; public sector information and service availability) and areas (such as Deaf education) that require urgent attention. Following consultation, these five priority areas were refined to:
- 28.1 *Acquisition and Learning:* Enable deaf children / tamariki, and children who use NZSL to communicate, and families and whānau to acquire and use NZSL
  - 28.2 *Evidence and Data:* Build an evidence-based profile of Deaf people and NZSL users
  - 28.3 *Deaf and NZSL workforce:* Ensure there is a workforce to support the acquisition and use of NZSL
  - 28.4 *Public Sector:* Improve attitude, acquisition, and use of NZSL across the public sector
  - 28.5 *Celebrating NZSL:* Enhance the status of NZSL in New Zealand and celebrate NZSL across society and cultures.
- 29 **What success would look like:** Submitters said success would look like Deaf people / NZSL users and their families and whānau having access to NZSL, NZSL being widely accepted and used, and progress on NZSL outcomes being tracked and measured. The Ministry and the Board support these outcomes.

*Extending the timeframe of the strategy from five to 10 years*

- 30 Submitters indicated the five-year timeframe for the strategy would not be long enough to achieve its ambition. This reflects that many of the actions are aimed at addressing deep-rooted issues that cannot be addressed quickly.
- 31 Given this, the Board proposes to extend the Strategy's timeframe to 10 years to set the platform and direction for change. While many of the issues facing NZSL users will not be resolved within 10 years, this period would allow for noticeable progress on long-standing issues.

## **Implementing the NZSL Strategy**

### *Developing action plans and an indicator framework*

- 32 As agreed in March 2025, the Ministry will work with the Board to develop an action plan for the NZSL Strategy [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers].
- 33 The initial NZSL action plan will be released in April 2026. Officials from the Ministry will develop this, working alongside the Board, government agencies and stakeholders as appropriate. This action plan will provide a mix of proactive immediate actions and actions aimed at addressing the longer-term issues facing Deaf people and NZSL users.
- 34 Delivering on the actions in the NZSL Strategy will require collaboration with the Deaf community, NZSL-users, the disability community, the hearing community, iwi and hapu, families and whānau, community organisations, businesses, and the public sector. With support from all sectors of society, NZSL will be able to flourish, and the barriers faced by Deaf people and NZSL users will be decreased.
- 35 The Ministry will also work across government to identify data and information sources to develop a NZSL indicator framework, to enable the impact of the strategy to be measured.
- 36 Work is currently underway, led by Stats NZ with support from the Ministry, on developing a Disability Data Framework, as part of the government's response to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This work aims to improve the availability of disaggregated data on disabled people in New Zealand. This framework is likely to provide some of the foundation data that can support the development of the NZSL indicator framework.

### *Developing departmental NZSL capability plans*

- 37 Section 9 of the NZSL Act 2006 sets out that government departments should be guided by the following principles (so far as reasonably practicable), when exercising their functions and powers:
- 37.1 the Deaf community should be consulted on matters relating to NZSL
- 37.2 NZSL should be used in the promotion of government services, and in the provision of information to the public
- 37.3 government services and information should be made accessible to the Deaf community through the use of appropriate means (including the use of NZSL).
- 38 While these principles are meant to guide government departments, NZSL has not always been well incorporated into many government areas. This creates barriers for Deaf people and NZSL users when accessing support and information.

- 39 The strategy proposes that government departments would be required to develop NZSL capability plans to increase the public sector's responsiveness to Deaf people and NZSL users. Each government department will have their own plan that could include commitments to develop more information and services in NZSL, learning about Deaf culture, and supporting staff to learn basic NZSL. Departments would be expected to monitor progress of their NZSL plans, and to report to the Board on implementation.
- 40 While the community (and the Board) wanted NZSL capability plans extended to all government agencies and local authorities, the strategy limits the requirement only to government departments, in line with the principles of the NZSL Act. However, other government agencies and local authorities are encouraged to also develop NZSL capability plans.
- 41 I acknowledge departments are operating in a fiscally tight environment, and that additional reporting will place an additional burden on agencies. However, NZSL is an official language of this country, and it is essential for the inclusion of Deaf people and NZSL users in all aspects of society and daily living. Developing departmental NZSL capability plans will improve departments' responsiveness to Deaf people and NZSL users.

#### *Annual reporting by government agencies*

- 42 Cabinet previously agreed that government agencies would be required to report on NZSL use or service availability as part of their annual reports [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers]. While this is an additional task for government agencies, this requirement reflects that NZSL is an official language of New Zealand, and its importance to Deaf people and NZSL users. I do not see any need to change this requirement.

#### *Reporting progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy*

- 43 Progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy will be reported to me in the Board's annual reports. As agreed in March 2025, I will report back annually to Cabinet on progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers]. This may involve consideration of what further support is needed to deliver real change.

#### **20th anniversary of NZSL as an official language**

- 44 April 2026 will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NZSL as an official language of New Zealand. As a significant milestone, it is important it is celebrated.
- 45 My officials will work with the Board and the community to develop a plan to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I expect to receive advice on what is proposed to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary within current resourcing.

#### **Cost-of-living Implications**

- 46 There are no cost-of-living implications associated with this paper.

## **Financial Implications**

- 47 There are no fiscal implications arising directly from this paper. It is likely that some actions required to deliver the NZSL Strategy may have financial implications. The sequencing of actions over the 10-year period will mean most actions can be delivered within baselines. If not, then initiatives will be subject to normal Budget processes in due course.

## **Legislative Implications**

- 48 There are no legislative implications associated with the draft NZSL Strategy.

## **Impact Analysis**

### **Regulatory Impact Statement**

- 49 A regulatory impact statement is not required for this paper.

### **Climate Implications of Policy Assessment**

- 50 The Climate Implications of Policy Assessment (CIPA) team has been consulted and confirms that the CIPA requirements do not apply to this policy proposal, as the threshold for significance is not met.

## **Population Implications**

- 51 The NZSL Strategy aims to improve experiences and outcomes for Deaf people and NZSL users in New Zealand, including Turi Māori, non-speaking people, and people who use NZSL to communicate.
- 52 While not all Deaf and hard of hearing people consider themselves as having a disability, some do. Additionally, there are a small number of non-speaking people or other people who use NZSL to communicate. Improving access and availability of NZSL will also support positive outcomes for disabled people.
- 53 Improving access to, and use of NZSL will improve life-long outcomes across many areas including education, employment, health, and mental health for all who need NZSL, particularly Deaf and hard of hearing people. It will also have positive impacts on Māori as there appears to be slightly higher levels of hearing loss amongst Māori children and young people.

## **Human Rights**

- 54 The development of a refreshed NZSL Strategy supports and strengthens New Zealand's commitment to Human Rights:
- 55 The UNCPRD recognises sign languages as equal to spoken languages. As a signatory, New Zealand is required to progressively strengthen the status of sign language.

- 55.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out that a child who is a member of a linguistic minority is entitled to use their own language and enjoy their own culture.
- 55.2 The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 also states that a person who belongs to a linguistic minority should not be denied the right to enjoy their culture and use their language.
- 56 The NZSL Act 2006 provides for the use of NZSL in legal proceedings, and outlines principles to guide government departments in the promotion and use of NZSL. Actions proposed in the NZSL Strategy will help support government departments to act in accordance with the principles under the Act.

## **Use of External Resources**

- 57 External resources were used to support officials by providing:
- 57.1 professional English translations of submissions received in NZSL
- 57.2 a summary of consultation findings report, based on the initial analysis of consultation feedback by officials.
- 58 External resources were used to provide NZSL versions and Alternate Format versions (such as Braille, audio, and Easy Read versions) of the Strategy for public consultation. External resources will be used to provide the NZSL version and Alternate Format versions of the final strategy.
- 59 External resources were also used to design the final version of the strategy.

## **Consultation**

### *Public consultation*

- 60 Public consultation on the Draft NZSL Strategy occurred from April to June 2025. A mix of community and targeted events were held, with over 300 participants. A total of 80 submissions were received, including 19 in NZSL.

### *Agency consultation*

- 61 The following departments and agencies were consulted on this paper: ACC, Cancer Control Agency, Civil Aviation Authority, Departments of Corrections, and Internal Affairs, Health New Zealand / Te Whatu Ora, Health Quality & Safety Commission, Human Rights Commission, Kāinga Ora, Māori Language Commission / Te Taura Whiri i te reo Māori, the Ministries for Ethnic Communities, and Pacific Peoples, the Ministries of Business, Innovation and Employment, Culture and Heritage, Education, Health, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Social Development, Transport, and Youth Development, National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), New Zealand Police, New Zealand Transport Authority (NZTA), Oranga Tamariki, Sports New Zealand, Stats NZ, Te Puni Kōkiri, and the Tertiary Education Commission.



- 62 The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Ministry for Regulation, Public Service Commission, Social Investment Agency and The Treasury were consulted on this paper.

### **Communications**

- 63 Subject to Cabinet's approval, I plan to officially release the NZSL Strategy, with current and former Board members, during the week of 17 - 21 November 2025. I seek authority for my officials to make any minor editorial or design changes required to the NZSL Strategy prior to its release
- 64 My office is working through official release event details. Any event is likely to be attended by NZSL users, the Deaf community, and representatives from stakeholders.
- 65 My office will also work with the Ministry and the Board to identify any additional communications and events for the launch of the initial action plan in April 2026.

### **Proactive Release**

- 66 This Cabinet paper will be proactively released on the Ministry of Disabled People's website, subject to any redactions as appropriate under the Official Information Act 1982.

### **Recommendations**

The Minister for Disability Issues recommends that the Committee:

- 1 **note** that the first New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy expired in 2023;
- 2 **note** that in March 2025, Cabinet approved public consultation on a draft NZSL Strategy [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers];
- 3 **note** that the NZSL Strategy has a 10-year timeframe from 2026-2036;
- 4 **approve** the attached NZSL Strategy for public release;
- 5 **note** that I intend to release the attached Strategy with the NZSL Board during the week of 17 - 21 November 2025;
- 6 **note** that, following the release of the final NZSL Strategy, the Ministry of Disabled People will work with the NZSL Board, relevant government departments and agencies, and stakeholders to develop NZSL action plans, and a NZSL indicator framework;
- 7 **direct** government departments and agencies to work with the Ministry of Disabled People to develop the NZSL action plans and the NZSL indicator framework;

- 8 **note** that the Minister for Disability Issues will approve an initial NZSL action plan for release in April 2026, as part of work to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NZSL becoming an official language;
- 9 **agree** that, as part of the actions under the NZSL Strategy, government departments will be required to develop NZSL capability plans, and report on their progress annually to the NZSL Board;
- 10 **note** that, as part of the March 2025 approval to consult on the draft Strategy, Cabinet agreed that [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers]:
  - 10.1 government agencies will report on NZSL use or service availability in their annual reports;
  - 10.2 the Minister for Disability Issues would report back to Cabinet on a yearly basis on progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy;
- 11 **authorise** the Ministry of Disabled People to make any minor editorial or design changes required to the NZSL Strategy prior to its release.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Louise Upston

Minister for Disability Issues