

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

## **Public consultation – Draft New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy**

### **Proposal**

- 1 I seek agreement for the New Zealand Sign Language Board (the Board) to release a draft New Zealand Sign Language Strategy (NZSL Strategy) for public and stakeholder consultation.

### **Relation to government priorities**

- 2 Promoting and maintaining New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) supports better outcomes for the Deaf community. Refreshing the NZSL Strategy supports the Government's priorities to deliver better public services, including the Government's focus on achieving improved results in several areas including health, education, and employment.

### **Executive Summary**

- 3 NZSL is the primary and preferred language of Deaf people. For a significant proportion of Deaf people, NZSL is their only language.
- 4 The New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 (the NZSL Act) made NZSL one of New Zealand's official languages. Despite this, the Deaf community report issues in accessing services and community spaces using NZSL. NZSL is not well incorporated into many government work areas, and this means that information and services are not always accessible to the Deaf community. This impacts on Deaf people's quality of life and their ability to fully participate in society.
- 5 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]. The Board released the first NZSL Strategy in 2018, which expired in 2023. The Board now seeks to release a refreshed draft strategy for public consultation.
- 6 The attached draft NZSL Strategy aims to set in motion the change needed across government agencies and the public to support and enable Deaf people to fully participate in society.
- 7 The vision of the strategy is **"New Zealand Sign Language everywhere, every day"**. This reflects the aspiration that everyone is aware of, using, and accepting NZSL – everywhere, every day.

- 8 The draft NZSL Strategy reflects two approaches: **revitalisation**, targeting the Deaf and hard of hearing community, who need NZSL to survive as a language, and **integration**, targeting the general population (including government agencies) who can support NZSL to thrive. Underneath these two approaches are five priority action areas.
- 9 I seek agreement for the Board to consult on the attached draft NZSL Strategy. Subject to your agreement, I propose that public consultation would last for six weeks, beginning 22 April 2025, and finishing 2 June 2025.
- 10 I will report back to Cabinet later this year with the final NZSL Strategy, seeking approval for its release. Pending the outcomes of consultation, s9(2)(f)(iv)
- 11 I also seek to rescind decisions made by Cabinet in 2023 to amend the NZSL Act [see SWC-23-MIN-0022], largely aimed at strengthening the Board's governance role. This reflects a decision by the former Minister for Disability Issues, Hon Penny Simmonds, to not progress with these amendments and instead, for officials to identify strategic and operational changes to address governance matters and improve the uptake and use of NZSL. The draft NZSL Strategy responds to this request. I now formally ask that these decisions be rescinded.

## Background

*New Zealand Sign Language is one of New Zealand's official languages*

- 12 In 2006, the New Zealand Sign Language Act (the NZSL Act) made NZSL into one of New Zealand's official languages. This reflected that NZSL is the primary and preferred language of Deaf people, and that it is the only language for a significant proportion of the Deaf community.
- 13 However, NZSL is not widely used in New Zealand. This makes it difficult for the Deaf community to be able to access services, or community spaces using NZSL, and can result in Deaf people being isolated and having poorer quality of life outcomes. Turi (Deaf) Māori also face additional barriers in accessing and te ao Māori and Māori culture.
- 14 Census information indicates the number of NZSL users has increased over the 2013, 2018 and 2023 censuses, with about 25,000 using NZSL in census 2023. However, the proportion of the total population using NZSL has remained stable at approximately 0.5 percent. This may reflect the relatively small population of Deaf and hard of hearing people in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2023 indicates 5,736 people in New Zealand could not hear at all, while 62,640 people had a lot of difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid. These two groups amount to 1.7 percent of the population, indicating that not all are not using NZSL, possibly due to later life deafness or using other techniques, such as lip-reading. This is an area where more information is needed.

### *The New Zealand Sign Language Board*

- 15 The Board was established due to concerns about the lack of visibility of NZSL [CAB Min (14) 18/4; SOC Min (14) 9/7 refers]. The primary purpose of the Board is the promotion and maintenance of NZSL.
- 16 The Board released its first NZSL Strategy in 2018 in response to concerns that NZSL was a language at risk. The strategy, which expired in 2023, focused on five language learning priorities (Acquisition, Use / Access, Attitude, Documentation and Status). However, the strategy did not result in the change needed.
- 17 The Board seeks to release a refreshed NZSL Strategy for 2025 – 2030. In developing this strategy, the Board considered research and information collected through engagement with the Deaf community over recent years, including a survey of NZSL users in 2022, and targeted engagement in 2024.
- 18 The refreshed strategy builds on the first strategy, by reflecting the five language priorities across its priority action areas. The refreshed strategy is an action-focused strategy.



### *Disconnect between NZSL and the actions of government agencies*

- 19 Despite NZSL being an official language, evidence suggests that Deaf people are not provided with opportunities to use or access NZSL in situations where needed. There is a disconnect between the status of NZSL as an official language, and the actions, behaviours, and practices of government agencies in promoting and using NZSL. Overall, NZSL is not well incorporated into many government work areas. This means that general information and services are not always accessible to the Deaf community.
- 20 The lack of availability of services for Deaf people can result in miscommunication or misunderstandings. It may also result in friends and family members, including children, having to interpret for Deaf people, impacting on a Deaf person's privacy and overall wellbeing.

### **The draft NZSL Strategy**






- 21 The attached draft NZSL Strategy is intended to set in motion the change needed across government and the wider public to support and enable the Deaf community to fully participate at all levels and stages in life using NZSL. It is also intended to set in motion the change needed to enable and support Turi Māori to be able to navigate as both Deaf people and as Māori.
- 22 The NZSL Strategy has a relatively simple vision - **“New Zealand Sign Language everywhere, every day”** – which sets out the aspiration of integrating NZSL into everyday life for both Deaf and hearing people.
- 23 The NZSL Strategy adopts two approaches: **Revitalisation**, which is intended to target the Deaf and hard of hearing community, for whom NZSL needs to survive, and **Integration**, which targets the general population (including government agencies), who can support NZSL to thrive. This two-pronged

approach reflects lessons learned from contributions to the revitalisation and integration of te reo Māori in recent years.

Revitalisation	Integration
	
<b>FIRST LANGUAGE USERS</b> Priorities and actions aimed at ensuring the survival of the language and the equitable development and use of the language by Deaf people	<b>SECOND LANGUAGE USERS</b> Priorities and actions aimed at ensuring the language is used in everyday contexts by the non-NZSL user community

24 The strategy sets out five priority areas intended to ensure NZSL is learnt (acquired), used, shared, championed, and celebrated across the Deaf and hearing communities, across the public sector, and across the wider public.

25 The five priority areas in the draft NZSL Strategy are:

Revitalisation	
	<b>Support and enable Deaf children / tamariki and their families and whānau to acquire and use NZSL</b> This priority is about ensuring community-driven Deaf spaces and language 'nests' for NZSL learning and intergenerational transmission (especially, but not exclusively, in the crucial early development years).
	<b>Build an evidence-based profile of the experiences of NZSL users (including Turi Māori)</b> This priority is about developing and building a data rich research and evidence base so resources can be more effectively targeted at opportunities and challenges for Deaf people.
Revitalisation and Integration	
	<b>Enhance the status, capability, and capacity of NZSL learning and use in New Zealand</b> This priority is about ensuring there is a workforce to support the acquisition and use of NZSL, to provide for opportunities for Deaf people, and to raise awareness among the hearing population.
Integration	
	<b>Improve attitude, acquisition, and use of NZSL across public service</b> This priority is about expecting more from the public sector in role modelling responsiveness to the NZSL community, including better meeting obligations under the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 to provide information and services in NZSL.
	<b>Enhance the status of Turi / Deafhood and celebrate NZSL across society and cultures</b> This priority is about using the 20-year anniversary mark for the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 to profile, raise awareness, and celebrate NZSL and Deaf culture.

- 26 Overall, the proposed actions are a mix of medium-term and long-term actions that build upon each other to create real change. Some will stretch beyond the proposed timeframe of the strategy. Some of the actions are challenging, and will need support from government agencies, from communities, from iwi and hapū, and from the public.
- 27 I am aware the NZSL workforce is small, and that significant work is needed to build the workforce. This is why it is important that actions are sequenced, and initiatives scaled appropriately, with limited resource targeted at where it is needed the most (e.g. NZSL access for Deaf children). Further planning on these actions will occur once the final version of the strategy is released.

### **Consultation on the NZSL strategy**

- 28 The proposed consultation process on the draft NZSL Strategy would last for six weeks, beginning 22 April 2025, and finishing 2 June 2025.
- 29 The Board intends to take a 'NZSL first' approach to the consultation process. This means that while the consultation process will be open to everybody (including online), the design of consultation resources and channels will prioritise NZSL to ensure the Deaf community have multiple opportunities to share their views in ways that work for them.
- 30 There will also be specific events and communications aimed at targeting input on the draft NZSL Strategy from Turi Māori communities, and from Deaf sector stakeholders.

### **Implementing the refreshed NZSL Strategy**

- 31 Officials will work with the Board to develop the proposed actions into action plans. As part of this, they will also work to identify what data and information may exist so that the impact of the actions can be measured.
- 32 Developing the action plan and delivering on the initiatives in the NZSL Strategy will require collaboration across the Deaf community, the hearing community, community organisations, businesses, and the public sector. Without the buy-in and support of all sectors of society, including the wider public, iwi and hapu, and families and whānau, NZSL will not be able to flourish, and the barriers facing Deaf people will continue.

### *Monitoring and reporting mechanisms*

- 33 The initiatives set out in the strategy will require action from government agencies. Currently, the public sector is not meeting its full obligations under the NZSL Act to ensure that information and services are provided in NZSL. This creates barriers for the Deaf community when seeking support and information.
- 34 Under the proposed actions, government agencies would be required to develop NZSL capability plans, aimed at increasing the public sector's responsiveness to Deaf communities. These plans could, for example, include

commitments to develop more information and services in NZSL and learning about Deaf culture.

- 35 There is currently limited public sector reporting about NZSL use or service availability in their organisations. I expect government agencies to report on progress in their annual reports.<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that government agencies 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 agencies already have obligations in relation to NZSL, which many are not meeting. Placing obligations to report annually is a small burden given the importance of NZSL for the Deaf community.
- 36 Early progress on action planning and delivering the NZSL Strategy will be reported to me in the Board's next annual report, and as part of each annual report thereafter. I will also undertake to report back to Cabinet on a yearly basis on progress delivering the NZSL Strategy. This may involve consideration of whether additional funding is needed to support initiatives that will make a real change for Deaf people and Deaf culture in New Zealand. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms will be confirmed upon approval of the final strategy.

#### *Raising the profile of NZSL in New Zealand*

- 37 I am also keen to explore actions that support raising the profile of NZSL in New Zealand. I am conscious that 2026 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NZSL Act, and it is important that this government champions and celebrates the existence of NZSL - and that this occurs for more than just one week in 2026.
- 38 My officials are working with the Board to develop a plan about how we can celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NZSL Act. While I am aware that we are in a tight fiscal environment, this thinking will include advice on what is possible under current resourcing, and to identify whether additional resourcing may be needed to support such celebrations. Any such proposal would go through normal Budget processes.

#### **Rescinding previous Cabinet decisions to amend the NZSL Act**

- 39 In 2023, Cabinet agreed to amend the NZSL Act [see SWC-23-MIN-0022] to:
- 39.1 reflect the creation of a NZSL statutory Ministerial advisory group in the purposes of the Act
  - 39.2 make the Board into the new statutory Ministerial advisory group
  - 39.3 include the functions of the statutory Ministerial advisory group in the Act, including monitoring the actions of government agencies, and principles guiding appointments to the group

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<sup>2</sup> Section 10 of the NZSL Act sets out a mechanism where the responsible Minister can release a report, setting out progress made on implementing the principles for government departments under the Act. This Ministerial reporting has never been used but could be used to support and improve reporting by government agencies.

39.4 recognise and support Turi Māori identity and leadership in the Act.

- 40 As the Amendment Bill was not introduced before the 2023 election, the decision on whether to proceed with these legislative proposals was referred to the then Minister for Disability Issues, Hon Penny Simmonds. The Minister decided not to proceed with the amendments, and I now formally seek agreement that the decisions set out in SWC-23-MIN-0022 be rescinded.
- 41 In lieu of legislation changes, officials have taken steps to build the governance expertise of the Board and have also established a Turi Māori advisory group to support the Board with Turi Māori expertise. The refresh of the NZSL Strategy also reflects work to improve the uptake and use of NZSL.
- 42 I will monitor progress to identify whether legislative change may be required in the future.

### **Stabilising the Alternate Formats service**

- 43 In December 2024, the Alternate Formats service – which includes NZSL translations of documents - moved from the Ministry of Social Development to the Ministry of Disabled People.
- 44 The Ministry of Disabled People is looking at how to stabilise and improve delivery of the Alternate Formats service. This will involve officials working with and supporting providers (Disabled People's Organisations) to improve capacity and capability so that the service can be more responsive to the needs of government agencies. Funding for this work was also transferred to the Ministry of Disabled People in December 2024.

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

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

### **Financial Implications**

- 46 There are no fiscal implications arising directly from this paper. The costs of consultation will be met out of existing Ministry and Board funding.
- 47 It is likely that some actions required to deliver the NZSL Strategy may have minor financial implications. The sequencing of actions over the five-year period will mean some actions can be delivered within baselines. If this is not the case, 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 or the consultation process.

### **Impact Analysis**

#### **Regulatory Impact Statement**

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

## **Climate Implications of Policy Assessment**

- 50 A Climate Implications of Policy Assessment is not required for this paper.

## **Population Implications**

- 51 The draft NZSL Strategy is aimed at improving the experiences and outcomes for Deaf people in New Zealand, including Turi Māori and deafblind people.
- 52 Improving outcomes for NZSL users will have positive implications for the Deaf community. It will also impact positively on Māori as there appears to be slightly higher levels of hearing loss amongst Māori children and young people than other ethnic groups in New Zealand.
- 53 Between 2010 to 2022, 2,556 children and young people were diagnosed with hearing loss. Improving access to, and use of NZSL will improve educational, employment and life-long outcomes for these children.
- 54 While not all Deaf people consider themselves as having a disability, some do, and some may also be Deaf+ (people who are Deaf with an additional disability). Therefore, improving outcomes for Deaf people will also support improve outcomes for Deaf people who are also disabled.

## **Human Rights**

- 55 The development of a refreshed NZSL Strategy supports and strengthens New Zealand's commitment to Human Rights:
- 55.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises sign languages as equal to spoken languages. As a signatory, New Zealand is required to progressively strengthen the status of sign language in different fields of a person's life.
- 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 In addition, the NZSL Act 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 meet their obligations under the NZSL Act.

## **Use of External Resources**

- 57 The NZSL Strategy has been developed by officials on behalf of the Board. Other than the Board, no external resources have been used in the development of the strategy.
- 58 External resources will be used to support the consultation process, for instance, to support the receipt and translation of submissions in NZSL.



## Consultation

- 59 The following departments were consulted on this draft Cabinet paper: Department of Corrections; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC); Ministries for Children-Oranga Tamariki, Culture and Heritage, Ethnic Communities, Pacific Peoples, and Regulation; the Ministries of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), Education, Health, Housing, Justice, Social Development, Transport, and Youth Development; Health New Zealand / Te Whatu Ora; Health Quality and Safety Commission; Kāinga Ora / Homes and Communities; National Emergency Management Agency; New Zealand Police; New Zealand Transport Agency; Public Service Commission; Social Investment Agency; Sports New Zealand; Statistics NZ; Te Aho o Te Kahu / Cancer Control Agency; Te Puni Kōkiri; Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori / Māori Language Commission; Tertiary Education Commission; and The Treasury. We also provided a copy to the Human Rights Commission.
- 60 In developing the draft strategy, the Board reviewed information gathered through community surveys, and feedback on consultation amendments to the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006. The Board also considered information gathered by officials through targeted engagement with Deaf sector stakeholders during 2024.
- 61 As part of the public consultation process, the Board intends to specifically target Deaf and Turi Māori communities and a range of Deaf sector stakeholders, to ensure the final strategy reflects and meets the needs of the Deaf community.

## Communications

- 62 Subject to Cabinet's agreement to the approach, I intend to announce the start of a six-week public consultation on the draft Strategy beginning 22 April and finishing 2 June. My officials will work with the Board in relation to communications about the consultation process.


## Proactive Release

- 63 As part of the consultation process, this Cabinet paper will be proactively released on the website of the Ministry, 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 existing New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy expired in 2023 and therefore a new NZSL Strategy is required;
- 2 **agree** to a six-week public consultation process, beginning 22 April 2025, on a draft NZSL strategy for 2025 – 2030;

- 3 **note** that the consultation process will take a 'NZSL first' approach, and that the Deaf community and Deaf sector stakeholders will be specifically targeted as part of the consultation process;
- 4 **approve** the attached draft strategy for release as part of the consultation process;
- 5 **note** that the Minister for Disability Issues will report back, seeking approval for the Board to release the final NZSL Strategy;
- 6 **note** <sup>s9(2)(f)(iv)</sup> 
- 7 **note** that, following the release of the final NZSL Strategy, officials from the Ministry of Disabled People will work with other agencies to develop action plans for the NZSL Strategy, as well as NZSL-related indicators;
- 8 **agree** that government agencies will report on NZSL use or service availability as part of their annual reports;
- 9 **agree** that that the Minister for Disability Issues will report back to Cabinet on a yearly basis on progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy;
- 10 **note** that in 2023, the previous government agreed to amend the NZSL Act 2006 to establish a statutory ministerial advisory group [SWC-23-MIN-0022];
- 11 **note** that the former Minister for Disability Issues decided not to progress these changes;
- 12 **agree** to recommend that Cabinet rescinds the decisions in SWC-23-MIN-0022;
- 13 **note** that the Alternate Formats service moved from the Ministry of Social Development to the Ministry of Disabled People in December 2024;
- 14 **note** that the Ministry of Disabled People is looking at how to stabilise and improve the Alternate Formats service.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Louise Upston

Minister for Disability Issues