



Scan for
NZSL name



Visual description: A purple Whaikaha logo with a QR scan for the NZSL name.

Aide-mémoire

Date:	27 March 2025
For:	Hon Louise Upston, Minister for Disability Issues
File reference:	REP/WHK/25/3/020
Security level:	Cabinet sensitive

Cabinet paper: Public consultation – Draft New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy

Cabinet Committee

Cabinet Social Outcomes Committee

Details

Wednesday 2 April 2025, 10:30 - 11:30am

Purpose

You are presenting the Cabinet paper *Public consultation – Draft New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy* and draft NZSL Strategy to Cabinet Social Outcomes (SOU) Committee. A range of talking points are set out in **Appendix One**.

Officials attending in support

The following officials are available to attend in support if needed:

- Rebecca Elvy, DCE, Outreach and Innovation
- Kara Hudson, Principal Analyst, Partnerships and Stewardship Group.

Background

The NZSL Board (the Board) was established by Cabinet in 2014 to support the maintenance and promotion of NZSL. In relation to concerns that NZSL was a language at risk, the Board released its first NZSL Strategy in 2018. That strategy expired in 2023.

This Cabinet paper seeks approval for:

- the NZSL Board to release a draft NZSL Strategy for a six-week public consultation, beginning on **22 April** and ending on **2 June**.
- you, as Minister for Disability Issues, to report back to Cabinet on a yearly basis on progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy
- government agencies to report on NZSL use or service availability as part of their annual reports
- the decisions in SWC-23-MIN-0022 to be rescinded. The decisions relate to amending the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 (NZSL Act) to strengthen the governance of the Board. The former Minister for Disability Issues, Hon Penny Simmonds, decided not to progress these amendments, and officials to identify strategic and operational changes to address NZSL governance matters.

Key issues

Approach to the strategy

The draft strategy sets out two approaches:

- The first approach is **revitalisation**, which is intended to target the Deaf and hard of hearing community, for whom NZSL needs to survive.
- The second approach is **integration**, which targets the general population (including government agencies), who can support NZSL to thrive.

The five priority areas¹ and actions in the strategy are aimed at ensuring that core needs are met, such as enabling deaf children and their families/whānau to acquire and use NZSL.

There are also actions aimed at boosting the public sector's responsiveness to the Deaf community, and actions to raise the profile of NZSL.

The actions are ambitious. Many are long-term and will extend beyond the life of the strategy – but they also reflect the need to address the long-standing issues impacting on the Deaf community.

¹ The five priority areas under the Strategy are:

- Support and enable deaf children / tamariki and their families and whānau to acquire and use NZSL
- Build an evidence-based profile of the experiences of NZSL users (including Turi Māori)
- Enhance the status, capability, and capacity of NZSL learning and use in New Zealand
- Improve attitude, acquisition, and use of NZSL across public service
- Enhance the status of Turi / Deafhood and celebrate NZSL across society and cultures.

Implementing the strategy

There are currently limited metrics available relating to NZSL or Deaf outcomes. The Ministry will work with other agencies to develop action plans metrics and indicators so that progress can be measured.

The NZSL Strategy and Cabinet paper proposes the NZSL Board reports to you on the progress on implementing the strategy as part of their annual reports, and that, as Minister for Disability Issues, you will report back to Cabinet on a yearly basis on progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy.

Actions and reporting requirements on government agencies

The NZSL Act provides the following principles to guide government departments when exercising their functions and powers:

- the Deaf community should be consulted on matters relating to NZSL
- NZSL should be used in the promotion of government services, and in the provision of information, to the public
- government services and information should be made accessible to the Deaf community using appropriate means, such as NZSL.

A survey of government agencies last year indicated that NZSL was not well incorporated into many work areas. Agencies also tended not to make general information and services broadly accessible to the wider Deaf community. This creates barriers for the Deaf community when seeking support or information.


The refreshed NZSL Strategy provides the opportunity to reset the Board's and Government's expectations in relation to NZSL and the principles of the NZSL Act.

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
- report, as part of their annual reports, on NZSL use and service availability in their organisations.

While the NZSL Act only places obligations on government departments, we consider government agencies that deliver services and supports to the public (for instance, New Zealand Police and ACC) should also consider how they can provide more information and services in NZSL.

s9(2)(g)(i)



Link with Education work programme

Many deaf children are not achieving at the same level as their hearing counterparts. We provided you with information on the importance of NZSL acquisition for deaf students in October 2024 [REP/WHK/24/10/165 refers].

s9(2)(f)(iv)

We consider this work, and the actions in the strategy can help to strengthen the Ministry of Education's NZSL delivery to deaf children and families.

Financial implications for government agencies

The financial implications of the other actions in the strategy will be worked through as part of the action planning process. As part of this, we will look at how actions can be sequenced and scaled over the five-year period of the strategy to help agencies deliver actions within current baselines. This may require some agencies to reprioritise funding to deliver on actions.

It may be that some actions will require additional funding. If this is the case, as noted in the Cabinet paper, then initiatives would be subject to normal Budget processes in due course.

Next steps

While the consultation process will be open to everyone, the Board will hold specific online and in person engagement events for the Deaf and NZSL user community. This approach will mean that the Deaf community have multiple opportunities to engage in the consultation process.

s9(2)(f)(iv)

End

Author: Kara Hudson, Principal Advisor, Partnerships and Stewardship

Responsible Manager: Jasmine Lindsay, Acting Group Manager, Partnerships and Stewardship

Appendix One: Suggested talking points

Key messages

- The approach to the NZSL Strategy reflects that something different is needed if Deaf people are going to be enabled to learn, communicate, and participate in society.
- It also provides an opportunity to reset expectations and ensure government agencies are meeting their obligations in relation to NZSL.
- While this may impact on baselines, there is already an obligation on government agencies to provide information and services in NZSL.
- If the Committee approves the draft Strategy for public consultation, the Board will undertake a six-week consultation period, from 22 April to 2 June. s9(2)(f)(iv)

If needed: Requirements on government agencies

- The NZSL Act 2006 provides principles to guide government departments when exercising their functions and powers, including that:
 - NZSL should be used in the promotion of government services, and in the provision of information, to the public
 - Government services and information should be made accessible to the Deaf community using appropriate means, such as NZSL.
- A survey of government agencies indicated that NZSL was, in general, not well incorporated into many government work areas, and that general information and services was not being made accessible to the wider Deaf community. This needs to change.
- I propose government agencies report, as part of their annual reports, on NZSL use and service availability in their organisations. This will remind agencies of the need for them to be responsive to the Deaf community.
- Government agencies would also be required to develop NZSL capability plans to increase their responsiveness to Deaf communities.

If needed: Financial implications for government agencies

- s9(2)(g)(i)

s9(2)(g)(i)

- The financial implications of the other actions in the strategy will be worked through as part of the action planning process. This will involve looking at how actions can be sequenced and scaled to help agencies deliver actions within current baselines. I am aware that this may require some agencies to reprioritise funding to deliver on actions.
- If it is identified that some actions will require additional funding then, as noted in the Cabinet paper, initiatives would be subject to normal Budget processes in due course.

If needed: Link to Education work programme

- Many deaf children are not achieving at the same level as their hearing counterparts.
 - The ombudsman decision in February 2024 highlighted that the Ministry of Education needed to improve its work in relation to delivering education for deaf children, specifically in relation to how it uses and supports NZSL and employs an appropriate Deaf or NZSL user education workforce.
 - I consider the work of the Ministry of Education, and the actions in the NZSL Strategy to be complementary – that is they work together to strengthen the Ministry of Education’s NZSL delivery to deaf children and families. This strengthening will enable deaf children to learn NZSL from birth, and to achieve good educational outcomes based on a foundation of NZSL learning, access, and use.
 - My officials continue to meet regularly with officials from the Ministry of Education to discuss matters relating to the education of deaf children and young people.
 - Ensuring that deaf children – and their families – are provided with appropriate opportunities to access and learn NZSL is key if education outcomes – and longer-term outcomes – for Deaf people are going to improve.
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