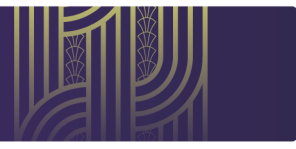




Scan for  
NZSL name




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

OIA1100



16 April 2026

Tēnā koe 

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (OIA) request, which was transferred to the Ministry of Disabled People – Whaikaha (the Ministry) from the office of the Minister for Disability Issues on 13 April 2026.

You requested:

- **Paula Tesoriero’s speech from last year’s NZDSN Conference.**

The Chief Executive of the Ministry, Paula Tesoriero, was a plenary speaker at the New Zealand Disability Support Network 2025 Conference on 12 November 2026. The theme of the event was “navigating uncertainty”.

The Ministry does not hold a recording of this speech, however we do have a copy of Paula’s speech notes. Please find these notes attached. These will give an indication of the content and key messages covered in her remarks.

Please note, as part of its commitment towards increasing transparency, the Ministry intends to make the information contained in this letter, and any attached documents, available to the wider public. The Ministry will do this by publishing this letter on our website. Your personal details will be deleted, and no information that would identify you as the requestor will be released.

If you wish to discuss this response with us, or if you are seeking any further information, please contact [OIA\\_requests@whaikaha.govt.nz](mailto:OIA_requests@whaikaha.govt.nz).



If you are not satisfied with this response, you have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman. Information about how to make a complaint is available at [www.ombudsman.parliament.nz](http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz) or 0800 802 602.

Ngā mihi nui

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'EMW', with several horizontal lines above and below it.

Emma Williams  
Manager, Ministerial and Executive Services

## **NZDSN 2025 Conference**

**Date:** 12 November

**Location:** Te Papa, 9am-4.30pm

**Event theme:** Navigating Uncertainty

**Speech time:** 10am (30 minutes)

**Speech length:** 2500 words = 28 mins at regular speech rate.

### **You follow opening speeches by:**

- Hon Louise Upston – 'Leading Through Change – A Government Perspective on Navigating Uncertainty'
- Anne Shaw & Alastair Hill – 'Responding to System Pressures and Commissioning Change'

## **Speech**

'Navigating System Change with Disabled People at the Centre'

### **Introduction**

E nga mana, e nga reo, rau rangatiratanga ma, tēnā koutou katoa

Ko Paula Tesoriero tōku ingoa, Ko Te Tumu Whakarae ahau i Te Manatū Whaikaha, Ministry of Disabled People

No reira, Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou katoa

Talofa Lava, Kia orana, warm Pacific greetings.

I am Paula Tesoriero the Secretary for Disabled People and Chief Executive of the Ministry of Disabled People - Whaikaha

My sign name is: <<description of sign name>>.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to NZDSN and Debbie Hughes for curating today's kaupapa under the theme Navigating Uncertainty.

I want to acknowledge Minister Hon Louise Upston for her opening keynote setting the Government context, and colleagues from Disability Support Services - Anne Shaw and Alastair Hill - who have also set important context around the commissioning environment we are all working in. I also acknowledge the providers, disabled leaders, advocates and whānau here today. Your daily mahi makes a real difference to communities across the country.

### **Survivor Remembrance Day**

Today marks Survivor Remembrance Day, a day of profound significance. We honour the courage and stories of survivors and their whānau, whose testimonies have transformed our understanding of safety, dignity, and accountability. Their voices remind us that dignity and accountability must always be central and shape our future.

### **Navigating Uncertainty-What It Really Means**

It's often during times of uncertainty that our people look to us to provide strong leadership. In such times we must paint the future when we may not understand it ourselves.

What I can say about my own leadership journey is that while often difficult, I have learnt my most valuable leadership lessons and grown the most when confronted with uncertainty. At these moments, people rightly expect us to lead with clarity, pivot, be adaptable, help sustain resilience and give people hope. That's our roles as leaders.

Uncertainty can sound abstract, but for our sector this is very real.

It shows up in:

- in evolving expectations from disabled people and their whānau;
- commissioning shifts and service redesign;
- in workforce pressures and tight budgets;
- weather events and other crisis where things are unpredictable;
- and in rapid technology changes that are transforming how services are designed, delivered, and accessed.

These are just a handful of the uncertainties in our area.

As I begin, I want to acknowledge the remarkable resilience and innovation shown by providers, disabled people, and whānau across the country. Despite uncertainty, you have adapted, solved problems, and upheld the core values of dignity, voice, inclusion, and equity.

This kind of innovation has often been grounded, relational, and often invisible to those outside the sector. But it is powerful. It is what keeps people connected, supported, and hopeful.

At Whaikaha, we see this. We value it. And we are committed to supporting the conditions where this kind of innovation can thrive - not just in response to crisis, but as a normal part of how the system evolves.

But let us acknowledge uncertainty can be tiring. It asks leaders to make decisions without all the information they would like, and it asks organisations to hold tension between long-term aims and short-term constraints.

Navigating uncertainty also means recognising its uneven impacts.

Disabled people who already face high barriers may experience change as risk more than opportunity. Tāngata whaikaha Māori may feel the compounding effects of inequity when systems shift quickly. Deaf and Deafblind communities can be excluded when information is not accessible or timely.

If we ignore these realities, uncertainty amplifies disadvantage. If we centre them, uncertainty can also be a catalyst.

We only need to look back to COVID to remind ourselves of the remarkable capacity we have to use uncertainty as a catalyst to do things differently.

It invites us to look again at how we work. It invites us to renew our focus on outcomes that matter and to build the kind of partnerships that endure.

We also only need to look at those we serve, disabled people to understand how to navigate uncertainty.

- Disabled people often develop exceptional resilience through navigating environments not designed for them. This resilience translates into an ability to cope with uncertainty and recover from setbacks. Adaptability—adjusting routines, finding alternative solutions, and embracing change—is a core strength forged through daily problem-solving.
- Living in a world with barriers fosters innovative thinking. Disabled individuals frequently devise unique strategies to overcome obstacles, which makes them adept at finding solutions in unpredictable situations. This creativity is highly transferable to contexts of organizational or societal uncertainty
- Experiences of exclusion and adaptation often cultivate deep empathy and emotional awareness. These qualities enable disabled people to build trust, support others during crises, and lead with compassion—critical in uncertain times.
- Research on disaster and crisis planning shows that disabled individuals and their families often engage in proactive strategies—such as creating emergency kits, planning for power outages, and leveraging community networks. This forward-thinking approach is a strength in volatile environment.

- Disabled people frequently advocate for their rights and accommodations, building confidence and negotiation skills. These capabilities help them maintain control and influence outcomes even when circumstances are uncertain.

So, we should draw on these strengths. Embrace them. And create conditions for these strengths to thrive.

I believe one of the greatest mitigations for uncertainty is holding on to the vision or purpose of our work.

At Whaikaha, our vision is: *Disabled people thriving in New Zealand*. That vision is not a slogan, I like to think of it as a compass.

Vision and Purpose is the compass we use when the pathway is unclear.

It keeps us orientated when the conditions around us shift. It shapes the choices we make and the partnerships we form. It helps us prioritise, communicate, and stay grounded. It keeps us honest about the difference our work is supposed to make.

It anchors all we do.

I always remind people that in times of uncertainty come back to your vision and purpose, because if that's clear, then each day you can keep moving forward.

### **Our Role - Stewardship Across the System**

With the machinery of government changes made to Whaikaha last year, a number of things felt uncertain. To navigate this, we had to define our vision and purpose, create a new operating model, new org structure, deliberately curate the culture we wanted to set.

We spent time defining who and what we are that was different than in 2022, we expanded our relationships and put in place a three-year strategy.

Involving our people in this was key to moving from a period of difficulty and uncertainty last year to an organisation with a clear purpose, work program and all the ingredients set up for success.

Our shift in focus enables us to look across sectors, think long-term, and work with others to drive real and meaningful change with disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori, and their whānau.

Our approach is underpinned by Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the UNCRPD and informed by data like the 2023 Household Disability Survey, which underscores persistent barriers and inequities that our work programmes must tackle. We are also guided by the EGL principles.

They give us a durable frame in a changing environment. While programmes and priorities can shift, these outcomes remain the measure of whether we are making a distance.

## **Our Strategic Intentions - 2025 to 2028**

We are focused on six strategic priorities and I'll give you an update on where those things are at:

- Many of you will be aware of the New Zealand Disability Strategy refresh, with public consultation having now closed. I want to thank everyone who contributed. The Strategy will focus action across the six outcome areas, with cross-cutting attention to accessibility, data, and equity. We will provide clear expectations for implementation and reporting to give confidence that commitments translate to practice. For uncertain times, this matters.
- *NZSL Strategy Refresh*  
Work is advanced, with dual focus on revitalisation within Deaf communities and integration across wider society. A key strand is workforce development - strengthening interpreter capacity, including specialist pathways. Access to communication is a right; we must plan and resource it accordingly.
- *Accessibility Work Programme*  
We are strengthening the Alternate Formats Service (Easy Read, Braille, audio, large print, NZSL) and working with agencies to embed digital accessibility standards so information and services are accessible by default. We are also working on addressing accessibility barriers in the built environment, transport and things that get in the way of everyday lives.

- *UNCRPD Implementation and Transparency*  
Agencies are progressing commitments from the 2022 CRPD recommendations, with a focus on public transparency and system-level accountability - because visible progress builds trust.
- *Employment Pathways*  
We are running the first all-of-government paid internship programme for disabled graduates - opening doors into policy, emergency management, communications, HR, and more. The aim is more than placements; it is career pathways and leadership growth. We are launching an employment website early next year with comprehensive guides for employers.

Being able to progress all of this work this year has helped us re-focus and reduce uncertainty about what we are here to do.

## **Navigating Uncertainty – Disabled People at the Centre**

When we say “disabled people at the centre,” we mean more than participation.

This matters in uncertainty because decisions made with, not just about, disabled people are more robust, more equitable, and more likely to endure. They surface risks earlier and build confidence and trust – the most precious currency when the landscape is changing.

If we start with those who face the highest barriers first when we design systems and processes, they become safer and more usable for everyone.

For tāngata whaikaha Māori, we must continue to embed Te Tiriti in our practice-strengthening partnerships with iwi, hapū, and Māori organisations; investing in cultural safety; and recognise the intersection of disability and indigeneity in outcomes and solutions.

## **Navigating Uncertainty - How We Work Through Change**

I want to share how Whaikaha is approaching change - not a checklist of tips, but the way we work when conditions are uncertain:

- *We set direction, then iterate.*  
We articulate a clear vision and outcomes, then build feedback loops with disabled people, DPOs, tāngata whaikaha Māori, and providers. We test ideas early, change course when evidence or lived experience tells us to, and accept that iteration is a strength, not a weakness.
- *We emphasise accountability to people.*  
System-level monitoring matters; public reporting matters. But our accountability is first to the people affected by decisions. That means being transparent about choices, providing accessible information, and owning what is working and what is not. It means explaining why we prioritise, and inviting critique so decisions improve.

- *We design for equity.*  
Uncertainty hits hardest where barriers are already high. So, design must start with those who face the greatest barriers - tāngata whaikaha Māori, Deaf and Deafblind communities, disabled women and rainbow communities, neurodiverse people, and carers. Equity by design is not only fair; it creates services that are safer, clearer, and more effective for everyone.
- *We steward responsibly in technology.*  
Change increasingly arrives through new tools. We support innovation, including AI, but we insist on responsible use - tiered risk approaches, community input where rights are at stake, and bias checks before deployment. Innovation cannot come at the expense of rights or trust.
  - Is there anything more uncertain right now about the way AI will change our world? We can ignore it or worry about the risks so much that we don't embrace the opportunities. OR we can step in and lead conversations about the responsible use of AI and all it offers disabled people. We choose the latter.

## **Partnership and Leadership**

Leadership in our sector is collective: it is influence, collaboration, and accountability – not just position alone. I wanted to share some of my reflections, shaped by our community and roles I have held. These matter all the time, but when experiencing uncertainty or swirl around us, these things can just continue and allow us to make progress:

- **Representation matters.** We need more disabled leaders across public service, local government, and providers - visible, confident, and supported to succeed. Seeing disabled leadership changes expectations and creates pathways for others.
- **Strategic advocacy matters.** Lived experience is powerful; pairing it with evidence and practical solutions makes it compelling in decision-making. Durable change requires both heart and proof.
- **Deliberate development matters.** Identify emerging leaders early. Provide mentoring, shared experiences, and opportunities for them to learn. Create environments where learning is welcomed, and mistakes are owned.
- **Allies matter.** Effective allies listen and do not speak over. They bring skills to cause change and use their access to open doors, not to occupy space. When disabled leadership and allies respect each other and combine, we get impact.

Our role at Whaikaha is to enable this leadership ecosystem – to open doors, broker opportunities, and ensure disabled leaders shape decisions that affect their lives. This helps reduce uncertainty for disabled people.

## **Opportunity in Change**

Change is not an interruption to our work - it is the work. If we remain clear on purpose, centre disabled people in design, and stay open to better ways of working, uncertainty becomes opportunity:

- Opportunity to simplify systems around people rather than around organisations.
- Opportunity to embed accessibility as a default – in every website, form, counter, meeting, and message.
- Opportunity to grow leadership and participation, including young disabled people stepping into roles that will shape the next era.

Whaikaha will continue to use its role to enable and encourage these opportunities - alongside you.

### **Closing - A Commitment on Survivor Remembrance Day**

As we close, I return to today's significance. On Survivor Remembrance Day, we recommit to a sector in which safety, dignity, and rights are non-negotiable. We recommit to listening-to survivors, to disabled people and whānau - and to building systems worthy of that trust.

Uncertainty is real. But so is our collective strength. By grounding ourselves in purpose, acting through partnership, and embracing our stewardship role, we can navigate change with confidence and compassion-and create an Aotearoa where disabled people thrive.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.