



Scan for
NZSL name

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

Aide-mémoire

Date: Thursday, 30 October 2025

For: Hon Louise Upston, Minister for Disability Issues

File reference: REP/WHK/25/10/075

Security level: ~~Cabinet sensitive~~

Cabinet paper- New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy – Approval to release

Cabinet Committee

Cabinet Social Outcomes Committee (SOU)

Details

Wednesday, 5 November 2025, 10.30 – 11.30am

Purpose

You are presenting the Cabinet paper *New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Strategy – Approval to release* to SOU Committee. Talking points to support you are provided in **Appendix One**.

Officials attending in support

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

- Rebecca Elvy, Deputy Chief Executive, Outreach and Innovation.
- Kara Hudson, Principal Analyst, Outreach and Innovation.

Background

The NZSL Board (the Board) was established by Cabinet in 2014 to support the maintenance and promotion of NZSL. This Cabinet paper seeks approval for you and the NZSL Board to officially release the NZSL Strategy. No feedback on the Strategy or Cabinet paper was received during Ministerial consultation.

The proposed release time is 5.30pm on Monday, 17 November 2025. You have recently received an aide-mémoire [REP/WHK/25/10/073 – NZSL Strategy Launch] providing you with information about the launch.

Approach to the strategy

NZSL is an official language of New Zealand but is also vital for the inclusion of Deaf people and NZSL users. The NZSL strategy seeks to address the long-standing issues that impact on the ability of Deaf people and NZSL users to be able to fully participate in society. It also aims to ensure that NZSL, an official language, survives and thrives.

The NZSL Strategy sets out two approaches:

- The first approach is **energise**, which is focused on Deaf people and NZSL users. This approach is aimed at ensuring the survival of NZSL and ensuring early acquisition and use of NZSL by Deaf people and NZSL users.
- The second approach is **integration**, which is focused on the general population (including government agencies). This approach is aimed at ensuring NZSL thrives, and promoting the awareness, acceptance and everyday use of NZSL.

The five priority areas¹ and actions in the strategy are aimed at ensuring that core needs are met, such as enabling deaf children, and non-speaking children, and their families and whānau, to acquire and use NZSL. There are also actions aimed at boosting the public sector's responsiveness to NZSL users, and to raise the profile of NZSL.

The actions in the strategy are ambitious. Many are long-term, extending beyond the life of the NZSL strategy – but they reflect the need to address the long-standing issues impacting the Deaf community. Delivering on these actions will improve outcomes for Deaf people and NZSL users.

The strategy and actions also support the Government's focus on improved outcomes in areas, such as education, health, mental health and employment. Without a strong

¹ The five priority areas under the Strategy are:

- Acquisition and Learning
- Evidence and Data
- Deaf and NZSL workforce
- Public sector
- Celebrating NZSL.

NZSL foundation, Deaf people and some non-speaking people experience exclusion, reflected in poor education, employment, health, and mental health outcomes.

The NZSL Board will report to you on the progress in implementing the strategy as part of its annual report. The Cabinet paper also sets out that, as Minister for Disability Issues, you will also report back to Cabinet yearly with progress on delivering the NZSL Strategy.

Key issues

Implementing the strategy (NZSL Action Plans and Indicator Framework)

The strategy will be implemented through NZSL Action plans and a NZSL Indicator Framework.

The aim is to release the initial action plan in April 2026. The plan will be developed with the NZSL Board and government agencies, and where appropriate, with key NZSL sector stakeholders. It is likely to consist of a mix of short-term actions and activity aimed at setting the foundations for longer-term actions.

The initial indicator framework will also be worked through with agencies, with the aim to release it in November 2026. We will engage with agencies shortly on processes to develop the initial action plan, and the NZSL indicator framework.

Actions and reporting requirements on government agencies

One of the strategy's priority areas is boosting the public sector's responsiveness to the Deaf and NZSL community.

The NZSL Act also sets out principles to guide government departments when exercising their functions and powers, including:

- 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.

The requirement for government departments to develop NZSL capability is aimed at supporting departments to act in accordance with the principles under the NZSL Act 2006 and to improve their responsiveness to Deaf people and NZSL users.

Each departmental NZSL capability plan will be individualised, developed based on their needs, and priorities. We will look at ways to support the development of their capability plans, and the sharing of good practice between departments.

Separately, Cabinet has previously agreed that government agencies would include material in their annual reports relating to NZSL use and service availability [SOU-25-MIN-0031; CAB-25-MIN-0101 refers]. This will remind agencies to be responsive and ensure that information and services is available in NZSL.

Information on annual reporting (all agencies) and NZSL capability plan (departments only) requirements, including timeframes, will be provided next year, as part of the initial NZSL Action Plan.

Financial implications for government agencies

Some agencies raised concern about the impact of the strategy and reporting obligations. However, while we recognise that all agencies (including the Ministry) are operating under tight fiscal environments, agencies also need to meet the needs of Deaf people and NZSL users.

We consider that the implications of the reporting obligations should not be onerous, while the fiscal implications of actions would be sequenced and scaled over the 10-year period of the strategy. This will help all agencies to deliver actions within current baselines.

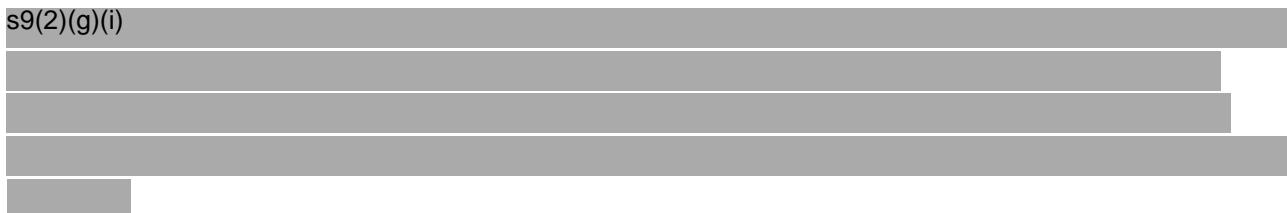
If additional funding is required, then, as noted in the Cabinet paper, initiatives would be subject to normal Budget processes in due course.

Link with Education work programme

Many deaf children are not achieving at the same level as their hearing counterparts. In February 2024, the Ombudsman 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.

In October 2024, we also provided you with information on the importance of NZSL acquisition for deaf students in October 2024 [REP/WHK/24/10/165 refers].

s9(2)(g)(i)

A large rectangular area of the page is completely redacted with a solid grey color, obscuring several paragraphs of text. The redaction is bounded by a thin black border.

Education remains the key priority for the NZSL Board given the importance of learning NZSL for improving lifelong outcomes for Deaf people and other NZSL users.

Next steps

Once the NZSL Strategy is released, Ministry officials will work to develop action plans to deliver the strategy, and an indicator framework. These will be developed in conjunction with other key agencies. We will also involve key NZSL sector stakeholders where appropriate.

End

Author: Kara Hudson, Principal Advisor, Outreach and Innovation

Responsible manager: Rebecca Elvy, Deputy Chief Executive, Outreach and Innovation

Appendix One – Talking Points

Key messages

- The NZSL Strategy provides the opportunity to try something different to improve outcomes for Deaf people – outcomes such as education, employment, health and mental health.
- Deaf people and other NZSL users need to be supported and enabled to learn NZSL so they can communicate and participate in society.
- The NZSL Strategy also provides the opportunity to ensure that government agencies are acting consistently with the principles of the NZSL Act – that is, ensuring that information and services are available in NZSL.

If needed: Requirements on government agencies

- One of the strategy's priority areas is boosting the public sector's responsiveness to the Deaf and NZSL community.
- 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 by the Ministry in 2024 indicated that while there were pockets of good practice, in general NZSL was not well incorporated into many government work areas, and general information and services were not being made accessible to Deaf people and NZSL users.
- The refreshed NZSL Strategy provides the opportunity to ensure that Deaf people and NZSL users are included in society and can access information they need in NZSL.

- In March 2025, Cabinet agreed that government agencies would report, as part of their annual reports, on NZSL use and service availability in their organisations. This reminds agencies of the need to be responsive to Deaf people and NZSL users. This requirement should not add significantly to agencies' workload.
- Separately, there would be a requirement for departments to develop NZSL capability plans to increase their responsiveness to Deaf people and NZSL users. This requirement is aimed at supporting departments to act in accordance with the principles under the NZSL Act 2006 and to improve their responsiveness to Deaf people and NZSL users.
- Each departmental NZSL capability plan would look different as departments have different starting points, and different NZSL priorities – and how they plan to sequence activity to ensure improved responsiveness within their available resources.

If needed: Financial implications for government agencies

- I am aware that some government agencies have concerns about the implications of the strategy. In my view, part of this concern reflects the current gap in service and information provision in NZSL – and a lack of agency responsiveness towards the Deaf community and NZSL users.
- The financial implications of the 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.
- This also provides agencies with an opportunity to reconsider and reprioritise spend that is not meeting the needs of Deaf people and NZSL users.
- As noted in the Cabinet paper, if actions are identified as requiring additional funding, then initiatives would be subject to normal Budget processes.

If needed: Implementing the NZSL Strategy (Action Plans and Indicator Framework)

- I know that agencies and departments are also keen to know the timings for when they need to start including NZSL-related material in their annual reports and develop the departmental NZSL capability plans. Neither of these are required for the current reporting year.
- My officials intend to release the initial NZSL Action Plan in April next year. This initial action plan will be developed by the Ministry, working alongside the NZSL Board and government agencies. Where appropriate, key stakeholders will also be involved.
- The intention is for this initial Action Plan to involve a mix of actions – both immediate actions as well as those to lay the groundwork to address the longer-term issues facing Deaf people and NZSL users.
- Around the same time, and possibly as part of the initial action plan, my officials will provide agencies with additional information on the annual reporting requirements. They will also provide information to support departments to develop their NZSL capability plan.
- An initial indicator framework is planned to be released in November 2026. As there is limited available data and metrics relating to NZSL outcomes, we will work with and across agencies to identify available data to help develop this indicator framework.
- Stats NZ is leading work to develop a Disability Data Framework. There is likely to be some data identified or developed as part of this work that will support the development of the NZSL indicator framework.
- My officials have advised that they are aware of the need to exercise care with the use of data and the potential privacy risks as data becomes disaggregated given the potentially small numbers. These are matters that would be worked through with Stats NZ as the NZSL Indicator Framework is developed.

If needed: Link to Education work programme

- Many deaf children are not achieving at the same level as their hearing counterparts.
- In February 2024, the Ombudsman 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.
- The Education NZSL work programme and the NZSL Strategy are complementary – they work together to strengthen the Ministry of Education's NZSL delivery to deaf children and families.
- Officials from the Ministry meet regularly with officials from the Ministry of Education to discuss matters relating to the education of deaf children, as well as other children who could benefit from learning NZSL (such as some non-speaking children).
- Ensuring that deaf children – and their families – are provided with appropriate opportunities to access and learn NZSL is key for improving education and longer-term outcomes for Deaf people.
