

Title:	NZSL Interpreter Workforce issues
Board meeting date:	17 & 18 March 2023
Question:	Does the Board want to adopt a strategic approach to NZSL interpreting issues?
Action required of the Board:	Decision
ODI Recommendation:	Adopt a four-year workforce strategy to improve access to NZSL interpreting services for Deaf NZSL users
NZSL Strategy link:	Use/Access
<p>Executive Summary</p> <p>Access to quality NZSL interpreting services in a range of settings is a key priority for the NZSL Board. Consultation with the Deaf community and NZSL interpreters also supports this outcome.</p> <p>Access to mainstream society for Deaf NZSL users relies on the skill and capacity of NZSL Interpreters. There are several factors that influence NZSL interpreting services and skill, such as training, opportunity to receive constructive feedback and/or mentoring.</p> <p>The NZSL Strategy (Use/Access) outlines three priorities for NZSL interpreting to maintain and promote the language and use by the Deaf community. The Board has committed a lot of time and money to explore options for the implementation of Standards as mandated in the establishment Cabinet paper. Through this work other issues have been raised by the Deaf community and NZSL interpreters.</p> <p>In October 2022 Government presented to the UN committee on work to promote equitable access for disabled people in New Zealand. Cabinet is now considering recommendations from the committee including calls for increasing the number of NZSL Interpreters particularly those with te reo skills (tri-lingual interpreting).</p> <p>The Board has a lot of information about what is needed and can plan pieces of work to promote high-quality and consistent access for Deaf people through NZSL Interpreters.</p> <p>ODI recommend the Board take a long-term strategic approach to address issue around NZSL Interpreter workforce supply and quality of interpreting services. Adopting a strategy allows the Board to prioritise issues and respond over time with funding improve interpreter supply and quality.</p> <p>Please note the draft workforce strategy will need consultation with stakeholders including Interpreters before being finalised.</p>	

Options

Option A – Extend the timeframe of NZSL Workforce Strategy

The draft strategy is four-years but can be extended to five-years or more.

Option B – Focus on the implementation of NZSL interpreting standards & supporting Professional Learning and Development (PL&D)

The Board has recommended the use of NAATI certification for NZSL Interpreters. There is still a lot of work required to support government implementation for the Deaf community and interpreters. Most costs will be covered by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) but additional work is needed to understand the PL&D needs & funding models for re-certification.

Implementing standards will meet the Boards responsibilities however will not respond to other issues raised through community consultation or the need for more te reo Māori competency for Turi Māori.

Option C – Implement standards and support developing tri-lingual interpreting skills

The Board has recommended the use of NAATI certification for NZSL Interpreters. There is still a lot of work required to support government implementation for the Deaf community and interpreters. Funding tri-lingual interpreting skills will respond to pressure from the Deaf Community and government who have a strong interest in access for Turi Māori.

Option B or Option C responds to one or two issues leaving the Board exposed to managing other issues in an ad hoc manner rather than controlling the work programme in a considered plan over time.

Risks and Mitigation

Risk: Consultation with stakeholders may identify new issues or disagreement with the content.

Mitigation: The workforce strategy is currently in draft form and will not be approved by the Board until feedback has been gathered to inform the Boards decision.

Risk: There is not enough money in the NZSL Fund to support the workforce strategy.

Mitigation: Formal approval of any pieces of work can considered by the Board at the beginning of each financial year. The final workforce strategy will have estimated budget figures for approval.

Next Steps

1. Access expert advice on workforce development and strategies
2. Ask for feedback from stakeholders about the proposed workforce strategy
3. Table a final strategy at the August 2023 meeting for approval

Appendix: NZSL Interpreter Workforce issues

Context

Strengthening access to quality NZSL interpreting services in a range of settings is a key priority for the NZSL Board. Consultation with the Deaf community and NZSL interpreters also supports this.

Government outcomes

The related NZSL Strategy Use/Access priorities are:

- NZSL Interpreter standards provide high quality professional interpreting services throughout New Zealand that meets the diverse needs of Deaf NZSL users
- Promote social equality for Deaf NZSL users by ensuring they have access to information and services through NZSL via professional NZSL Interpreters
- Māori Deaf have access to Te Ao Māori and Māori speaking domains through the training and retention of trilingual interpreters (te Reo Māori, NZSL and English)

New Zealand Government presented to the UN Committee on their response to the UNCRPD in October 2022. In the UN's Concluding observations, they called for the NZ Government to:

“Implement incentives and increase funding for the training and employment of sign language interpreters, including trilingual interpreters who can interpret between NZSL, English and Te Reo Māori, and adopt a national standardised accreditation framework for sign language”

These concluding observations will be considered for action by Cabinet in the next few months.

Setting a workforce strategy

ODI recommend a long term and broad approach to the NZSL interpreter workforce due to the complexity of issues faced by the Deaf community and interpreter workforce. A workforce strategy can systematically investigate and propose solutions to key areas over time while providing time to engage with NZSL users and key stakeholders.

An initial review of current report has identified the following key areas:

1. The business or operating model for accessing interpreter services
2. Ongoing capability development of interpreters
3. Specialist interpreter skills including tri-lingual interpreting
4. Complaints and resolution process
5. Investigating the number of interpreters required across the motu

Draft four-year NZSL Interpreter Workforce Strategy

	Year 1 (2023/24)	Year 2 (2024/25)	Year 3 (2025/26)	Year 4 (2026/27)
Interpreter training, including initial training and specialist interpreting skills	Fund tri-lingual interpreting development	Fund tri-lingual interpreting development	Investigate best practice and guidelines in Legal and Health settings	Investigate role of educational interpreter
Promoting and maintaining capability (interpreter skills)		Investigate professional development requirements for interpreters	Implementation PL&D programmes	
Consistent and high-quality interpreting services	Implement NAATI interpreter standards		Investigate pay-rates for NZSL Interpreters in public services	
Interpreter service models including complaints & resolution processes	Commission a report into a Complaints process	Implementation of complaints & resolution process	Investigate a service model that enables workforce co-ordination and Deaf people at a governance level	Implement improved service co-ordination

Background

We know a lot about the current workforce.

The NZSL interpreter workforce is small with approximately 80 interpreters working across the country. The workforce is highly qualified compared with other spoken language interpreters with the majority holding a NZSL interpreting Diploma or Degree through Auckland University of Technology.

- there are 80 active interpreters in New Zealand.
- a recent report commissioned by the NZSL Board indicated that Norway has 700, The Netherlands has 563, Ireland has 109 when comparing the population of Deaf people.
- the only training programme for interpreters in New Zealand is a three-year, Bachelor course at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), on average six interpreters graduate per year. There is a scholarship grants scheme to fund course costs administered by the Ministry of Education.
- interpreters have a Code of Ethics and a Code of Conduct for members of the Sign Language Interpreters Association New Zealand (SLIANZ) to ensure professional and ethical practice.
- some interpreters trained overseas are able to work in New Zealand however before doing so need their experience and competency in New Zealand Sign Language measured.
- 120 interpreters belong to the Sign Language Interpreter Association of New Zealand (SLIANZ) which is the professional body and provides guidance of best practice to its members and consumers.
- The NZSL Board has supported SLIANZ through several grants providing professional development and administrative support.

We would like to know more about the way interpreters work

- The range of terms and conditions for interpreters, for example hourly rates, payment of preparation time, travel and booking fees
- What is the ideal number of working NZSL interpreters to meet the needs of Deaf NZSL users around the country?
- Where is the greatest demand for NZSL interpreters and has this changed by movement within the Deaf community to smaller regions due to the cost of living, i.e. anecdotally we know what some Deaf people who live in Auckland have moved to smaller regions such as Northland and the Waikato.

Several issues and opportunities have been highlighted in reports commissioned by the Board.

There are limited pathways to becoming a qualified NZSL Interpreter.

- Auckland University of Technology (AUT) delivers the only qualification to become an NZSL interpreter.

- Many people report difficulty in moving to Auckland, especially students who have family responsibilities.
- Low numbers graduate each year and those who graduate continue to work in Auckland, rather than moving back to their home region.

An ongoing way to educate interpreters outside of Auckland is also essential if this problem is to be addressed (Fitzgerald, 2017)

Many interpreters report a difficulty in earning enough money through interpreting and are limited in developing specialist skills by a lack of funding or training opportunities.

- Since the establishment of NZSL Interpreter training, the size of workforce has stayed the same over the past five years. Contributing issues are:
 - most interpreters work as freelancers (contractors) with a few salaried positions available.
 - the workforce is competitive and defensive with some graduate interpreters failing to gain work to start their career (Fitzgerald, 2017).
 - ACC recommends a maximum of 20-25 hours per week of physical interpreting to become eligible for any financial support for Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS) placing limitations on the number of bookable hours to earn a living.
 - there are no career pathways for NZSL Interpreters.
 - while there would not be enough demand to work exclusive in legal or health settings developing specialist skills are critical in these high-risk areas but are not recognised financially.
 - there is no support to develop competency in educational interpreting which demands specific skills including high levels of NZSL fluency; knowledge of working with children and young adults; knowledge of teaching methods; and working in an education team (Victoria University of Wellington, 2020).

The UN concluding observations called for more trilingual interpreters.

- Currently only one interpreter has qualifications as an NZSL and te reo Māori interpreter. This person is often acknowledged as New Zealand's only trilingual interpreter.
- There is a scholarship fund available through the Ministry of Education to support people fluent in te reo Māori to attend the AUT interpreting course and become a trilingual interpreter.
- There are several NZSL interpreters who have some level of te reo Māori fluency who are not acknowledged or supported to become recognised as trilingual interpreters.
 - The te reo Māori test offered by Te Taura Whiri o te reo Māori is a useful tool to assess te reo Māori proficiency levels.
- An investment will be required to support the development of more trilingual interpreters
 - There is no qualification to become a trilingual interpreter and it would not be feasible for one to be established.
 - Costing has been developed to invest in the development of the trilingual interpreter work force.

- It may still be possible that some fluent te reo speakers could be supported to undertake and complete their NZSL interpreting qualifications at AUT. However previous experience tells us this is unlikely given the limited financial support available.
- A bespoke approach for individual NZSL interpreters with some fluency in te reo Māori, focussing on the development of their te reo fluency and te reo interpreter qualifications is the more likely approach. This would involve:
 - Identify te reo training options in the interpreter's region
 - Compensation for loss of interpreting income and clientele while engaged in their training

NZSL interpreter services are uncoordinated and do not maximise the capacity of the existing workforce.

- Under the current operating model, interpreters work independently or receiving bookings through one of three national Language Service Providers (LSP) and as such, there is no visibility of NZSL interpreter availability across the country at any one time.
- It is a relatively small work force while operates as freelance contractors, with many interpreters experiencing unpredictability in demand for their services.
- The spread of interpreters by location does not necessarily match where Deaf people live, especially as anecdotally many Deaf people are relocating from Auckland, for cost-of-living reasons, to live in other centres.
- There are difficulties sourcing interpreters for after hours, weekends or urgent requests.
- National emergency and media jobs results in reduced capacity for community interpreting jobs.

The implementation of NAATI standards will set a minimum requirement for professional development with some guidance on learning and training needs.

- There is little guidance and support for post graduate training to continue developing skills as a community interpreter or to become a specialist interpreter, particularly for new graduates.
- The delivery of professional development for interpreters is ad hoc and funded by a range of organisations. The NZSL Board has funded training through NZSL Community grants for 'NZSL in pharmacy settings' and 'Working in Mental Health settings.
- Voluntary membership of SLIANZ requires interpreters to participate in minimum level of professional development each year.
- Graduation from the NZSL interpreting course provides a foundational level of skills, however ongoing training is required to support the quality and consistency of interpreting services (VUW, 2020)
- There is little to no training or funding to provide content for specialist areas such as education, te Ao Māori, legal, or health settings
- There is little motivation or incentive to participate in training as there is no distinction in job titles or remuneration levels.

There are no formal processes for lodging complaints or providing feedback on interpreter conduct, skill or service for the Deaf community and others.

- Deaf community members have requested a process to manage complaints that also include consequences for poor practice.
- Feedback that could be used for interpreter skill is unmanaged and doesn't link into a development plan to support increasing interpreter skill and ability.
- Currently, issues can be raised with the booking agency or directly to an interpreter.
- SLIANZ have a code of Ethics and a Code of Conduct that informs best practice to ensure a quality service however they do not actively manage complaints.
- NAATI has a process for responding to complaints and if founded, can require interpreters to reflect on their practice. For example, in the case of poor ethical practice, the interpreters can be asked to repeat the online ethics module, or in the case of a gross misconduct can remove certifications.
- When investigated in 2017, it was found that the Health and Disability Commissioner complaints process could be used to resolve interpreter issues however was not culturally responsive or accessible to the Deaf community.
- Anecdotally, Deaf people are known to use social media to seek feedback on how to respond to poor interpreter practice.

The funding mechanisms for NZSL Interpreting are fragmented and complex to navigate for Deaf users and interpreters

- Deaf people need to be able to easily navigate an interpreter system where competition and the locality they live in does not limit choices and the right to privacy and communication are also supported.
- A lack of awareness about the role of an interpreter and therefore payment for services causes issues with accessing interpreters.
- Limited funding restricts access to mainstream society for Deaf people (Fitzgerald, 2017)
- Booking agencies have different systems for managing interpreting bookings, for example differences in payment of travel, preparation for jobs and hourly rates. This inconsistency impacts on individual interpreters and the interpreter options available for the Deaf community.
- The lack of co-ordination is seen as a reason for access issues and difficulties earning a living (ODI, 2021)
- Deaf people have no input into the development of government policy or service provision for interpreting services

References

Fitzgerald & Associates (2017). A review of Interpreter Standards Report

Fitzgerald & Associates (2017). NZSL Interpreter Registry Design Report

Fitzgerald & Associates (2018). NZSL Interpreter Registry Consultation Report

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