



# New Zealand Sign Language Strategy

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2018–2023



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You can also access the NZSL versions and other alternate formats at: [www.odi.govt.nz/nzsl/nzsl-strategy-2018-2023](http://www.odi.govt.nz/nzsl/nzsl-strategy-2018-2023)



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**New Zealand Government**

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# Minister's foreword

Language is an essential part of developing individual and community identity and culture. It also provides a pathway that allows people to connect with others and to access all a society has to offer, including education and employment.

As one of our country's official languages, New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) is a valued taonga of Aotearoa New Zealand, and in particular of the Deaf community. NZSL is an integral part of the Deaf community's realisation of both mana and Deaf culture. NZSL is critical to New Zealand as a whole and part of what makes Aotearoa unique.

To ensure that NZSL is sustained in the Deaf community and across Aotearoa, the NZSL Board (the Board) has responsibilities that extend across leadership, advice, strategy, and co-ordination and monitoring of NZSL. In addition, the work of the Board helps government meet its commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its obligations under the New Zealand Sign Language Act (2006).

By setting a strategic direction, the Board is creating a strong platform for developing the acquisition and use of NZSL in New Zealand, while ensuring it is also accessible and available to all users. This strategy gives effect to the NZSL Act.

As Minister for Disability Issues, an important part of my role is to influence and support improvements to the accessibility of information provided by government. As such, I envision that this Strategy will guide the work of government agencies and Crown entities to ensure that we meet the language needs of NZSL users and the Deaf community.

This Strategy comes at a time when government agencies are confirming their commitment to accessibility by signing an Accessibility Charter. This commitment will see agencies working progressively over the next five years towards providing information for the public that is accessible to everyone.

By implementing this Strategy, we are demonstrating the value of NZSL in Aotearoa, ensuring its survival and reinforcing its sustainability as a language that is recognised and embraced by all New Zealanders.



**Hon Carmel Sepuloni**  
Minister for Disability Issues



# Executive summary

The New Zealand Sign Language Strategy 2018–2023 (the Strategy) addresses the critical and ongoing need for effective language planning by the NZSL Board. Research tells us that while New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) is now more recognised and accepted by society, the numbers of Deaf people learning and using the language are decreasing (McKee 2017). This means that NZSL – one of New Zealand’s official languages – is considered a threatened language.

The Strategy aims to enable Deaf and other NZSL users to learn and use NZSL naturally within a community of users, contributing significantly to its survival, sustainability and vitality. Proposed promotional activities will help to increase recognition, awareness, learning and use of NZSL by all New Zealanders.

The Strategy will also guide the NZSL work happening in government agencies and Crown entities to maintain and promote the use of NZSL by Deaf people and other NZSL users.

The Strategy is based on five internationally recognised language planning priorities.

- 1. Acquisition:** The learning of a language by children and adults.
- 2. Use/Access:** The ability to use a language in any or all domains of society, including within whānau.
- 3. Attitude:** The beliefs and opinions of language users and others towards that language.
- 4. Documentation:** The systematic recording of language use for research and reference.
- 5. Status:** How a language is regarded by its users and others.

For each of these priorities the Board has developed aspirational descriptions of what the future for NZSL will look like in 2023, after five years of implementing the Strategy. The descriptions enable a clear and shared understanding of what the Strategy and its associated activities are seeking to achieve.

The Board will develop an action plan of key activities to be progressed under each of the five strategic language planning priorities. The action plan will be reviewed and updated annually.

Many government agencies and Crown entities have a clear responsibility to provide NZSL services and resources and/or access to their services through NZSL: this will not change. The Board will work in partnership with key government agencies during 2018 to 2019 to jointly plan for the collation and analysis of more NZSL-related data. The aim is to develop targets and indicators that can start being reported against in 2020.





# The NZSL Strategy 2018–2023

This Strategy guides the work required by the the Board from 2018 to 2023 to maintain and promote the use of NZSL by Deaf people and other users. This Strategy is also intended to guide the NZSL work of government agencies and Crown entities.



## NZSL Board's Strategy planning framework

### **The NZSL Board**

Promotes and maintains NZSL by ensuring the development, preservation and acquisition of the language, and provides expert advice to government and the community on NZSL.

### **NZSL Strategy**

Guides the work required by the NZSL Board from 2018 to 2023 to maintain and promote the use of NZSL by Deaf people and other NZSL users.

### **The language planning priorities**

The strategy is based on five language priorities.



## 1 Acquisition

The learning of NZSL by children and adults.



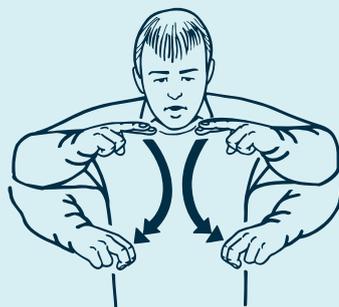
## 2 Use/Access

The ability to use NZSL in all domains of society, including within whānau.



## 3 Attitude

The beliefs and opinions of NZSL users and others towards the language.



## 4 Documentation

The systematic recording of NZSL's use for research and reference.



## 5 Status

How NZSL is regarded by its users and others.



## The current state of NZSL and the need for planning

There are approximately 20,000 NZSL users in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2013), of whom it is estimated 4,000 are Deaf.

NZSL was recognised as an official language by the introduction of the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 (the NZSL Act). The NZSL Act was pivotal because “achieving linguistic rights is inseparable from realising basic human rights that follow from being able to communicate meaningfully in the family, at school and in civil society. Limits on such opportunities for users of an unrecognised sign language often result in the negative social outcomes familiar to colonised minorities, such as under-employment, under-participation in higher education, and reduced wellbeing” (McKee 2011).

The New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2013) undertook an inquiry into NZSL, seven years after the NZSL Act came into force. The inquiry identified the need for strengthening the maintenance and promotion of NZSL. The Commission made recommendations to government, some of which have been implemented, including establishing an NZSL Board.

The NZSL Board was established by Cabinet in 2015 to maintain and promote NZSL, progress priorities for the language and to support NZSL initiatives, so that Deaf NZSL users can participate fully in New Zealand society as outlined in the NZSL Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Board does this by providing strategic direction and expert advice on NZSL to government. This includes recommending how the Board’s annual funding can be allocated to support the strategic maintenance and promotion of NZSL.

Since the Human Rights Commission report, research has confirmed that while NZSL is now more recognised and accepted by society, a decreasing percentage of the deaf population are learning and using the language (McKee 2017). The findings mean that, in line with language endangerment and vitality frameworks, NZSL can be considered a threatened language.



## About the Board's Strategy 2018–2023

Both the Human Rights Commission report and recent NZSL research have highlighted the critical and ongoing need for effective language planning by the Board, government agencies and Crown entities.

Effective NZSL planning that is focused on enabling Deaf and other NZSL users to learn and use NZSL naturally within a community of users will contribute significantly to ensuring the survival, sustainability and vitality of NZSL. An additional focus on promotion activities will aim to increase recognition, awareness, acquisition and use of NZSL by New Zealanders.

The NZSL Board established a three-year action plan in 2016 to action the priorities charged to it by Cabinet (CAB SOC Min (14)9/7). However, a review in 2017 identified that this plan did not enable the Board to undertake an effective long-term approach and that the action plan priorities needed to better reflect minority language planning priorities.

To address this the Board undertook further research on language planning priorities and over the course of a year developed priorities for a NZSL Strategy to guide the Board's work for the next five years.

This review also resulted in the needs of Māori Deaf people being incorporated within all of the five language planning priorities. This was seen as a more comprehensive approach than the prior action plan that identified the needs of Māori Deaf people as a standalone priority. The Board is also aware that there is little knowledge of the sign language needs of Pacific people in New Zealand. This will be addressed as the Strategy is implemented.

The NZSL Strategy and the New Zealand Disability Strategy both contribute to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in New Zealand. The two Strategies share an interface and complementary focus in highlighting the need to increase access to all domains of society for Deaf NZSL users. They emphasises that access to government services and information through NZSL is a key strategic priority for Deaf NZSL users.



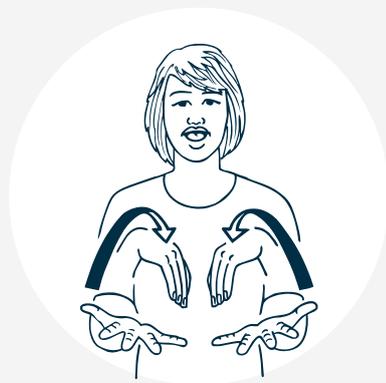
## The NZSL language planning priorities

The 2017 review showed that the Strategy needed to more clearly describe the language planning priorities for NZSL. Further research identified five internationally recognised language planning priorities that the Board has based this Strategy on (Hornberger, 2009).

1. Acquisition: The learning of a language by children and adults.
2. Use/Access: The ability to use a language in any or all domains of society, including within whānau.
3. Attitude: The beliefs and opinions of language users and others towards that language.
4. Documentation: The systematic recording of language use for research and reference.
5. Status: How a language is regarded by its users and others.

Acquisition and use/access are the two key language priorities within the Strategy due to the importance of Deaf and other NZSL users being able to fully learn and use NZSL in all domains of society. The remaining three language priorities, attitude, documentation and status, play essential supporting roles for achieving NZSL acquisition and use/access.

A summary of the NZSL Board's Strategy planning framework is illustrated on pages 10 and 11.



# 1 Acquisition

## The purpose of acquisition planning is to ensure:

- deaf children and young people become fully proficient in NZSL
- the Deaf community and other members of society can learn NZSL.

## What success looks like in five years' time

- Deaf children and young people who use NZSL are learning and acquiring NZSL at age-appropriate levels throughout their education through full immersion with signing peers and adult NZSL models.
- Families and whānau are able to learn NZSL throughout their child's education, enabling them to communicate more easily with their deaf child.
- Professionals working in educational contexts with deaf children and young people who are NZSL users, are proficient in NZSL to an appropriate level, supporting deaf children and young people to acquire NZSL at age-appropriate levels.

## National education NZSL planning

Planning how deaf children and young people acquire a language is central to any national language strategy. Due to the complexity of language acquisition for children and young people, countries with national language plans for minority languages tend to have two approaches – a national language strategy and a related national education language strategy.

New Zealand examples of such an approach are the national strategy for te reo Māori – Te Rautaki Reo Māori (2014) and the associated national education te reo strategy, Tau Mai Te Reo (2013).

The Ministry of Education has had various plans and strategies for deaf education and during 2018 is developing an up-to-date NZSL pathway, with a view to developing a long-term strategy for NZSL in deaf education.

The Board will continue to work with the Ministry of Education as well as key Crown entities and other relevant stakeholders in early childhood education, schooling and tertiary education sectors to:

- support further development and implementation of a national NZSL education sector plan
- ensure the alignment of such a plan with the Board's Strategy.

The Ministry of Education is the government agency responsible for funding both deaf children and young people's access to learning NZSL and services that support access to learning NZSL within education settings. The Board will not replicate or replace the Ministry of Education's NZSL planning and funding in these areas, and will work with and support the Ministry of Education.



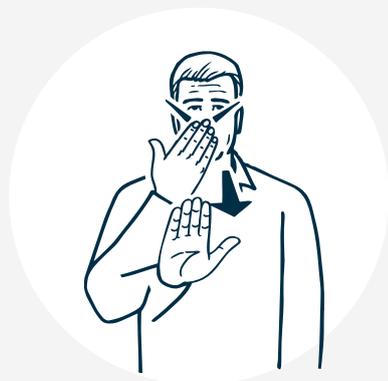
## 2 Use/Access

### The purpose of use/access planning is to:

- enable NZSL to be used in all domains of society
- promote social equality for Deaf NZSL users by ensuring they have access to information and services through NZSL.

### What success looks like in five years' time

- The Deaf community is able to maintain Deaf domains of intergenerational transmission of NZSL amongst the Deaf community. Deaf domains include organisations, events, places and spaces (for example, face-to-face or online interaction) where Deaf people are able to use NZSL.
- Core government services and information, which are the responsibility of key central government agencies such as the Ministries of Education (pre-school, compulsory and tertiary), Health, Justice, and Social Development as well as local government agencies are accessible to Deaf NZSL users because they:
  - provide professional NZSL interpreters
  - translate written information into NZSL
  - use up-to-date information and communication technology that provides Deaf NZSL users access to services and information
  - provide services and information directly in NZSL, for example via NZSL fluent staff
  - make decisions that are informed by the Board's Strategy and the use of robust data and evidence.
- NZSL interpreter standards provide high quality professional interpreting services throughout New Zealand that meet the diverse needs of Deaf NZSL users.
- 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).



## 3 Attitude

### The purpose of attitude planning is to ensure:

- the Deaf community:
  - has a critical awareness and appreciation of NZSL as a valid language
  - believes that NZSL is recognised and valued by New Zealanders.
- families and whānau of deaf children, and the professionals who work with them, recognise and value NZSL as a language and understand the benefits of using NZSL early with deaf children
- government agencies, Crown entities and New Zealanders recognise NZSL as a language and demonstrate inclusive attitudes and practices towards NZSL users, including recognising the importance and value of NZSL to the Deaf community.

### What success looks like in five years' time

- The Deaf community believes that NZSL is recognised and valued by New Zealanders.
- Families and whānau of deaf children make a conscious choice to learn and use NZSL and recognise it as an equal language alongside spoken languages.
- Government agencies, crown entities and New Zealanders demonstrate awareness of, and positive attitudes towards the use of NZSL in New Zealand.



## 4 Documentation

### The purpose of documentation planning is to:

- develop and maintain comprehensive records of NZSL that enable current and future use and the understanding and further analysis of the language.

**Documentation** includes researching, archiving and recording evidence-based descriptions of the structure and use of NZSL, including a dictionary, grammatical analysis and corpus of NZSL, as well as other forms of language analysis.

### What success looks like in five years' time

- NZSL users have ongoing access to comprehensive records of NZSL, including an NZSL online dictionary that documents NZSL and maintains a high standard of content and usability.
- NZSL documentation and research is ongoing, reflecting partnerships between research institutions, individuals and the NZSL community.



## 5 Status

### The purpose of status planning is

- to develop a positive environment for the use of NZSL, including by:
  - determining what rights are given to NZSL users through legislation, policy and practice and the position of NZSL in society
  - enhancing how NZSL is viewed and used.

### What success looks like in five years' time

- Central and local government and Crown entities are implementing the principles of the NZSL Act 2006, particularly in the priority areas of education, social and employment services, health, justice and emergency services.
- A positive environment, including legislation, policy and practice, support the use of NZSL.



# Implementation, monitoring, reporting and partnerships

The Board receives \$1.25 million each year to assist with implementing the Strategy through the funding of national and local NZSL initiatives and resources.

The Board's 2017 planning review confirmed that there are some essential NZSL services and resources that need to be established and/or maintained, which are not clearly the responsibility of any one government agency (for example, NZSL teaching and assessment resources, the NZSL dictionary and regulation of NZSL interpreting services). Some of the essential language planning services and resources require ongoing funding and when considered together may require a sizable proportion of the limited NZSL Fund to be set aside.

Where government agencies and Crown entities have a clear responsibility to provide NZSL services and resources and/or access to their services through NZSL, the Board will not replicate or replace the government agencies' responsibility.

To support the implementation of the Strategy, the Board will continue to focus on strengthening its partnerships with key government agencies (Ministries of Education, Health, Justice and Social Development) to:

- provide advice to government agencies on developing and implementing their NZSL planning and/or activities
- support the Board to plan, implement, monitor and report on progress towards achieving the Strategy's objectives.

The Board continues to recognise that to implement the Strategy it must also maintain its strong relationships and consult with Deaf Aotearoa as the recognised Disabled Persons Organisation representing the voice of Deaf New Zealanders. The Board also recognises the importance of engaging with the Deaf community, other non-government organisations and Deaf organisations, and relevant experts.

The Board will develop an Action Plan to outline the key activities it will progress under each of the five language planning priorities. The Action Plan will be reviewed annually to monitor progress. The Board will report on its progress in implementing the NZSL Strategy in its annual report to the Minister for Disability Issues.

For full information on the Board's planning and reporting processes, including governance, refer to the Board's Terms of Reference (Office for Disability Issues, 2015).



# **Developing NZSL indicators and targets to monitor and report on the Strategy**

Currently there are very limited metrics and systems for gathering and analysing NZSL data by the Board and government agencies. This limits the Board's ability to monitor and report to Government on progress with implementing the Strategy. As a result, the Board will work in partnership with key government agencies during 2018 and 2019 to develop indicators, targets and systems for collating and analysing NZSL-related data and to begin reporting against NZSL targets and indicators by 2020.

The NZSL indicators and targets work programme will specify:

- the indicators and targets for each language priority and their agreed definitions
- where the information is sourced
- how often the information will be collected
- who is responsible for collecting it
- where proxies are needed and how information gaps will be addressed.

Having NZSL indicators and targets will also assist an evaluation of the Strategy in 2022.

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## Glossary

<b>Access/Accessible:</b>	Deaf and other NZSL users are able to access all services and information with ease and dignity through NZSL.
<b>Critical awareness:</b>	An understanding of the social and political aspects of NZSL.
<b>Crown entities:</b>	Responsible for provision of government services as listed by the State Services Commission e.g. School Boards of Trustees, District Health Boards and Tertiary Education Institutions. <a href="https://www.ssc.govt.nz/sites/all/files/guide-to-central-government-agencies-april17.pdf">https://www.ssc.govt.nz/sites/all/files/guide-to-central-government-agencies-april17.pdf</a>
<b>Deaf or deaf:</b>	<p>The capitalised D is commonly used when referring Deaf culture and the Deaf community. The NZSL Board have decided on the use of 'Deaf' when referring to Deaf adults who identify with the Deaf/NZSL community.</p> <p>A small 'd' for deaf is used to describe children and young people who have a hearing loss and use NZSL and who may/may not identify as a member of the Deaf community.</p>
<b>Deaf culture:</b>	Shared history, beliefs and behavioural norms of Deaf people, including use of NZSL.
<b>Deaf NZSL users:</b>	Deaf adults who culturally identify as a member of the Deaf community and use NZSL.
<b>Deaf domains:</b>	Deaf domains are organisations, events, places and spaces (for example, face-to-face or online interaction) where Deaf people are able to use NZSL. The concept of Deaf domains can also be referred to as 'Deaf spaces'.
<b>Government agencies:</b>	Government agencies as listed by the State Services Commission. <a href="https://www.ssc.govt.nz/sites/all/files/guide-to-central-government-agencies-april17.pdf">https://www.ssc.govt.nz/sites/all/files/guide-to-central-government-agencies-april17.pdf</a>

<b>Maintenance:</b>	Actions which ensure the vitality of NZSL by supporting conditions that enable NZSL use, transmission and natural development to occur within a community of NZSL users.
<b>NZSL learners:</b>	Deaf and hearing people who are learning NZSL.
<b>NZSL users:</b>	Deaf and hearing people who use NZSL as either a first or second language.
<b>Promotion:</b>	Actions that increase recognition, awareness, acquisition and use of NZSL by New Zealanders.
<b>Transmission or intergenerational transmission:</b>	The transference of NZSL from Deaf adults to deaf children.
<b>Vitality:</b>	The extent to which a language is used as a means of communication in a wide range of contexts for various purposes. The most significant indicator of a language’s vitality is its daily use by the youngest generation of the relevant community.



