

In Confidence

Office of the Minister of Broadcasting, Communications and Digital Media

Chair, Cabinet Business Committee

## **RELEASE OF CONSULTATION ON THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS RELAY SERVICE (FOR DEAF, HEARING-IMPAIRED, DEAFBLIND AND SPEECH-IMPAIRED NEW ZEALANDERS)**

### **Proposal**

- 1 This paper seeks the Committee's approval to release a public consultation document on the future of the Telecommunications Relay Service, for deaf, hearing-impaired, deafblind and speech-impaired New Zealanders.

### **Background**

- 2 The Telecommunications Relay Service (relay service) aims to improve digital inclusion by providing telecommunications services for members of the user communities which include deaf, hearing-impaired, deafblind and speech-impaired New Zealanders.
- 3 The relay service was established in 2004 as a Telecommunications Service Obligation (TSO) under the Telecommunications Act 2001, to provide communication tools for users that cannot access traditional means of communication. Sprint International New Zealand is the current TSO provider for the New Zealand Relay Service. Services under the TSO are delivered from a contact centre in Auckland, managed by Communication Services for the Deaf, Inc. (CSD).
- 4 The Crown has a textphone pool that was established to subsidise the cost of proprietary end-user equipment types approved for use on the relay service. This pool is managed by CSD through a separate contract with the Crown.
- 5 Separately from the TSO, the New Zealand Video Interpreting Service (VIS) was launched on 1 July 2016 upon the amalgamation of two preceding video interpreting services. VIS offers services for New Zealand Sign Language users to make phone calls or use a video interpreter from a computer, tablet or laptop. The Crown has contracted with CSD for the provision of VIS services.
- 6 All contracts for services expire on 30 June 2019. To ensure the effective delivery of relay services beyond this date, I seek the Committee's approval for the release of a public consultation document to seek views on what services and equipment are required to meet the needs of users, and how the services and equipment may need to change in light of technological developments.

## **Comment**

- 7 Since the establishment of the relay service, advances in communications technologies have meant that the range of mainstream products and services with advanced accessibility features suitable for people with disabilities has increased.
- 8 Officials at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) commenced the procurement process for services beyond June 2019 with the release of a Request for Information on 14 November 2017. This document sought to gather information from prospective providers of future services on technological developments and solutions that could be employed in New Zealand, to inform the content of the draft public consultation document.
- 9 It is intended that the public consultation period will run from late January 2018 to late March 2018. Members of the public will have the opportunity to respond to the questions posed in the document through written submissions. A short series of public consultation events is also being considered.
- 10 After the consultation period, there will be a Request for Proposals released in mid-2018, with a view for a contract to be awarded late 2018 and any new service to be operative by 1 July 2019 following an agreed transition phase.
- 11 Officials have developed the following objective for the procurement of services beyond June 2019, in consultation with the New Zealand Relay Advisory Group of user community representatives:
  - 11.1 To ensure the New Zealand Relay Service meets the needs of users in facilitating the accessibility of deaf, hearing-impaired, deafblind and speech-impaired people in New Zealand society and the economy.
- 12 The procurement of services will be guided by four principles, as set out in the following paragraphs. The public consultation document provides context on each of these principles, and asks several questions under each.

### *Availability*

- 13 Relay services should be available to those who need them, when they need them, regardless of where they live. Hours of service are also not currently 24/7 for all services, and public consultation offers a chance to explore the demand and viability of extended hours of service.

### *Accessibility*

- 14 Relay services should be widely known, easy to access and straightforward to use. The New Zealand Relay Advisory Group has highlighted a lack of awareness within user communities of the services offered. For many New Zealanders fixed line telephones are giving way to mobile devices, and the public consultation will explore the appetite for mobile relay service solutions employed in other countries.

### *Affordability*

- 15 Relay services should be affordable for users whilst offering value for money for the Government. Currently, only calls to national landlines (excluding premium numbers) are

provided free of charge to users. This presents an issue with an increasing number of people having only mobile phones rather than landlines. Costs to telecommunications services and equipment may still represent a barrier for some relay service users despite charges decreasing across the telecommunications industry.

#### *Fit for purpose*

- 16 Relay services should be compatible with mainstream technologies and networks, and keep pace with technological advancements. Since the relay service began in 2004 technology has developed significantly. Whilst these changes have been transformational, there remains a proportion of relay service users that require specialist equipment, and other modifications to standard equipment to accommodate other physical disabilities.

#### **Consultation**

- 17 A cross-agency group chaired by MBIE and comprised of officials from the Office of Disability Issues at the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Education, Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), New Zealand Police, the Treasury, the Ministry of Health, the Department of Internal Affairs and Te Puni Kōkiri have been consulted on this paper and the public consultation document.
- 18 The Ministry for Culture and Heritage and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet have been informed of this paper and the public consultation document
- 19 The public consultation document has been drafted in consultation with the New Zealand Relay Advisory Group. This Group was established alongside the relay service and is comprised of representatives from the user communities (deaf, hearing-impaired, deafblind, speech-impaired and parents of children with a communication disability).

#### **Financial Implications**

- 20 No additional funding is sought through this paper. The cost of the proposed public consultation will be met by MBIE operating expenditure budgets.
- 21 Funding for relay services comes from the Communications: Services for Deaf, Hearing Impaired and Speech Impaired People Multi-Category Appropriation within Vote Business, Science and Innovation. The value of this appropriation for 2017/18 is \$4.684 million, of which \$3 million comes from the Telecommunications Development Levy to fund services provided under the TSO.

#### **Human Rights**

- 22 The proposals outlined in this paper are consistent with the Human Rights Act 1993 and the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990.

#### **Legislative Implications**

- 23 There are no legislative implications arising from the proposals outlined in this paper.

#### **Regulatory Impact Analysis**

- 24 There are no proposals in this paper that require a Regulatory Impact Analysis.

## **Disability Perspective**

- 25 The public consultation seeks to ensure the needs of New Zealanders with communications disabilities are met. People with communications disabilities are anticipated to make up the majority of respondents to the public consultation.
- 26 The Office of Disability Issues at the Ministry of Social Development strongly supports the public consultation, and will remain closely involved with the procurement process for services beyond June 2019 as part of the cross-agency group.

## **Publicity**

- 27 I intend to announce the public consultation upon the release of the public consultation document in 2018.

## **Recommendations**

The Minister of Broadcasting, Communications and Digital Media recommends that the Committee:

- 1 **authorise** the Minister to direct officials from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment to release the public consultation document “New Zealand Telecommunications Relay Services beyond June 2019”; and
- 2 **authorise** the Minister to make minor editorial changes to the public consultation document “New Zealand Telecommunications Relay Services beyond June 2019” prior to its release.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Clare Curran

Minister of Broadcasting, Communications and Digital Media