



**MINISTRY OF BUSINESS,
INNOVATION & EMPLOYMENT**
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NZ Relay Service Insights Report— Summary

Adapted in 2026 by Accessible Formats Service,
Blind Low Vision NZ, Auckland

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NZ Relay Service Insights Report—Summary

Read the full report at: www.mbie.govt.nz/have-your-say/the-future-of-the-nz-relay-service or shortened URL: tinyurl.com/ymnjfb5a

Introduction

NZ Relay exists so that everyone can access telecommunications, particularly people who are Deaf, experiencing hearing loss, or living with speech impairments. It currently offers a Video Interpreting Service, text relay, captioned relay, speech-to-speech, and teletypewriter (TTY) services. It is funded through the Telecommunications Development Levy and administered by MBIE.

The current contract expires on 8 May 2027. This consultation was carried out to inform the tender for the next provider, focusing on which services people use, their experiences of those services, which services might be phased out, and how people would feel about a registration process that MBIE is considering as a way of preventing misuse.

NZ Relay users share a common barrier to phone communication, but the community is diverse, and a one-

size-fits-all approach will fail some of them. The provider currently holds no demographic information about users, a deliberate choice made to keep the service as close as possible to picking up an ordinary phone. This also means the service is not personalised, and interactions tend to be transactional rather than relational.

This report was written by a team of disabled people, with Deaf and tāngata turi Māori communities working as part of the engagement team.

Methodology

Engagement ran from 2 June to 20 July 2026 (MBIE extended the period to maximise participation). More than 180 people took part across a survey, written submissions, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations.

The survey, built on Accessible Surveys, was available in NZSL, Easy Read, audio, and read-aloud formats as well as English. It ran from 23 June to 26 July 2026 and received 85 responses. Figures about current service delivery are drawn from the 68 respondents who had used the service in the last 12 months; other figures come from the full sample.

Twenty-four written submissions were received, seven of them in NZSL through a dedicated submission portal and translated into English for analysis. Focus groups ran over Zoom at a range of times, including evenings and

weekends, with NZSL interpretation and captioning. One-on-one conversations were the main method used with Deafblind participants, some of whom needed specialist communication support.

All is for All partnered with AWE, a kaupapa Māori agency, to support the recruitment and involvement of Māori participants, reflecting Aotearoa New Zealand's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Once themes had been identified, they were taken back to community members in playback sessions to be refined and validated.

Participation was self-selected, so these findings should guide decision-making rather than serve as a strict mandate.

Topline considerations

The service is valued, and the technology is not

Ninety per cent of service users would recommend NZ Relay to someone else, and satisfaction with Relay Assistants and Interpreters averages 4.24 out of 5. But the app or website is one of the most requested improvements: half of service users do not use the app at all, and technology accounts for 28% of open comments.

People are not using NZ Relay because it is easy or convenient

41% of users chose their services because they were the most accessible option for their communication needs, and 37% preferred NZSL. Only 7% chose the service for speed or convenience.

The service needs tangible improvements

Participants consistently asked for:

- A queue you can see.
- Hours that match when people need to call, including at night and in a crisis.
- Knowing who is interpreting for you, and being able to ask for someone you trust.
- Two-way communication.
- Web-based text relay that actually works.

There are nuanced considerations for technology

NZ Relay is free to use, but it relies on costly infrastructure. Video Interpreting Service users need significant mobile data, and broadband and equipment are a real cost. Participants said AI may have some role in the

service, but is not fit-for-purpose in many situations and should not be used for NZSL interpretation.

Registration for NZ Relay is cautiously welcomed

Interpreter safety was the most common reason given in support of registration (57%), while personal privacy was the most common barrier to it (50%). Participants wanted registration to be:

- One-time, rather than required per device again.
- Delivered in NZSL and plain language.
- Culturally appropriate, with a verification route that needs no documents.
- Two-way, not a burden placed only on the Deaf or disabled person.
- Paired with an anonymous route kept open for calls reporting crime or violence.

Most were comfortable with phasing out TTY, but most were not TTY users

63% of those who commented were comfortable with phasing out TTY, against 10% who were opposed. The community was clear that no one should be abandoned by a change, and that any phase-out must not be sudden or done without the people affected.

Tāngata turi Māori participants expressed a unique context

A culturally competent service is critical, including more Māori in the interpreter workforce. Cultural bridging is currently unpaid work done by the caller when an interpreter cannot provide it, and there is no agreed te reo Māori sign vocabulary or certification for interpreting into it. A registration model based on a driver's licence or passport would disproportionately exclude tāngata turi Māori.

Funding is the pre-condition

Improving the service's technology and delivery, and realising its potential, depends on greater investment.

The service needs to be more visible, and it needs a champion

The lack of community connection, visible outreach, and Deaf and disabled leadership has damaged trust and confidence. MBIE delivers NZ Relay at arm's length, and the service currently functions without anyone visibly in its corner, which has affected both quality and trust.

More detailed findings: How the service is experienced

The service is valued, but the technology is not fit for purpose

Seven of 43 open comments named issues with Microsoft Teams directly, and six people had stopped using NZ Relay because it was too difficult to access, with five of them moving to other tools instead. Future contracts need to look beyond high satisfaction scores: strong overall support for the service can mask issues that need dedicated attention.

People use the service because it meets their needs, not because it is convenient

Users cannot easily switch between communication channels because NZ Relay is often the only service that meets their specific needs. Poor usability becomes a major barrier, since communication cannot simply happen elsewhere. Text carries words but not tone or context; an interpreter carries the full picture of a conversation, so text-based services and video interpreting are not interchangeable. Even so, there is a clear need to make the service easier and more convenient overall.

Promotion and awareness are critical and currently missing

Around three-quarters of respondents wanted more advertising on social media and information through hospitals and GP clinics; 73% wanted more in-person education and relational outreach in the Deaf community; 69% wanted flyers and notices in community hubs. On average, respondents selected 3.53 channels each, the highest of any survey question, showing that no single channel is enough. One organisation said it "rarely hears" about the service, and about 95% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, so information often doesn't travel through family. Participants wanted outreach teams led by Deaf and disabled people. To put lived experience at the core of service design and delivery, rather than an afterthought, was imperative.

Calls need to result in communication

Participants are sometimes hung up on by hearing or non-disabled people who don't understand NZ Relay, or have their calls refused or treated as a scam; one NZSL submitter described banks treating Video Interpreting Service calls this way. Often the first voice on the line is not the user's own, it was reported, which adds to the impression that a call isn't genuine. Opting out of this is possible but not widely known, and people want the first

voice on the line to be their own. Educating the public shouldn't fall on individual Deaf or disabled people; it was emphasised; it should be a contractual expectation on the provider.

Text relay lost real-time typing and gained a double lag

Under the previous provider, web-based text relay ran letter by letter in real time, so the operator could start voicing while the user was still typing. The current system batches whole messages behind a send button, so every exchange involves two waits, a loss also felt in the captioned service. Participants want real-time typing restored and specified as a technical requirement in the next contract, not just an aspiration, along with predictive text for those using assistive technology.

The queue is invisible

Participants want a visible queue indicator across services, showing wait times and helping prioritise urgent calls such as those to mental health helplines. A "double queue" means waiting first for a Relay Assistant or Interpreter, then waiting again in the receiving organisation's own call queue; one participant described a two-hour wait in a second queue with an Interpreter held on the line. Participants proposed a "fast-pass" so NZ Relay calls move to the front of the receiving organisation's queue.

Users want to know who is interpreting for them

Participants want anonymous identifiers like "VIS01" replaced with Interpreters' first names, visible forward-rostering, a clear published conduct standard, and a transparent way to raise concerns. This sits within a complex reality: NZ Relay runs as a call centre, so demand is met by whoever is available, and letting people request specific Interpreters could overload a few skilled staff while others sit idle; rotation is also sometimes a safeguarding measure. A middle ground is needed, and any feedback mechanism must be developmental rather than punitive.

Ethical standards are applied inconsistently

Participants described variability in professionalism and impartiality, Interpreters whose personal reactions were visible on screen, and inconsistent understandings of ethical expectations. An independent registration body for Interpreters is in development, intended to hold both a complaints process and a professional development system, alongside new Interpreter standards.

The community wants 24/7 access

The Video Interpreting Service is the most used part of the offering: 66% of users had used it in the last 12 months.

Participants see 24/7 access as a matter of equity, not just convenience; the lack of overnight coverage creates critical gaps during events like mental health crises. But overnight shifts would draw from an already limited pool of interpreters, so participants suggested a pilot, noting that 24/7 provision is already being piloted in Australia. In the short term, a technical quality uplift, such as HD video, is critically needed.

Deaf Interpreters are needed

Deaf interpreters bring both language and cultural knowledge to interactions. As was reported in the example of a Deaf interpreter who was able to help an NZ Relay Interpreter understand a migrant caller who was still learning NZSL.

Privacy is the largest barrier to registration, and the platform is partly responsible

One NZSL submitter described having to disclose sensitive information, such as a driver's licence or bank account number, over video because there is no secure way to enter a PIN on the in-app dial pad. Users have also reported no confidence that conversation histories in Microsoft Teams are deleted after a call, raising fears that another Interpreter, or anyone else using the same device, could access private transcripts. When the service feels

unavailable, unreliable, or insufficiently private, people fall back on someone they trust to speak for them instead, which removes their privacy permanently rather than for the length of one call.

More detailed findings: Who the service does not reach

The service is organised around categories that people do not fit neatly into

Peak bodies said users have genuine communication needs that don't always fit the existing categories. As, for example, with stroke survivors who have hearing loss, changed speech, and affected dexterity all at once. One leader of a national learning-disability advocacy group found that none of the people her team supports used NZ Relay; for some people with learning disabilities who live independently but need help with particular conversations, the service could be valuable if it didn't risk them being dismissed for not phrasing a request in the expected way. An eligibility principle based on communication need, rather than diagnostic category, would serve people better.

Building services for a full spectrum

Participants who experience hearing loss, and think and speak in English rather than using NZSL, feel underserved

by current options; some submissions described this group as the largest and worst served, for whom Voice Carry Over and Hearing Carry Over are critical services. The withdrawal of the CapTel captioned telephone at the change of provider is repeatedly named as the moment people stopped using the service; screen size, fine motor control, and set-up complexity were the main barriers, and "too complicated" was the most common reason former CapTel users gave for not moving to the replacement. Submitters representing older New Zealanders argued NZ Relay should be treated as essential communications infrastructure, not just a disability support. At the same time, breadth must not come at the cost of the central audiences the service serves, or of Deaf culture: NZSL users' needs are materially different from other groups and risk being lost if all "communications-disabled" users are treated as one homogeneous group.

Deafblind users are at times not served by the current design

The system must not time out, disconnect, or treat pauses as inactivity, and Relay Assistants need specialised training in Deafblind communication, including tactile signing. Braille access must be a core feature, not an optional add-on. Some Deafblind participants who use tactile sign language tried but could not successfully use NZ Relay; "stacked" messages can push earlier text out of

view, forcing a scroll back. An accessible text interface should work with common screen readers and refreshable braille displays, be usable by keyboard alone, and not depend on visual icons, audio alerts, or messages that disappear. As one participant put it, accessibility can't be judged only by whether an app technically opens; it must be practical, understandable, and usable in real situations.

Cost barriers can be prohibitive

A service can't be considered fully accessible if the equipment needed to use it is unaffordable; one submitter noted that even a 50%-subsidised CapTel phone, at \$323, remains out of reach for many. Submitters called for equipment subsidies and funded in-home installation, configuration, training, and follow-up.

VIS requires increased data

The Video Interpreting Service uses more mobile data than an ordinary voice call. Participants without home or work wifi described rationing video calls, having them freeze mid-call, and reverting to typing to save data. Suggestions included letting telecommunications companies convert "call" minutes to data for Deaf people, and zero-rating NZ Relay traffic in the same way some government websites are zero-rated.

More detailed findings: What tāngata turi Māori told us

These findings need to be understood in context: tāngata turi Māori have experienced a dual suppression of both their identity as Māori and their access to Deaf culture and sign language. One participant described being made to choose between being Deaf and being Māori, rather than being able to be tāngata turi Māori. Cultural competency is a critical need for this community's whole sense of identity, not a courtesy.

Māori Interpreters are a critical bridge

Māori interpreters allow for Māori-specific concepts to be unpacked, rather than lost, within the interpreting, and there is also a pre-existing safety in the interaction; a Māori Interpreter creates one less barrier and less expectation that the Deaf participant will be the bridge themselves. Māori Interpreters are in constant demand, so increasing their numbers is only part of the solution; the next contract requires cultural training across the whole workforce.

There is no agreed te reo Māori sign vocabulary

Interpreters who can work across all three languages are scarce, and there is currently no agreed te reo Māori sign

vocabulary in Aotearoa. One participant described a Pākehā Interpreter simply stopping at karakia rather than interpreting it. A wānanga participant proposed certifying interpreting into te reo Māori as a safeguard against this variability.

Participants' sense of safety varies, and this should inform outreach

One participant said she felt safer in wānanga than in general Deaf spaces. Participants said Māori Deaf wānanga need to be held separately from general Deaf community engagement, and one asked for women-only wānanga specifically. Kai brings people together, and face-to-face visits matter; one participant proposed whānau outreach teams visiting households to teach hearing family members how to call their Deaf relatives. Building institutional trust with tāngata turi Māori is critical but will take longer than a single contract cycle: engagement has to be an ongoing relationship, not a set of events.

Identification documents create rather than solve problems

Many participants would reject a service requiring mandatory identification documents; one described a brother who would refuse the service rather than hand over official ID. Alternatives proposed include verification

through Deaf community membership, a code sent to a registered phone, and human verification of a signed video.

Recognition of the rural reality

TTY must be kept because it works over a landline without data, remaining usable for rural Māori Deaf people facing connectivity barriers and the cost of internet access.

AI has no role in carrying language or cultural protocol

Participants were clear that a signing avatar cannot hold a karakia, that AI is not culturally sound, and that it cannot substitute for NZSL interpretation.

Who appears in the service's communications has impact

Wānanga participants described the service's social media presence as intermittent, with the same few people appearing in its videos for years. They asked for more visible tāngata turi Māori presenters, more variety of faces, and content made to be watched rather than endured, because who appears in a service's communications signals whose service it is, and right now the signal received is that it is not especially theirs.

More detailed findings: What the service must not lose

Nothing should be retired until more engagement is done

Comfort among people who don't use TTY is not a mandate to retire it; retirement is only acceptable once transition support and functional alternatives are in place. Those who do use TTY were unequivocal about the impact: one survey respondent said they would "likely stop using NZ Relay altogether", and some argued no one should be forced to adopt new technology just to keep the access they already have. New Zealand's landline network is itself being phased out, so TTY will eventually be retired regardless; remaining users should be traced through equipment distributors rather than through digital notices or website updates alone. No service should be retired within this contract cycle: as submitters put it, NZ Relay services should never be considered through an economic lens, only through the needs of the person.

Emergency access is not equivalent

Participants said emergency calls should be:

- Automatically prioritised.
- Presented to all available positions.

- Returned to the front of the queue if put on hold.
- Recorded and retained on the same basis as voice emergency calls, following international benchmarks like the UK's 999 BSL service.

Placing emergency access behind a registration process would fail people who acquire a disability suddenly, overseas visitors, and anyone forced to use a stranger's device in a crisis. Users reported wait times of up to fifteen minutes for text responses, and cases where health-alarm activations went unanswered; without an accessible non-emergency route on the 105 model, urgent-but-not-critical calls are forced down the same path as genuine emergencies.

The service is one-directional, but conversation is not

As one user put it, the service functions as "half a relay service": outbound calls are easy to place, but there is no easy way for a hearing or non-disabled person to call back. Participants described receiving calls from unknown numbers with no indication of who was calling, and not answering as a result. In Norway, every user has a national number, and interpreters are bridged into inbound calls automatically, producing much more balanced use. Submitters want personal, portable national telephone numbers for every user, which would also solve the

problem of calls being refused as unknown or scam numbers.

Funding is the precondition for everything else

Submissions called for workforce investment, improved (HD) video quality, equipment subsidies, funded in-home support, and outreach that is properly resourced rather than aspirational; all of which require investment. Two submissions proposed specific mechanisms: increasing the Telecommunications Development Levy, and weighting the tender evaluation mostly on user requirements.

More detailed findings:

Governance, trust, and the terms of the contract

Contract terms need to be openly defined

Peak bodies want the terms of the contract, including the provider's right to "modify, suspend or restrict" the service and what counts as genuine use, openly defined. The total absence of published performance metrics feeds mistrust; a provider with no published metrics cannot be held to a standard. Participants want clear, public definitions of key

terms and contract boundaries; a published dataset covering wait times, abandoned calls, technical failures, and service resilience; and a complaint route that sits outside the provider.

The advisory group needs to be re-established, with real influence

The current provider no longer has a community advisory group. Beyond simply existing, any future group needs real influence, and MBIE needs to be involved in setting the expectation that its input is meaningful.

Employment and governance

Hiring Deaf and disabled staff is a necessary first step, but it isn't the same as empowering Deaf and disabled governance; submitters described Deaf people as the guardians of NZSL. A recurring theme was that the current service, designed by hearing professionals, lacks a nuanced understanding of the community it serves; lived experience should shape how the service is designed, not only how it is delivered.

Microsoft Teams is a barrier in its own right

One submitter said creating an account took around 90 minutes and assumed a level of digital competency some

people don't have; others reported being unable to keep separate personal and work accounts. There is broad agreement that Microsoft Teams is not well-suited to the service, and participants with closer subject-matter knowledge felt that intellectual property expectations may discourage bidders from building bespoke, accessible solutions.

AI is rejected for language, but could have a role elsewhere

AI or avatar signing is one-way, cannot take part in cultural protocols, is not culturally sound, and cannot replace NZSL interpretation; it was the least-wanted form of TTY transition support (15%). Some participants suggested other uses: an after-hours option for simple, urgent matters where the alternative is nothing at all; support with English grammar; and automatic speech recognition to remove delays in text-based services. The distinction is between AI as a substitute for an interpreter, which is rejected, and AI as a transcription tool for people who don't use NZSL, which is wanted in some cases.

Registration is cautiously welcomed

Participants did not want a document-heavy registration process, or one expected only of the Deaf or disabled person; models asking for limited information, rather than identification or documents, are preferred. Registration

must be one-time, fully accessible in NZSL and plain language, and culturally appropriate for Māori Deaf users, with an anonymous route preserved for calls such as reporting crime or violence. One organisation proposed involving government-funded NGOs and community groups to support people through registration, since those most at risk of exclusion are least likely to complete it unaided; asking users to solve misuse through registration alone, as one submitter put it, "unfairly places the burden of solution-focused outcomes on the wrong group."

A path to personalisation

The lack of user data means every interaction starts from scratch, and the provider cannot proactively communicate with its user base. Registration could support saved Interpreter preferences, saved contacts, priority routing, and better understanding of call context, and is broadly accepted if it delivers a genuinely better, more personalised service, provided the details are worked out with the community.

The community wants an ongoing dialogue

This consultation should be the start of an ongoing dialogue, not a one-off transaction. MBIE must show its commitment to building trust through community

connection, quality monitoring, and meaningfully including service-user voices.

Conclusion

The NZ Relay service is vital to the people who use it. But people choose it because it meets a specific communication need, not because it is easy to use.

The community wants a service that is visible and accessible: a queue people can monitor, hours that meet real-world needs, the ability to know and trust who is interpreting, real-time text, and a genuinely two-way service that serves a full spectrum of users without losing sight of cultural elements.

Two shifts underpin almost every improvement requested. First, the current service is built around rigid categories, but impairments combine, change, and emerge suddenly, so future design needs to be broader, more flexible, and more inclusive. Second, a lack of transparency in performance reporting and outreach, and the absence of visible Deaf and disabled leadership, is holding back the community's trust and confidence.

Maximising NZ Relay's potential will require dedicated attention to funding and an agency willing to be visibly in the service's corner. The upcoming tender is the main opportunity to act on these findings, and where the tender diverges from what the community has asked for,

explaining why will matter for building trust and closing the loop.

End of NZ Relay Service Insights Report—Summary