GREYPOWER
NEW ZEALAND FEDERATION INC

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Submission by Grey Power NZ Federation New Zealand

To

Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE)

Introduction

Grey Power NZ Federation Inc (GPF) appreciates the opportunity to submit on the review of the New Zealand Relay Service (NZRS).

Grey Power represents approximately 34,000 senior New Zealanders through a nationwide network of local associations. Our members have a strong interest in ensuring telecommunications services remain accessible, affordable and reliable as they age.

New Zealand's ageing population means the demand for accessible telecommunications services will continue to increase. GPF believes the Relay Service should be regarded not simply as a disability support service, but as essential communications infrastructure that enables older New Zealanders to remain independent, connected, and safe.

Key Messages and Recommendations

1. **The future Relay Service must recognise the increasing prevalence of hearing loss among older New Zealanders.**

   Hearing loss is a common consequence of ageing and makes telephone communication increasingly difficult. Captioning technologies are becoming essential for many older people, enabling them to participate fully in telephone conversations, television viewing, and video calls, and increasingly face-to-face conversations using live captioning technology. It also allows them to receive weather and other emergency notifications.

2. **The Relay Service should accommodate people living with multiple disabilities.**

   Stroke prevalence increases with age and many stroke survivors experience both hearing loss and speech impairment. It also affects dexterity and mobility. Future relay services should be designed to support people experiencing multiple communication and mobility issues (an example is a tactile keyboard, rather than a flat screen) through simple-to-operate integrated solutions rather than requiring users to navigate separate systems.

3. **The Government should recognise the wider health benefits of addressing hearing loss.**

Hearing loss is associated with several age-related conditions, including diabetes, and is increasingly recognised internationally as one of the largest potentially modifiable risk factors for cognitive decline and dementia. Improving access to communication technology should therefore be viewed as an investment in healthy ageing.

4. **Financial barriers to accessing relay technology should be removed.**

   Many older New Zealanders rely solely on New Zealand Superannuation and cannot easily afford tablets or other smart devices required to access modern relay services. Where financial hardship exists, Government should provide subsidies of up to 100 percent for eligible users. A service cannot be regarded as fully accessible if the equipment needed to use it is unaffordable.

5. **Digital support should be funded alongside the technology.**

   Many older people are willing to adopt new technology but require assistance to become confident users. The Relay Service should include funded in-home support to install equipment, configure applications, provide training and offer follow-up assistance. This will improve uptake and reduce frustration and abandonment of the technology.

6. **Accessible telecommunications improve wellbeing and reduce social isolation.**

   Telephone communication remains one of the primary ways older people maintain contact with family, friends and community organisations. Accessible communications support independence, reduce loneliness and contribute positively to mental wellbeing.

7. **Reliable telecommunications are essential during emergencies.**

   Older New Zealanders must be able to communicate effectively with emergency services when they require police, fire or ambulance assistance. They must also be able to receive warnings of real or imminent emergency situations, such as weather-related emergencies, flooding, etc. Communication barriers during emergencies can have life-threatening consequences.

8. **New Zealand should adopt modern relay technologies.**

   International experience demonstrates that older users readily adopt AI-assisted relay services and captioned telephony when appropriate support is available. New Zealand's Relay Service should continue evolving to incorporate these technologies rather than relying solely on legacy systems.

9. **The Relay Service requires sustainable long-term funding.**

   GPF supports consideration of increasing the Telecommunications Development Levy to provide sustainable funding for a modern Relay Service. This could be achieved through either a very small charge across telecommunications services or through industry contributions as part of providers' responsibility to support essential national communications infrastructure.

Conclusion

The next generation of the New Zealand Relay Service should:

- recognise the growing prevalence of hearing loss among older New Zealanders;
- accommodate people living with multiple communication disabilities;
- remove financial barriers to accessing suitable technology;
- provide funded in-home digital support;
- support independence, safety and social connectedness;
- incorporate modern AI-assisted captioning technologies; and
- be supported by a sustainable long-term funding model that ensures no eligible New Zealander is excluded because of cost.

Communications are fundamental to participation in modern society. As New Zealand's population ages, a modern, accessible Relay Service will become an increasingly important public service that enables older New Zealanders to remain connected, independent and safe.

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