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NZ Relay Project Team

ICT Policy & Programmes

Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment

By email: RelayConsultation@mbie.govt.nz

Tēnā koutou

Submission on the Future of the NZ Relay Service

Introduction

Deaf Aotearoa is the national Deaf-led organisation representing the interests of Deaf people across 14 locations throughout the country. Our organisation is also the largest provider of services to the Deaf community, with a key service being iSign, a national NZSL interpreting service. As a reminder, and in the interests of transparency, Deaf Aotearoa submitted a bid for the Relay Service contract during the previous RFP in 2019. Despite being unsuccessful in that process, we have provided significant support to the current provider throughout the six years they have been providing the service. At this point, we are undecided as to whether we will take part in the upcoming RFP.

This submission focuses specifically on the needs of Deaf people whose first or preferred language is New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), a group whose need for the Relay Service is materially different from other users of the service, and whose needs risk being lost within a consultation process that treats all 'communications-disabled' users as a single, homogenous group.

We welcome MBIE's decision to seek community input ahead of the next Relay Service procurement. Because this service is only reviewed around once a decade, we encourage MBIE to treat this submission as the start of an ongoing relationship with Deaf Aotearoa and the Deaf community, not a one-off exercise.

Topic 1: Current services and how NZSL users experience them

For Deaf people who use NZSL as their first language, the Video Interpreter Service (VIS) is the only genuinely equivalent relay option available. Every other current service (text relay, captioned relay, speech-to-speech, and the various obsolete TTY-based services) is built around English literacy or spoken English, not NZSL. Reporting usage across all these services as a single combined figure, as the current consultation document does, risks masking how essential VIS is to this community, and how far short it still falls of a genuine telephone-equivalent standard.

In its current form, VIS has three structural limitations for NZSL users:

- It is effectively one-directional. A Deaf person can call out through the relay centre, but a hearing caller cannot easily initiate a call to a Deaf person's own number, because VIS calls are not carried on the national telephone numbering plan and are not integrated into the NZ Relay app.

- It runs restricted hours, for example, reduced weekend availability, unlike an ordinary telephone service, which is available at any hour. Deaf people should not have less access to urgent or personal calls simply because they fall outside a service window a hearing caller doesn't need to think about.

- Interpreting quality and continuity are inconsistent, as there is no guaranteed matching of interpreter skill to the complexity of the call, health, legal, or education matters in particular.

- Separate from, but directly linked to, the quantity and experience of interpreters, is the need for significant government investment in attracting new people to the workforce and retaining qualified interpreters in the profession.

- Inclusion of Real Time Text is important for any mid-call clarification that may be required, for example to confirm bank account details or other such information that may be requested by utility providers.

We encourage MBIE to build the next contract around a genuinely two-way, direct-dial video relay service, with each Deaf user assigned their own national telephone number, and a qualified interpreter automatically bridged into the call before the hearing party is called – the model already operating successfully in Norway and comparable countries. This is not a 'nice to have'; it is the difference between a relay service and telephone-equivalent access for NZSL users.

Topic 2: Misuse

We understand MBIE's concern about misuse of the service by people outside the community, and the impact this has on the safety and wellbeing of interpreters. For NZSL users specifically, a registration model tied to a personal app number that authenticates automatically rather than requiring repeated manual log-ins would meaningfully reduce misuse without adding a real barrier for Deaf users, most of whom already use a smartphone or tablet daily.

We ask MBIE to ensure that any registration process:

- Is available in NZSL, not only in English, at every step: application, identity verification, and help desk support.

- Does not require Deaf people to prove their identity through hearing-oriented channels, such as a voice phone verification call, that they cannot use.

- Is supported in practice by NGOs such as Deaf Aotearoa, Deaf Societies (Deaf Clubs), Hearing NZ and others who are trusted within the community and already provide this kind of hands-on assistance, but only where this work is properly and separately funded, since NGOs do not have the capacity to absorb it.

Alignment with the NZSL Strategy 2026–2036

The Relay Service sits squarely within at least two of the five priority areas of the NZSL Strategy 2026–2036:

- Deaf and NZSL workforce: A telephone-equivalent VIS depends on a sufficient supply of qualified NZSL/English interpreters, matched to call complexity and protected from burnout. The next Relay Service contract is an opportunity to grow demand for, and investment in, professional NZSL interpreting capacity.

- Public Sector: Equitable telephone access is a basic public service. A relay service that cannot support a Deaf person calling their GP, a government agency (with the ability to request a call-back from agencies such as MSD when wait times are lengthy), or 111 with the same ease as a hearing person falls short of the Strategy's ambition for NZSL users to participate fully and equally in New Zealand life.

Technology and workforce quality

We ask that any future contract require:

- High-definition video. Video quality is felt directly by both interpreters and Deaf NZSL users. Poor-quality video increases concentration fatigue and the risk of burnout in a workforce that is already in short supply.

- Equivalent, prioritised access to 111 for NZSL users, with calls recorded and retained in the same way as emergency calls from hearing callers.

Funding

A telephone-equivalent VIS for NZSL users cannot be delivered within a static or declining budget. We support a substantial funding uplift for the next contract period, and encourage MBIE to prepare a genuine cost-benefit case that captures the wider value of this investment, including increased workforce participation, reduced social isolation, and better outcomes for Deaf people, rather than treating this procurement as a narrow technology purchase. The upcoming procurement is as much a social services procurement as it is a technology procurement.

Recommendations

1. Build the next Relay Service contract around a telephone-equivalent VIS: two-way, direct-dial, with a national telephone number for every Deaf user.

2. Fund and require high-definition video and fully integrated audio, video and Real Time Text technology in accordance with ITU-T standards, prioritising interpreter wellbeing alongside user experience.

3. Ensure any registration or identity-verification process is available in NZSL and does not depend on hearing-oriented verification channels.

4. Fund NGOs adequately to support Deaf users through registration, onboarding, and first use of new technology.

5. Guarantee prioritised, recorded, equivalent access to 111 for NZSL users. The United Kingdom provides 24/7 British Sign Language emergency calls. We recommend you view their website for further information 999 BSL.

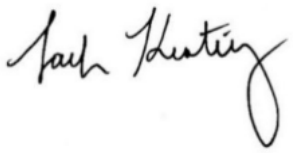
6. Commission a genuine cost-benefit analysis capturing the social and economic value of a modern relay service, not only its technology.

7. Significantly increase promotion of the relay service, along with hands-on, in-person training and support for users.

8. Prioritise NZSL interpreter wellbeing, as this has a direct impact on the quality of interpreting services received by Deaf people. Interpreting is a role that can be physically, emotionally and mentally taxing. Supporting this workforce to remain fit and healthy is critical. Research conducted by two psychiatrists at the University of Rochester Medical Center, presented at the National Symposium on Video Interpreting in Washington, DC, found that sign language interpreting ranks as the second most physically and mentally demanding profession, surpassed only by nursing.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission further.

Nāku noa, nā



Lachlan Keating

Chief Executive

Deaf Aotearoa