July 2026

NZ Relay Project Team
ICT Policy & Programmes
Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment

Blind Citizens NZ

Emailed to: RelayConsultation@mbie.govt.nz

Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand
Submission on: The Future of the NZ Relay Service

1. About the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc

Founded in 1945, the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc (Blind Citizens NZ) is a disabled people's organisation (DPO), with Branches and Networks across the country. We consider that we are New Zealand's leading blindness consumer organisation.

Blind Citizens NZ exists to give voice to the aspirations and lived experiences of blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired people (blind people) living in New Zealand. We aim to achieve this by heightening awareness of our rights and removing the barriers that negate our ability to live in an accessible, equitable, and inclusive society.

2. Submission Summary

2.1 Our response to consultation on 'The future of the NZ Relay Service' primarily addresses the needs of those in the blind community who may also have intersecting disabilities such as being deaf or hearing impaired, having a speech impediment etc.

2.2 Blind Citizens NZ confirms that there is nothing of a sensitive nature in our submission that prevents it from being shared.

2.3 The opportunity to speak to our submission will be welcomed.

2.4 Contact about this submission should be directed to Rose Wilkinson either by email rwilkinson@blindcitizensnz.org.nz or phone 021 222 6940.

3. About Blind Citizens NZ's Submission

3.1 Blind Citizens NZ's submission highlights the need for the NZ Relay Service to support people in Aotearoa New Zealand who are deafblind, as well as blind people who may also be hard-of-hearing, have hearing loss, or have a speech impediment and rely on the phone to communicate.

3.2 We emphasise the importance of, and need for the NZ Relay Service to continue to provide reliable communication access and to bridge gaps that traditional phone or digital communication can't solve.

3.3 To meet the diverse needs of users and address unmet need, the NZ Relay Service must offer both digital and non-digital accessible options so everyone can use the service in a way that works for them.

4. Accessibility and Community Inclusion

4.1 The importance of maintaining the NZ Relay Service can easily be underestimated, particularly when user numbers appear small or the need is not immediately visible. Although the service already supports a wide range of communication needs, Blind Citizens NZ considers it essential to highlight several core reasons why it remains indispensable

4.2 Many essential services still rely primarily on phone-based communication. These include banks, government agencies, medical and emergency services, utility providers (power, phone, water), and organisations responsible for booking transport or appointments.

4.3 Independence and privacy are fundamental. When individuals must rely on family, whānau, or support workers to make phone calls, their personal information and safety can be compromised. The NZ Relay Service enables users to:

- manage personal matters independently;
- communicate without disclosing sensitive information to a third party, and
- maintain autonomy in daily life.

4.4 In safety or emergency situations, the NZ Relay Service is vital. It allows users to contact Police, Fire Services, and Ambulance, ensuring clear communication for people with speech impairments, providing accessible text-based options, and offering trained relay operators who understand emergency protocols.

4.5 Given that many deafblind people do not use New Zealand Sign Language, the Relay Service is essential in connecting deafblind users who rely on text or Braille with hearing people who communicate by voice. In doing so, it removes communication barriers. However, equally important is that the service must also ensure hearing people can initiate contact with those who rely on it.

4.6 Assistive technology must remain fully integrated and supported. Screen readers, Braille devices, magnification software, and similar tools are essential for deafblind users to communicate confidently and independently. These technologies make communication accessible in ways standard phone systems cannot.

4.7 Skilled relay operators help manage the flow of conversation, reducing cognitive load and stress for users. Beyond facilitating essential communication, the Relay Service also enables people to stay socially connected—calling friends and family, participating in community groups, and maintaining social wellbeing. For many, it is truly a lifeline.

4.8 As the Relay Service is refreshed, it is critical to recognise the digital divide. Non-digital, low-tech options must remain available for users who cannot access digital devices or who face affordability barriers. The service exists to make communication accessible, and that commitment must extend to everyone who relies on it.

5. Eligibility and Awareness of the Relay Service

5.1 The NZ Relay Service provides several communication options for people who are Deaf, hard-of-hearing, experiencing hearing loss, or who have a speech impediment. Some individuals may also need the Relay Service for a short period, such as someone recovering from a stroke whose daily communication is affected. Others with different disabilities or impairments, not only those traditionally associated with the service, can benefit from it as well.

5.2 In our view, there appears to be mixed messaging about whether a hearing person can initiate a communication with someone through the Relay Service. This is concerning especially when the person being contacted is a frequent service user. The information in Topic 1 of the consultation document states that “Phone User” services allow any hearing person to call someone who is Deaf, hard of hearing, or has a speech impediment. However, both hearing people and Relay Service users tell us that hearing callers cannot easily—if at all—access the service. This inconsistency needs to be addressed.

5.3 As indicated in our introduction, Blind Citizens NZ is a disabled people’s organisation comprising and representing blind, deafblind, low vision, and vision-impaired people across Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite this, we rarely hear about the Relay Service, which contributes to limited awareness or understanding of its availability and purpose.

5.4 Our understanding is that there are around 880,000 people who could potentially benefit from the Relay Service. While this figure reflects current need, the service must also be future-proofed. As awareness improves, demand is likely to increase. Additionally, many disabilities are age-related, and with an ageing population, more people will need accessible communication options. The refreshed service must be ready to meet these emerging needs.

5.5 Although procurement may well include responsibility for promotion and awareness-raising of the Relay Service, there must be checks and balances to ensure this actually happens. All available channels should be used to publicise the Relay Service, including disabled people's organisations such as Blind Citizens NZ, disability service providers, non-government organisations, and telecommunication companies.

5.6 MBIE also has a role in promoting the Relay Service through its networks, including employers. As stated on its website, MBIE helps shape a strong economy by delivering policy, services, advice, and regulation to support business growth. Two relevant responsibilities include:

- ensuring businesses have access to the skills they need now and in the future met;
- ensuring workplaces are safe and fair.

Promoting the Relay Service aligns with both responsibilities by supporting accessible communication and inclusive employment practices.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Blind Citizens NZ appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and acknowledges the extended timeframe provided.

6.2 While the consultation document is comprehensive, we strongly encourage MBIE to consider the full scope of what the Relay Service must deliver. This includes significantly improving promotion and public awareness so people understand what the service offers and how it can support them.

6.3 In line with the Government's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), particularly Article 9 Accessibility, and Article 19 Independent Living and Community Inclusion, barriers to accessible information and communication must be identified and removed. Equal access to communication is essential for autonomy, safety, and full participation in community life. The NZ Relay Service must therefore be fully accessible, reliable, and fit for purpose.

6.4 All information about the Relay Service, how it works, how to use it, and how hearing people can initiate calls should be in plain English and available in the full suite of alternate formats (Braille, large print, audio, Easy Read, and New Zealand Sign Language). This directly supports Article 9 obligations.

6.5 To assist guarantee quality and consistency, MBIE should ensure the refreshed Relay Service includes measurable performance standards such as response times, operator training requirements, accessibility benchmarks, and user satisfaction monitoring.

6.6 Government agencies, banks, medical providers, emergency services, and utilities should receive guidance or training on how the Relay Service works. This reduces

confusion and ensures service users and disabled people new to the service are not turned away or told to “call back another way.”

6.7 To ensure the Relay Service continues to meet real-world needs and adapts as technology and user expectations evolve, MBIE is urged to commit to regular consultation with disabled people’s organisations, such as Deaf Aotearoa, Blind Citizens NZ, and other representative organisations.

6.8 To build an environment of transparency and trust, Blind Citizens urges MBIE to publish regular reports on:

- usage statistics;
- service performance;
- promotion activities;
- feedback from Relay Service users.

6.9 For people who are deafblind, blind with hearing loss, or who have speech impairments, accessible phone communication is essential for independence, safety, and participation in daily life. The NZ Relay Service is a critical mechanism through which the Government meets these obligations. Failing to maintain, strengthen, or modernise the service would undermine compliance with Articles 9 and 19 and limit disabled people’s right to communicate, participate, and live independently.

6.10 Blind Citizens NZ urges the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment to commit to funding a modern, accessible, fit-for-purpose Relay Service – one that meets current needs, anticipates future demand, and upholds the rights of disabled people across Aotearoa New Zealand. Modernising the Relay Service should be designed in conjunction with service users and disabled people’s organisations such as Blind Citizens NZ, Deaf Aotearoa, etc. so it remains a reliable communication lifeline for everyone who needs it.