

# Towards an NZSL Strategy

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## Report on a survey of priorities for action on NZSL

Rachel McKee, Victoria Manning, Rachel Noble, Sara Pivac Alexander, Micky Vale

Report of a working group convened by Human Rights Commission, Wellington, NZ.

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### ABSTRACT

As a step towards drafting an NZSL Strategy, a range of NZSL stakeholders were surveyed regarding their priorities for action on the promotion and maintenance of NZSL. 140 respondents identified the top five areas of concern as follows: 1) deaf children's access to education through NZSL; 2) support for families/whanau of deaf children to learn NZSL; 3) better availability and quality of interpreting services, 4) promotion of NZSL in society; 5) improved access to govt services and information via NZSL. Respondents supported the development of an NZSL strategy and the need for more practical measures to realise the aims of the NZSL Act 2006.

## **Background to the survey**

The NZSL Act 2006 granted official language status to New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). The overarching purpose of the Act is to promote and maintain NZSL by provisions aimed at improving the inclusion of Deaf citizens (as per the NZ Disability Strategy). The Act provides voluntary principles to guide government departments in making their information and services accessible to Deaf people. However, there has been little strategic work accomplished that advances these aims in a practical way.

The Deaf community has some clear ideas about what is needed to ensure their language is supported. In response to calls for action following the NZSL Act, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) invited and facilitated a working group of Deaf community/NZSL stakeholders to take steps towards a NZSL Strategy. The purpose of a Strategy is to articulate key goals and outcomes in the maintenance and promotion of NZSL. A strategy can provide immediate priorities and guide future actions to address language barriers that result in severe disadvantage to Deaf people.

The working group includes members of the HRC, Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand, NZSL Teachers Association, Deaf Studies Research Unit Victoria University, and the Sign Language Interpreters Association of NZ. The group has no 'official' status or formal representative structure, and has no funding. It is a group of people from the NZSL community who are motivated and able to begin this work. The Strategy to be developed will be shared for wider community comment and input.

As a starting point in drafting an NZSL strategy, the group has considered the following relevant sources of information: the HRC's *Te Waka a Reo - Statement on Language Policy*, the *Māori Language Strategy* (and advice on its development and implementation), examples of sign language planning initiatives overseas, analysis of the submissions to the Select Committee on the NZSL Bill, reports associated with implementing the NZSL Act (mainly undertaken by ODI) and Deaf Aotearoa NZ's "Community Goals" consultations. These sources of information have informed the group about what a strategy might look like, and the specific issues already identified by the Deaf community for the promotion of NZSL.

## **The survey**

In drafting an NZSL Strategy, it was agreed that three key priorities should be chosen as the focus of an initial five-year plan. In order to select these from a raft of issues already identified, the group informally surveyed the views of the NZSL user community about their priorities for planning action on NZSL.

From December 2009 to February 2010, a short survey was distributed via email to a wide network of individuals and groups in the following categories:

- Deaf community
- Deaf NZSL teachers
- Parents of deaf children
- Teachers and related professionals working with deaf children
- Sign language interpreters
- NZSL students

The survey was written in plain accessible English and was also available in NZSL on Deaf Aotearoa’s website. It asked two questions:

- 1) *What are the 3 most important things that need to happen for NZSL? (Select 3, from a list of 9 possible priorities; see Appended)*
- 2) *If you have other ideas or issues that you want to share about how to make sure NZSL is supported, promoted and maintained in New Zealand, please tell us.*

## Response to the survey

140 responses were received by email between January - March 2010. The profile of respondents is as follows:

Deaf community <sup>1</sup>	101
Parents of deaf children <sup>2</sup>	10
NZSL students	10
Interpreters	9
Deaf Ed & Audio professionals	5
Unidentified	4
Hearing Impaired	1

The top three ‘NZSL Action’ priorities selected by respondents were:

		Number of votes
1 <sup>st</sup>	<b>Deaf children’s access to education through NZSL</b>	105
2 <sup>nd</sup>	<b>Support for families/whanau to learn NZSL</b>	69
3 <sup>rd</sup>	<b>Interpreting services more available &amp; better quality</b>	48

The first two priorities stood out in terms of level of support, reflecting significant concern across the sector about existing barriers to Deaf children and their families acquiring NZSL as a home language and being able to use it as a medium for learning in the school system. These two related goals for action were supported equally strongly by Deaf community members, hearing parents of deaf children, and educators of deaf children. The importance of

<sup>1</sup> Deaf community includes NZSL Tutors, who were not separately identified

<sup>2</sup> At least one parent response represented a group of parents.

these points is paramount in relation to achieving, (a) meaningful access to education (and better life outcomes) for deaf people from early childhood, and, (b) the maintenance, transmission and natural growth of NZSL as a viable language in home, school and community contexts.

The need for expanded and enhanced interpreting access was identified as the next most important area for action. This reflects current constraints on the provision and funding of interpreting for Deaf people in many everyday domains. Action is needed to address problems relating to interpreter workforce capacity, standards, funding entitlement, and service provision.

Other priorities were selected by respondents in this overall order:

4 <sup>th</sup>	Public promotion and awareness of NZSL	41
5 <sup>th</sup>	Public and government information and services available in NZSL	39
6 <sup>th</sup>	Establish a NZSL “commission” or guiding body	35
7 <sup>th</sup>	Language development – develop more NZSL vocab etc	31
8 <sup>th</sup>	Develop NZSL resources for learning NZSL	27
9 <sup>th</sup>	Research on NZSL – resources and information, etc	9

***Key points raised in comments about the top three priorities***

**1. Deaf children’s access to education through NZSL**

- Need to strengthen a cultural-linguistic perception of Deaf children in the education system (parallel with Maori strategies & resources)
- Deaf children deserve equal access to education thru NZSL
- Deaf mentors and NZSL resource people are vital to Deaf students
- Use technology more creatively for improving deaf children’s remote access to education through NZSL
- Support early acquisition of NZSL – pre-school, early intervention

**2. Support for families/whanau to learn NZSL**

- Improve early access to NZSL at diagnosis & early intervention stage
- Could use technology & online resources for giving families’ remote access to learning NZSL
- NZSL tuition needs to be freely and consistently available – currently at personal cost to family, and not delivered in a way to suit families. Not available at all in many locations .

**3. Interpreting services more available and better quality**

- Increase the range of interpreting appointments that receive govt funding - beyond current categories linked to health, employment, justice, tertiary
- Need more funding of interpreters in the workplace - current limits are disempowering: limit Deaf access to training, promotion, participation
- Increase awareness by agencies about the use of interpreting services
- Formalise standards of competence
- Develop training outside of Auckland

Additional comments about NZSL issues fell into two major themes:

### **Teaching and learning NZSL**

- Subsidy needed to keep NZSL classes affordable - and should be free to families of deaf
- Need to increase class availability, especially outside main centres
- ACE cuts have reduced NZSL classes – by programmes closing
- Use remote technology and TV to reach more learners
- Formalise standards of proficiency for NZSL second language learners
- Continued development of training & standards for NZSL teachers needed

### **Promotion of NZSL in society**

- NZSL Act needs to be extended to cover domains other than justice
- NZSL can be promoted via schools – curriculum and/or 'one-off'
- NZSL should be a compulsory element in school curriculum
- Increase visibility of NZSL in broadcasting (TV) – eg, language tuition like Maori channel, interpreted news, have an NZSL channel
- Make parallels with Maori promotion - strategies and resourcing
- Role of NZSL in Deaf peoples' workplaces needs better support
- Awareness work is needed, eg, in workplaces, via library activities

### **Summary**

Survey responses clearly indicate that a wide range of NZSL stakeholders would want a Strategy to focus attention on *improving deaf children's access to NZSL in the education system and the family*, and on *increasing deaf adults' access to quality interpreting services to enable equal participation*. Also strongly supported by the survey is the goal of *promoting awareness, tolerance and visibility of NZSL in wider society*. Overall, respondents' comments reiterate areas for action that have been previously articulated in community advocacy, government consultations and reports, and independent research on the status of NZSL users. Respondents expressed enthusiasm for the development of an NZSL strategy and the timeliness of consultation and action to implement the aims of the NZSL Act.

## Appendix: Survey Questions

[Preamble about the purpose of the survey]

The questions are:

1) What are the 3 most important things that need to happen for NZSL?

Please tick **three**:

- Deaf children's access to education through NZSL
- Support for families/whanau to learn NZSL
- Interpreting services more available and better quality
- Establish a NZSL "commission" or guiding body
- Develop NZSL resources for learning NZSL
- Public and government information and services available in NZSL
- Language development – develop more NZSL vocab, eg: for schools, universities, Maori concepts, etc
- Public promotion and awareness of NZSL
- Research on NZSL – resources and information, eg: dictionary, grammar, Deaf community, etc.
- Other? Please say: \_\_\_\_\_

2) If you have other ideas or issues that you want to share about how to make sure NZSL is supported, promoted and maintained in New Zealand, please tell us.

Key groups and networks to send this survey to:

Deaf Aotearoa NZ– all local offices and on website  
Sign Language Interpreters Association of NZ - members  
iSign (interpreting service agency)  
NZSL Teachers Association - members  
NZ Federation of Deaf Children and local parent groups  
Deaf Teachers - networks  
NZ Deaf Yahoo email group  
Kelston Deaf Education Centre  
Van Asch Deaf Education Centre  
Deaf Societies (local clubs)  
Deaf Education Access Forum participants