

Language Assistance Services Programme

What you need to know

What is the programme about?

Language assistance services - such as interpreting and translation services - are critical to bridge the communication gap and ensure people with limited or no English language proficiency, such as former refugees and migrants, can access the public services and information to which they are entitled.

Central Government agencies are working together under the leadership of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the Department of Internal Affairs on a multi-year work programme to:

- improve the quality, consistency and coordination of language assistance services provided across the New Zealand public sector
- provide equitable access to public services for those with limited English language proficiency
- future-proof New Zealand's public services to serve an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population.

This programme of work is called the Language Assistance Service Programme. This programme will establish a new, comprehensive framework for high quality, consistent and coordinated language assistance services across the New Zealand public sector.

This new approach will be underpinned by:

- a cross-government policy and detailed service guidelines to improve the availability of language assistance services
- new procurement approaches which will be simpler, more efficient and cost effective than the current systems
- new professional standards and certification requirements for interpreters and translators operating in the public sector to lift the quality and consistency of services.

The new model is being implemented in three phases (service design, implementation, transition) across 2017 – 2023.

What is the problem and who are the clients?

The programme implements the recommendations of two reviews undertaken by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment¹ and the Department of Internal Affairs in 2016 and 2015 respectively. These reviews found that while Government-funded interpreting and

¹ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2016) *Fair and Accessible Public Services: The Use of Interpreters and Other Language Assistance in New Zealand*

translation services are available in New Zealand, a number of barriers and gaps prevent equitable access to public services and information for people with limited English language proficiency.

Examples include an inconsistent use of qualified practitioners, gaps in language assistance services availability outside business hours, and funding issues in relation to government-contracted services.

Language assistance services are critical to bridge the communication gap and ensure people with limited language skills can access public services and information they are entitled to in a language other than their own. They are also particularly important for newly arrived refugees and migrants, some of whom have insufficient English language skills to operate independently, integrate quickly into New Zealand life and achieve self-sufficiency.

When language assistance services are not provided, or when these are inconsistent - or of a questionable quality, it can result in less effective public services, prolonged service involvement with increased costs for certain client groups, delays in the successful integration of former refugees and migrants, and compromised confidence in public services altogether.

What's the scope of the programme?

The programme will address the complete range of interpreting types and settings and translation services necessary for people with limited English language proficiency to access government and government-contracted services and information.

While a large proportion of people with limited English are former refugees and migrants, the Programme's client group also captures other well-established and settled individuals who may continue to need language assistance services to communicate effectively in particularly complex or emotive environments (such as legal proceedings or healthcare situations) and visitors to New Zealand when accessing essential or emergency services to which they are entitled (such as health, police, immigration, customs, justice and legal support).

The programme applies to all languages spoken in New Zealand by members of minority groups or communities within a majority language context.

Separate work programmes on Te Reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language are being progressed by the Māori Language Commission / Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori and the Office for Disability Issues. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the Department of Internal Affairs will ensure ongoing communication and information sharing with both agencies to ensure that the synergy flowing from shared approaches can be harnessed where beneficial.

Who's involved?

While the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the Department of Internal Affairs are co-leading the implementation of the programme, outcomes depend on input from all participating agencies.

An inter-agency working group (IAWG) consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, Department of Internal Affairs, Office of Ethnic Communities, the Ministries of Health, Justice, Social Development and Education, New Zealand Police, the Treasury, Oranga Tamariki, Inland Revenue Department, Housing New Zealand Corporation and State Services Commission has been established to provide cross-agency advice and input and ensures whole-of-government commitment and participation.

As the programme shares the governance structure of the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement and Migrant Settlement and Integration Strategies, decision-making is exercised by a group of Senior Officials from the above-mentioned agencies.

How is the programme being implemented?

The programme comprises three separate but interconnected projects.

Project One (Guidelines) is responsible for the development and implementation of the Guidelines and operates through an extended version of the IAWG.

Project Two (Procurement) is responsible for progressing the procurement-related aspects of this work including the new service delivery models for telephone and face-to-face interpreting. This project is led by MBIE Procurement and works closely with the IAWG.

Project Three (Standards) is responsible for the identification and implementation of a standards and certification framework applying to language practitioners working in the public sector. It works closely with the New Zealand Society for Interpreters and Translators, the Language Sector Reference Group (comprising language practitioner experts and provider agencies of language assistance services) and the Academics Group (comprising representatives from educational institutions).

What did phase one achieve?

The following outputs were produced during phase one (service design) in 2017 and 2018.

Project One developed a cross-Government policy and a set of Language Assistance Services Guidelines for Central Government Agencies and Funded Services. These Guidelines were adopted in 2017 and subsequently expanded to include New Zealand Sign Language in 2018.

Project Two produced a market assessment and business case to inform options for a new procurement model for central government agencies wishing to purchase language assistance services. A phased approach to implementation was agreed in December 2018, with a new telephone interpreting service being procured as a priority due to the cessation of funding for the Language Line telephone interpreting service in 2019.

Project Three developed a set of options and recommendations for professional standards for interpreters and translators working in the public sector and an associated certification framework. In 2017 a comprehensive consultation survey of practitioners indicated strong agreement with the set of standards posited – those developed by the Australian National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). The recommendation was for

the NAATI standards and certification framework to be adopted across the New Zealand public sector, and this recommendation was agreed to in 2018.

What happens in phase two?

The work programme is currently in phase two of implementation. Over the next two years central government agencies will:

- implement the Guidelines for Central Government Agencies on Language Assistance Services and Funded Services and develop and deliver training to assist with this
- implement a new procurement model to deliver language assistance services across the public sector
- set up the transition infrastructure required to bring into effect the NAATI standards and certification framework across the public sector by 2023.

What changes are coming up?

The Ministry for Business Innovation and Employment is leading the development of the new procurement model for central government agencies wishing to purchase language assistance services, together with input and advice from the IAWG.

The new procurement approach will be introduced in phases, with telephone interpreting services being tendered for this year, followed by face-to-face interpreting services in 2020.

On 1 October 2019 telephone interpreting services provided by Language Line will transition from the Office of Ethnic Communities' Language Line to a new provider. The new telephone interpreting service will provide access to telephone interpreters 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in a multitude of languages.

Access to the new service will be provided through an open syndicated contract in line with New Zealand Government Procurement rules. This has an impact on some agencies' eligibility to join the new contract.

More information about the changes surrounding telephone interpreting services is available on <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/cross-government-functions/language-assistance-services>