



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

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**Submission to the Justice and Electoral Select Committee on the
New Zealand Sign Language Bill**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 42 nationally organised societies. It has 33 branches spread throughout the country to which women from some 150 societies are affiliated. The Council's function is to serve women, the family and the community at local, national and international level through research, study, discussion and action.

This submission has been written by the Public Issues Standing Committee based on the comments from the many Branches who responded to the Action Item in the NCWNZ Circular.

This Bill is about the 'right to language' and thus a human rights issue. Deaf New Zealanders would have their specific needs recognised as a result of this Bill becoming law. In this context NCWNZ supports the Bill.

**Part 1
Preliminary provisions**

3 Purpose

The purpose of the Bill is to promote and maintain the use of New Zealand Sign Language. NCWNZ agrees that New Zealand Sign Language should be recognised and used in legal proceedings when necessary; that regulations should be established to set standards of competency for the interpretation in legal proceedings; and guidelines established for government departments in the use they should make of the New Zealand Sign Language in the promotion to the public of their services and in the provision of information to the public.

**Part 2
New Zealand Sign Language**

Recognition

6. New Zealand Sign Language to be an official language of New Zealand

NCWNZ queries whether setting New Zealand Sign Language alongside English and Maori as an official language is necessary in order to achieve the main purposes of this Bill. Members appreciate that the New Zealand Sign Language is unique, but it has the same roots as Australian, English and some European sign languages.

Some European countries, some states in the USA and provinces in Canada have recognised sign language as an official language. The concern of NCWNZ is the potential establishment of a precedent for other minority languages, perhaps a Pacific Island language, to claim recognition. Members agree that recognising New Zealand Sign Language would give confidence to Deaf New Zealanders to enable its wider use and allow greater understanding of the problems of deafness. Almost half the responses, however, queried the need for the New Zealand Sign Language to be the third official language in order to achieve this.





7. Right to use New Zealand Sign Language in legal proceedings.

NCWNZ gives wholehearted support for this provision, which we had assumed was already the case. It would, however, be merely paying lip service to the provision which will affect many families if sufficient resources are not made available to provide this service throughout the country by way of trained interpreters.

10 Reporting

NCWNZ suggests that the Minister should make an annual report on the progress being made in implementing the principles of this enactment.

Regulations

11 Regulations

NCWNZ supports this clause. As well, standards of competency for interpreters of New Zealand Sign Language should be established in the near future.

Conclusion

NCWNZ fully supports the recognition of the New Zealand Sign Language for use in legal proceedings, and over time, in the wider community. Opinion is divided, however, about whether New Zealand Sign Language needs to be a third official language.

Members understand that Deaf New Zealanders can make themselves understood overseas even though New Zealand Sign Language is very New Zealand specific. Many members felt that the use and recognition of an Australasian sign language, would have been perhaps of greater value long term. Such a language could have had specific 'add-ons' to cover the needs of Maori and Aboriginal cultures.

It is important that there are standards of competency for the New Zealand Sign Language to ensure interpreters function at the highest level. There is a shortage of interpreters and NCWNZ has concern about the costs involved in training sufficient numbers of interpreters and teachers of the New Zealand Sign Language given that at present two sign languages are in use in the country.

NCWNZ appreciates the opportunity to make a submission on this matter.

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