

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 language skills can access public services and information. Interpreting and translation services 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.

Government agencies are working with the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) on a comprehensive work programme – the Language assistance Services Programme (programme) - to transform the way in which New Zealand public sector agencies provide language assistance services to non-English speaking clients.

What are the problems the programme is addressing?

The programme was established to implement the recommendations of two reviews undertaken by MBIE¹ and DIA in 2016 and 2015 respectively. These reviews found that while Government-funded interpreting and 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.

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 is the programme's vision?

The programme's vision is to provide equitable access to public services and information for people with limited/no English language proficiency in New Zealand, such as former refugees and migrants.

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

How is the programme realising its vision?

The programme is establishing a new, comprehensive framework to deliver high quality, consistent and coordinated language assistance services across Government.

This new framework is underpinned by:

- a cross-government policy and detailed service guidelines to improve the availability and consistency of language assistance services;
- new service delivery models which will be simpler, more efficient and cost effective than the current systems; and
- 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 framework will be established in four phases across 2017 – 2024.

How is the programme structured?

The programme comprises three separate but interconnected projects.

The Guidelines Project will develop a cross-government policy, associated service delivery guidelines and training support to facilitate agencies' adoption and implementation of the Guidelines.

The Procurement Project will establish new service delivery models for key services to be provided across government, such as the new Telephone and Video Interpreting Service for the government (which was established in 2019 to replace Language Line) and new approaches to provide face-to-face interpreting (to be delivered in 2021) and translation services across the public sector.

The Standards Project will identify and introduce a new standards and certification framework for language practitioners working in the public sector. The framework developed by the National Australian Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) was chosen in 2018 for adoption in New Zealand. Once it comes into effect in 2024, practitioners wishing to work in the public sector will need to attain a minimum level of training and successfully pass a certification test - merely possessing bi/multilingual skills will no longer be sufficient to work as a public sector interpreter. NAATI will not apply to Te Reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language².

Who's involved?

While MBIE and DIA are co-leading the implementation of the programme, outcomes depend on input from all participating agencies. The programme shares the governance structure of the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement and Migrant Settlement and Integration Strategies.

² 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.

Decision-making is exercised by a group of Senior Officials with broad cross-government representation.

A cross-government reference group oversees the implementation of the work programme and provides advice on strategic issues to the Senior Officials' Group.

A number of working groups and expert groups provide cross-government advice and input into the programme's individual projects.

Where do I find additional information?

For additional information on progress with the programme you can visit the [Language Assistance Services section on the MBIE website](#).