

INQUIRY INTO AUSLAN INTERPRETATION FOR BROADCASTING

Organisation: Clerk of the House of Representatives, New Zealand
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Hon Matthew Mason Cox, MLC

Chairperson

Procedure Committee

Legislative Council of New South Wales

via: procedurecommittee@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr President

Submission on the Inquiry into Auslan interpretation for broadcasting

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Inquiry into Auslan interpretation for broadcasting, and for providing the terms of reference. My submission focuses on New Zealand's experience in providing simultaneous sign language interpretation for broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings.

Value of providing sign language interpretation

It is important for Deaf and hearing impaired people to have access to parliamentary proceedings. In New Zealand, approximately 4,500 Deaf people use NZSL (New Zealand Sign Language) as their primary form of communication.¹ English is not their first language. NZSL is a distinct language with its own grammatical structure. It is not signed English words in an English order. Many Deaf or hearing impaired adults have faced significant barriers in their education, which means that their reading comprehension skills may make English-language captions or transcripts unsuitable.

New Zealand Sign Language is an official language of New Zealand,² and all members have the right to address the House of Representatives in NZSL.³

¹ Deaf Aotearoa <<https://www.deaf.org.nz/what-we-do/translation/>>.

² New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006.

³ Standing Orders (NZ), SO 109.

New Zealand experience

In the New Zealand House of Representatives, sign language interpretation is provided for question time during New Zealand Sign Language week, the Budget Statement and leaders' replies to the Budget, and during debates of particular significance to the Deaf community and other significant debates.

The Standing Orders have not been amended to enable sign language interpretation. As Clerk, I have responsibility for broadcasting.⁴ The decision to provide sign language interpretation is at my discretion, though members may request that interpretation be provided for a particular item of business.

Our sign language interpreters are not participants in the proceedings of the House and should not be brought into proceedings or involved in subsequent discussions of proceedings by members.

In 2018, I considered expanding sign language interpretation for House broadcasts, to provide interpretation for oral questions every sitting day. After a trial period we went to the market for expressions of interest. The only organisation to express interest in providing the service withdrew from consideration because there were not sufficient qualified interpreters available to provide this new service and meet the regular needs of the Deaf community. Consequently, the rollout was suspended. We have been unable to find any alternative ways of providing the service to date, though I remain open to doing so.

Practical factors

Interpreter set-up

In New Zealand, the sign language interpreter works from outside the Chamber, in a separate room on the precinct. This allows for a better set-up, as we are able to limit background noise, equip the interpreter with a screen showing the speaking member, and have a fit for purpose camera set up. A chroma-key screen⁵ allows for greater control of the environment and clear definition of the interpreter's hands. A facilitator shares the space with the interpreter, and is able to ensure the interpreter is positioned appropriately for the best picture.

⁴ Standing Orders (NZ), SO 8(1).

⁵ A flat backdrop of a single colour (blue or green).

Broadcast

The sign language interpreter appears in a “picture-in-picture” (PIP) box positioned at either of the top corners of the TV screen, and takes up just less than 1/12 of the screen (see appendix). Our set-up does not support the option for viewers in our broadcast or streaming audience to minimise or remove the PIP box, so a compromise in the size of the box needs to be made—balancing our sign language viewers’ need to see the interpretation and all viewers’ need to have a clear image of the member and the information scrolling at the bottom of the picture.

Chamber

During debates where interpretation is provided, a screen in the gallery is set to show only the interpreter, for the benefit of NZSL users in the gallery. A smaller screen could be set up on any member’s desk if they required access to the interpretation. Previously, a Deaf member preferred to use a note-taking service to follow proceedings in the House. Her time as a member preceded the captioning of all proceedings.

Alternative mechanisms

Captions and transcripts

As discussed above, closed captioning is not a substitute for sign language interpretation. However, just as many sign language users are not fluent in written English, many hearing-impaired people are not fluent sign language users. Closed captioning and producing transcripts remain essential tools for reaching the hearing impaired community.

Broader use of sign language

Interpretation of House proceedings is not the only place where adopting wider use of sign language may help you reach the hearing-impaired community. You may wish to consider facilitating broader use of sign language in calls for submissions to select committees and in other engagement from both parliament and individual members.

You may also wish to consider ways to facilitate participation in proceedings for sign language users. In New Zealand, we provide in-room interpreters on request for submitters to select committees⁶, and committees may request simultaneous interpretation for a livestream. We have investigated ways to support video submissions for sign language users, in place of written submissions, but we do not have sufficient funding to provide this service.

⁶ Interpreting NZSL into spoken English and spoken English into NZSL.

I am happy to facilitate more technical discussions with parliamentary staff should you wish to explore any element of this submission in more depth.

Yours sincerely

David Wilson
Clerk of the House of Representatives

Appendix: Placement of PIP box

The screen is divided into 12 equal rectangular quadrants. For PTV, the PIP box occupies either the top left corner (#1) or the top right corner (#4). The placement of the PIP box is tweaked a bit inwards to prevent the edge being out of frame on differently shaped monitors.

