

28 September 2025

Submitted by email to disabilitystrategy@whaikaha.govt.nz

NZSTA Submission on the Draft New Zealand Disability Strategy

Focusing on Communication Access and Safe Eating & Drinking (Dysphagia)

The New Zealand Speech-language Therapists' Association* (NZSTA) welcomes the draft of the New Zealand Disability Strategy. We strongly support the Strategy's cross-cutting emphasis on accessibility, data, and workforce capability and its explicit recognition of tāngata whaikaha Māori and whānau.

Our submission focuses on sharpening the Strategy so that communication access and safe eating and drinking (dysphagia) are named, funded, and measured across systems.

Make **communication access** (NZSL, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), Easy Read, plain language, reo Māori), and **safe eating and drinking** explicit, cross-system enablers across education, health, housing, employment, and justice.

If the Strategy supports this, agencies must plan, fund, and report on communication access and safe eating/drinking. This will ensure participation, safety, and equity for disabled people and their whānau.

- **Name and require communication access and safe mealtimes across all sectors.**
- **Resource and procure services to ensure communication access and safe mealtimes:** interpreters, augmentative and alternative communication training and equipment(AAC), speech-language therapy (SLT), mealtime plans and carer and staff training.
- **Measure and publish progress**, including dashboards with relevant indicators related to communication access and safe eating and drinking (e.g., time to speech-language therapy (SLT)/AAC; dysphagia-related ED/admissions; interpreter/communication assistant uptake; modification wait times; track job retention for disabled employees where communication accommodations are in place (e.g., NZSL interpreters, AAC supports, plain-language processes, flexible meeting formats).
- **Consider the impact of communication access on all aspects of disabled people's lives**, including education, health, employment, housing, justice, social welfare systems, and interaction with the disability support systems.
- **Collect data in future census (or their replacement) on communication access and safe mealtimes.**

***Who are we?**

The New Zealand Speech-language Therapists' Association (NZSTA), established in 1946, represents speech-language therapists (SLTs). NZSTA supports over 1,100 registered SLTs nationally, and well over 95 per cent of the workforce are registered members.

The Association operates a self-regulatory process that provides for –

- annual practising certificates
- a clear scope of practice
- code of ethics
- complaints process
- programme accreditation of tertiary speech and language courses and the approval of international speech-language therapy qualifications to ensure equivalency with New Zealand standards.
- a structured supervisory framework for new graduates or return-to-practice therapists
- continued quality assurance of its registered professionals.

Speech-language therapists study, diagnose, and treat communication disorders and swallowing disorders. These included difficulties with speaking, listening, understanding language, reading, writing, social skills, stuttering, voice use, eating, and drinking.

SLTs work with people of all ages who have difficulty communicating because of developmental delays, stroke, brain injuries, learning disability, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, dementia, hearing loss, and other conditions that affect speech and language.

Many individuals have difficulties with both communication and eating/drinking.

Individuals who experience difficulties swallowing food and drinking safely can also benefit from the assistance of a speech-language therapist.

Speech-language therapists work in various settings, including schools, hospitals, courts, prisons, childcare centres, or a client's home.

Speech-language therapists complete a four-year bachelor's degree or a master's in speech-language therapy.

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