

Working with interpreters (NZSL and spoken languages)

This advisory is included as a short prompt for members who may not routinely work with interpreters. It is not intended to restate core communication competence, but to support consistent, safe processes where interpreting is required.

1) Why this matters

Access to interpreting is a safety and equity issue across services. The NZSL Strategy 2026–2036 is one current example of this broader expectation, and the same principles apply when English is not a person's first language and a spoken-language interpreter is required.

2) Focus for this guidance

- Use a qualified interpreter (NZSL or spoken language) for *high-stakes interactions (e.g., health, justice, safeguarding, formal education meetings).

* For the purposes of this advisory, “high-stakes contexts” refers to situations where communication errors, misunderstandings, or inadequate interpreting may significantly affect a person's health, safety, rights, informed decision-making, wellbeing, participation, or legal or professional outcomes.

- Avoid ‘workarounds’ such as informal signing, lipreading, writing-only approaches, or relying on whānau/family to interpret unless they prefer whānau. This can be a personal choice.
- Plan for interpreting: brief the interpreter, support good turn-taking, and allow additional time.
- If an interpreter is unavailable, record the steps taken and escalate the communication risk using service processes; respect Deaf-led expertise and scope boundaries.

3) Interpreters: when they are required

Strongly consider (and advocate for) a qualified interpreter for:

- Medical appointments, consent processes, and discharge planning
- Mental health assessments and safeguarding discussions
- Legal/justice interactions and decisions with consequences
- Education planning meetings and formal reviews
- Any context where inaccurate communication could cause harm

If an interpreter is declined or unavailable, document the steps taken and the interim risk-mitigation plan.

4) Working well with an interpreter (briefing checklist)

Before the session:

- Share the purpose, key vocabulary, and any sensitive topics (confidentially).
- Confirm seating/visibility and turn-taking.

- Agree how clarification will be handled (pause, check meaning).

During the session:

- Speak to the person (not to the interpreter).
- Use plain language, chunk information, and check understanding.
- Allow extra time; interpreting is cognitively demanding.

After the session:

- Debrief briefly with the interpreter if needed (terminology, process).
- Document interpreter details and any communication risks.

5) NZSL alongside AAC and other supports

Interpreting may sit alongside other communication supports (e.g., AAC, visuals, Easy Read, written information, communication passports) depending on the person's needs and preferences. Ensure roles are clear: interpreting supports language access; other supports may be needed for comprehension, participation, and decision-making.

6) Responding to unsafe 'workarounds'

- Escalate within the service using a risk-and-equity lens.
- Advocate for interpreting and accessible communication systems.
- Support the person/whānau to request accommodations in advance.
- Document barriers and impacts to inform systemic improvement.

7) Cultural safety and partnership

- For NZSL contexts, involve Deaf-led resources.
- Respect identity, language preference, and autonomy.
- Use culturally safe practice; recognise power dynamics and confidentiality concerns when selecting interpreters
- Avoid token use of NZSL in high-stakes contexts.

NZSTA note: This advisory supports safe pathways and does not replace local policy or interpreter service requirements. For NZSL contexts, Deaf-led language and cultural guidance should be followed.