

MEDIA RELEASE

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4^{to}10 MAY 2026
20 years



NZSL Week 2026: Honouring 20 Years of New Zealand Sign Language as an Official Language - and Still Advocating for Equity

WELLINGTON, Aotearoa New Zealand – 10 March 2026

New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Week returns from **4–10 May 2026**, marking a significant milestone: 20 years since NZSL was recognised as an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand.

This year's NZSL Week holds both celebration and reflection. For the Deaf and NZSL community, the 20th anniversary recognises decades of advocacy, resilience, and collective mahi - while also acknowledging the pain, barriers, and inequities that persist and continue to shape Deaf lives today.

NZSL Week 2026 continues under the theme “*an Aotearoa where anyone can sign anywhere,*” alongside the awards night theme “*A Legacy in Our Hands.*” The awards night honours the organisations, teams, and individuals whose commitment to NZSL keeps the language alive and growing in everyday spaces – celebrating those who are actively building the equitable Aotearoa the theme calls for. Together, they carry both pride in how far we have come and responsibility for what comes next.

“Twenty years ago, NZSL became an official language - but recognition alone does not guarantee equity,” said Deaf Aotearoa President, Craig Findsen. *“We honour our elders, advocates, allies and organisations who fought for our language to be seen and valued. At the same time, we are honest about the work still ahead so Deaf children and future generations can experience full access, participation, and belonging in society.”*

Over the past two decades, attitudes toward NZSL and the Deaf community have shifted. Greater public awareness and visibility - including NZSL interpretation at national moments such as government announcements and civil defence briefings - reflect progress that has been hard won.

However, systemic barriers remain across education, health, employment, and public services. *“NZSL is part of Aotearoa’s identity,”* said Lachlan Keating, Chief Executive of Deaf Aotearoa. *“This legacy sits in our hands now. Allyship means moving beyond awareness to action - embedding NZSL into everyday spaces, systems, and decision making.”*

Global leadership and language rights

This year's celebrations also carry international significance. Dr Joe Murray, President of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), will be in Aotearoa during NZSL Week. Dr Murray will attend several high-level meetings and attend Deaf community events, with his visit culminating in the NZSL Awards Night at Te Papa.

Dr Murray's visit coincides with the 75th anniversary of the World Federation of the Deaf, the world's oldest disability organisation and a global leader in Deaf advocacy and language rights. *“Language rights are human rights,”* Dr Murray said. *“The recognition of NZSL 20 years ago is part of a global movement led by Deaf people to secure dignity, access, and equality through language.”*



A shared responsibility

NZSL Week 2026 invites all people across Aotearoa to take part - not as observers, but as allies. Learning and using NZSL strengthens inclusion, connection, and wellbeing, and benefits everyone.

“NZSL Week is a celebration, but it is also a call to action,” said Keating. “When Deaf children grow up seeing their language in schools, workplaces, and public life, we are not just celebrating a milestone – we are building the Aotearoa that milestone promised. That work belongs to all of us.”

Throughout the week, Deaf Aotearoa will share stories that celebrate NZSL while encouraging meaningful, lasting change. We’re encouraging everyone to take a moment each day to learn a new word or two in NZSL. To learn more, find resources and get involved, visit nzsignlanguage.nz

Key facts

- NZSL Week 2026 runs from 4–10 May
- NZSL became an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand in 2006
- NZSL is an official language of Aotearoa, alongside te reo Māori
- Approximately 4,600 Deaf people and tens of thousands of New Zealanders use NZSL in daily life

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Join the conversation: #NZSLWeek26 #LegacyInOurHands #AnyoneAnywhere

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About NZSL Week

NZSL Week is held annually in May and led by Deaf Aotearoa. It celebrates NZSL, Deaf culture, and the ongoing journey toward equity, access, and language rights for the Deaf community.

NZSL Week is a time to honour the past, recognise the present, and shape a future where our language - and our people - can thrive.

To book an interpreter, please phone 0800 934 683, email bookings@isign.co.nz or free TXT: 3359.