**Speech: Minister Poto Williams**

**Introduction**

Tēnā koutou katoa, kia orāna. Warm greetings to you all and welcome to my hometown – Ōtautahi.

My name is Poto Williams, and I am the Minister for Disability Issues.

**[Describe yourself and what you look like]**

Firstly, I’d like to say thank you to Vaughan, Amanda, and the Taranga Turi Kāpō - DeafBlind Association New Zealand Charitable Trust for inviting me to open your second biennial Be Seen, Be Heard, Be Connected seminar.

I would like to acknowledge your patron Hon Ruth Dyson, and Trustee Don McKenzie. I’d also like to recognise Patrick Pink and Saul Taylor, from Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ, and acknowledge their important work with children with deafblindness.

Since becoming Minister, I have heard from disabled people and their families about how important it is to be connected, part of your local community, to have the supports you need to live a good life, and living in a world that welcomes you, where people’s attitudes are warm, friendly, and welcoming.

I know that for the Deafblind Community this is of the utmost importance and is reflected in the purpose of Taringa Turi Kāpō - DeafBlind Association New Zealand Charitable Trust.

I’m delighted to meet with you today, and I want to acknowledge all the attendees and the incredible work that the Association does.

Your leadership, advice, and peer to peer support for deafblind New Zealanders and their whānau helps to empower, connect, and inspire deafblind people.

The work that you do with other organisations across the blindness and low vision sector, as an organisation specifically dedicated to supporting our Deafblind Community, is vital.

**Reflection on 2022**

While we all know we have a long journey towards making Aotearoa New Zealand more inclusive and a better place to live for disabled people, tāngata whaikaha and whānau, we made some good progress in 2022.

I have experienced many highlights since becoming Minister for Disability Issues in June.

Earlier in 2022, the Prime Minister Right Honourable Jacinda Ardern, and other Cabinet colleagues, decided that we should have a new government organisation, a Ministry of Disabled People.

July was a very special month, as we celebrated the start of Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People.

Whaikaha reflects this Government’s commitment to the disability community, and towards the realisation of a true partnership between Government and disabled people, mana whenua, tāngata whaikaha Māori, their whānau, carers, and supporters.

And, in September, we were delighted to welcome our Chief Executive, Paula Tesoriero, to lead Whaikaha in their mandate to improve outcomes for disabled people.

Paula is a respected leader with a deep knowledge of the challenges and opportunities for the disability community, and she has been a champion for the rights of disabled people. I understand she will be joining you via zoom at this seminar tomorrow.

Many disabled people had been calling for this Ministry for a long time, and I acknowledge everyone who helped bring it to fruition and their dedicated advocacy.

**Whaikaha**

We know that supports can be fragmented and difficult to navigate. Even the fact that there are multiple eligibility criteria for different services can make it difficult to know what support services are available for disabled people and whānau.

Whaikaha is working to change this and is planning the transformation of the disability support system using the Enabling Good Lives approach for people across the motu.

Whaikaha will work towards providing clearer pathways to support, clarity on eligibility, and will progress work to transform the wider disability system, to enhance the mana and improve the lives of disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori, and whānau.

This transformation, and the Enabling Good Lives principles-based approach, will give disabled people much more choice and control over the supports they need.

$100 million in contingency funding was set aside in Budget 2022 to progress towards system transformation of disability support services.

This funding will support Whaikaha to take its first steps to national transformation of the disability support system.

This will include extending the Enabling Good Lives principle-based approach to more of our disability communities and their whānau, making it easier for people to navigate the system to access the funding, equipment, and support needed.

This approach will give disabled people more control over the supports and options they have for living the lives they choose.

Overall, through Budget 2022 we invested over one billion in initiatives specifically for disabled people. This included funding to:

* Establish Whaikaha
* Fund cost pressures for Disability Support Services
* Implement the Enabling Good Lives approach
* Expand community-based services places
* Provide payment to family members for support services
* Strengthen New Zealand Sign Language in education.

I want disabled people to have the same opportunities as all New Zealanders to achieve their goals, dreams, and aspirations.

Whaikaha will also work with other government organisations in a stewardship role to help make their policies and services effective for disabled people in areas such as employment, education, health, and wellbeing.

**UNCRPD**

Another early highlight in my role was leading New Zealand’s Delegation to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

This was a compelling experience with an international committee of disabled people who are advocates and experts on disability rights and the UN Convention.

Their recommendations will be vital to improving inclusion here in Aotearoa, and enabling disabled New Zealanders to experience the same rights and opportunities experienced by all New Zealanders.

I know that you will be keenly interested in our progress, and that disabled people in Aotearoa expect us all to give careful consideration to the recommendations.

I am now working with others in Government to think about what we need to do to put those ideas into practice.

Responding to these recommendations will build on our current government commitments and plans such as:

* The New Zealand Disability Strategy and Action Plan
* The partnership model of Whaikaha
* Our commitment to the rollout of Enabling Good Lives principles and approaches, and transformation of the disability support system
* And the commitment to progress the Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill.

The UN process was an opportunity to learn from the Committee on where further progress can be made for disabled people, and to recognise what we are already doing to promote the rights of disabled people in New Zealand, such as:

* The Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction.
* The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and in the Care of Faith Based Institutions.
* And maintaining our mechanisms to ensure the voice of disabled people and their representative organisations inform disability policy, service development and our approaches to implementing the Convention.

**Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill**

2022 was an exciting year, with a lot of work underway to create a better, more independent future for disabled people, tāngata whaikaha and their whānau.

We will continue this work in 2023 with further fundamental changes, to disability services and in areas that can create a more enabling society.

The Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill is an important legislative change and demonstrates a commitment by this government to help create a more inclusive Aotearoa.

For many years disabled people and groups such as yours have spoken about the issues they experience with accessibility.

Disabled people tell me that they have difficulty getting about on public transport, finding information that is accessible and easy to understand, and that buildings are not always designed for disabled people.

Last year we began working on the Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill to make New Zealand as accessible as possible. It will give us a better way to find out what disabled people think the biggest accessibility problems are, and the best way to get rid of those barriers.

The Bill, when it becomes an Act, will impact the accessibility of government services as well as the non-government sector.

Disabled people and groups such as yours have told us that if we can do this, they will have a better life and be able to be included in their communities just like other New Zealanders.

What is important about what we are planning is that disabled people will have an important role in leading this work.

The Social Services and Community Committee has finished receiving submissions. All submissions will be carefully analysed and considered, and the Select Committee’s commentary will be presented to the House by 16 May 2023.

While I won’t be able to take questions on the Bill as it is currently going through the Select Committee process, I would like to acknowledge DeafBlind Association New Zealand Charitable Trust, and all those who have played an important role in working with officials to develop the Bill.

**Conclusion**

In all this work we are on a journey, and there is much to do together - with disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori, families, whānau, allies, disabled people’s organisations, and service providers.

We need all of you to help us towards our vision of New Zealand as a non-disabling society – a place where disabled people have an equal opportunity to achieve their goals and aspirations, and lead the life they want.

Thank you very much for having me here – it is a privilege and I wish you well for your seminar and the conversations over coming days.