**Speech: Paula Tesoriero, CE of Whaikaha**

**Introduction**

E nga mana, e nga reo, rau rangatiratanga ma, tēnā koutou katoa.

Ko Paula Tesoriero tōku ingoa, ko taku tūranga mahi, he Tumaki mō Whaikaha - the Ministry of Disabled People.

Talofa lava, kia orana, warm Pacific greetings, e ngā reo tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

My name is Paula Tesoriero, and I am the Chief Executive of Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People. I am pleased to join you all today.    

Provide a visual description

My sign name SIGN 

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge Hon Poto Williams, Minister for Disability Issues, and your patron Hon Ruth Dyson who I believe were part of your opening yesterday.

I want to thank Vaughan, Amanda and the Taringa Turi Kāpō - DeafBlind Association New Zealand Charitable Trust team for the invitation to be part of your biennial seminar.

I am delighted to meet with you all and I am very sorry I cannot be there in person today, though I hope that throughout future engagements we can meet face to face.

I understand at the opening Minister Williams shared insights into disability sector opportunities and the legislative changes that are so important for our communities. This is something that Whaikaha will focus on and champion across Aotearoa.

From our discussions, and from your submission on the Bill, I understand your Association seeks a fully accessible Aotearoa, with an end to barriers to inclusion and full participation for disabled New Zealanders.

I want to acknowledge the importance of your call for an end to systemic exclusion of people with “dual sensory loss.” I echo your call of “be seen, be heard, be connected.”

I also acknowledge your commitment to striving for a community that is accessible for all, no matter the complexity of their impairments, so we can all enjoy full lives. I know from your Accessibility legislation submission that you are amongst those who often feel the most marginalised.

This kōrero provides a unique opportunity for me to connect with your community.

I would like to acknowledge your leadership, advice and support for the deafblind community and the work you do with other organisations across the blindness and low vision sector.

As an organisation specifically dedicated to supporting our deafblind community, Whaikaha will rely on your leadership, advice, and advocacy.

I hope today will strengthen the relationship between yourselves and Whaikaha. I am going to talk about Whaikaha, our mahi to date, and what exciting plans we have on the horizon, and then I will have time to respond to some of your questions.

Your theme of reconnecting resonates strongly with me and the team at Whaikaha.

For the Whaikaha team and I, today is very much about reconnecting, so we can work together to improve outcomes for disabled people.

Working in partnership is at the very heart of how Whaikaha conducts our mahi.

We are at a time of pivotal change, one that has resulted from your advocacy and that of others in our community.

2022 saw the launch of our new Ministry of Disabled People - Whaikaha.

We all know of the mahi, in fact many of us contributed to this in the build-up of this launch as part of the new health and disability system. We have learnt, and continue to learn, a great deal from this, and know that more change is needed.

An important part of this change process is to strengthen the voice of our community. Whaikaha is working across the motu to achieve this.

The regional Enabling Good Lives groups are examples of how we work more locally on this.

We want, we need true voices that represent the diversity of our community and need disabled people engaged in designing and implementing change.

**The association’s context**

The last few years have not been easy ones due to the COVID-19 pandemic, amongst other things.

New Zealanders talk about isolation, but few would truly understand the impact of social distancing where touch is critical to communication and connection.

Even fewer would have insight into the disconnect that you have experienced. We need to learn from you and these experiences people with dual sensory impairments faced during the pandemic.

I am grateful for the invaluable peer support Deafblind Association Charitable Trust has given and continues to give to members during these times.

There are lessons we have learnt from COVID that can improve our communication strategies for all disabled people, and especially the deafblind community.

Whaikaha will learn from these experiences, we must strengthen our use of alternate formats and explore how best to resource the timely delivery of these.

Please, if you have feedback, let our team know what works and does not work for you.

The skills and experiences of your networks will continue to be invaluable as Whaikaha works to improve our overall communication strategies.

At this time of change it is of increasing importance that disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori, whānau, and others have access to accurate and timely information.

**Whaikaha update**

I know many of you are very interested in understanding where Whaikaha is at, what our priorities are, and how we can improve outcomes for disabled people and whānau throughout Aotearoa.

The day I became Chief Executive at Whaikaha, I reflected on the privilege and opportunity this presented.

We are the first Ministry in the world to be of and for disabled people. I am grateful to the many of you who advocated for our community to bring about this change.

The aim in 2022 was to transition smoothly, support people to stay safe during COVID surges, and to improve connections with disabled people and tāngata whaikaha Māori, and their families and whānau.

Whaikaha has taken responsibility for the provision of disability support services, and now provides these to around 45 000 New Zealanders a day.

The NZSL and Office for Disability Issues teams now sit within Whaikaha, and they continue to comment on government policies, strategies, and Cabinet papers.

As a Ministry, Whaikaha is now moving from its embryonic state toward becoming fully functional in all areas of our work.

During this time Whaikaha has committed to maintaining more flexible carer support and has published the new Autism Guidelines.

A key part of this, we still have many more processes and policies to put in place, roles to recruit to, and a strategy to finalise.

We now want to look at how we continue to improve services for people with high and complex needs, and how we can streamline effective needs assessments and ensure effective services are provided.

Additionally, Whaikaha is providing cross government stewardship on disability issues. We are continuing to provide a strong voice across Ministries to ensure that disabled people are front of mind.

Most significantly in September 2022, Whaikaha was present in Geneva during the United Nations hearing on New Zealand’s performance against the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The recommendations from the UN will help steer our work in the coming years.

Whaikaha also continues to actively engage with the Abuse in Care – Royal Commission of Inquiry and with the Waitangi Tribunal Wai 2575 Health Services and Outcomes Inquiry. The learnings from both will be incorporated in all aspects of our work.

Our work with the New Zealand Sign Language Board, and the review of the New Zealand Sign Language Act continues to be a priority. I understand that members of the Deafblind Community utilise Tactile Signing and acknowledge that Tactile Signing needs stronger representation in these forums moving forward.

I would like to continue to engage with you about how Tactile Signing can be recognised and championed in New Zealand, to ensure that your communities voice is heard.

**From continuity to transformation**

With the disability support services now fully transferred from the Ministry of Health to Whaikaha it remains a priority for us to ensure the continuity of service provision to the people who need it.

Additionally, people are increasingly in need of a greater variety of support options; they quite rightly expect these to be available and Whaikaha must keep pace with increasing demand.

We know that COVID has contributed to difficulties with service provision. We know that services have struggled to provide what is needed, including support staff and interpreters.

Whaikaha is developing a Workforce Strategy to address this, and other challenges facing disability support services and the disability community.

We need to have services available in a timely manner, and we need to ensure the quality of this service provision nationwide.

One of our key strategies is to continue to work in partnership with the disability community and service provider allies.

These and other key aspects of our work will be combined into the Statement of Intent for Whaikaha. This document will outline our strategy and what we can be expected to deliver in the coming years.

**System transformation – EGL**

Underlying the Statement of Intent of Whaikaha will be the implementation of the principles of Enabling Good Lives (or EGL) across Aotearoa.

We know the choice and control this approach brings has a positive and lasting impact on quality of life of disabled people and their whānau.

We know EGL creates increased opportunities for disabled people to be more connected, and improves learning, offering a life with more enjoyment.

We know that these opportunities are not currently available to everyone, and that this contributes to the disabling nature of our society.

This year we will begin changes to the system and you will be part of this exciting change as it progresses further.

We know that these changes, as they roll out across the motu, work best when they are driven together with local communities.

Transformation to the disability support system must start with localised understanding of what it means to give disabled people and their whānau more choice and control, which is why EGL is deliberately a set of principles rather than a rigid government framework.

At Whaikaha, our goal is to ensure that the positive outcomes achieved for some become the experience of all. We know that transforming disability supports is complex and will take time.

We need to improve our understanding of the current experiences of disabled people and are aware that data is woefully lacking.

I know the notion of ‘if we are not counted, we won’t count’ will resonate with all of you. We are continuing to engage with Stats NZ and other key organisations to improve data processes.

We are also aware that choice and control requires information, and Whaikaha is working to explore how best to provide information to all disabled people.

This requires that we continue to partner with disabled organisations such as yourselves and service providers to ensure we have alternate formats and pathways for discussing and clarifying information.

It is understood, particularly for the deafblind community, that access to technology and re-dressing of the digital divide is of pivotal importance.

Assistive technologies are developing in their responsiveness and complexity at a rapid rate. Whaikaha understands the importance of providing access to emerging technologies, and the importance of closing the digital divide so that they can be fully utilised.

Through the transformed disability support system, we hope to ensure better access to these life changing technologies, and ensure improved communications, choice and control and opportunities for education and employment.

There will be many details to work through, and we will be doing this with the community.

The EGL principles-based approach will ensure Whaikaha stays on track. We must bring the EGL vision to life in a way that truly reflects what it is all about.

The EGL principles are not for Whaikaha alone. To improve the outcomes for disabled people in all areas, we must continue to challenge the whole sector to adapt and embrace these principles as this approach becomes how we do things across Aotearoa.

**UNCRPD and stewardship**

Everyone here will know the importance of transforming our disability service system.

You also know, as do I, that for Aotearoa to be a truly inclusive society, we need all of government to make change, we need education, health, transport, and local government to become partners in change.

I referenced this before, but as the capacity of Whaikaha increases, we will be providing leadership, stewardship, direction, and feedback across government.

This will be based not only on EGL principles and approaches, but will also embed the Te Tiriti of Waitangi and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We will be using approaches that are strength-based, mana enhancing, localised and promote choice and control.

Across Government stewardship is a key mechanism to bring about broader and sustainable change in community attitudes and responses.

We need to influence government, local communities, and private enterprise. We need to work in partnership and encourage them to do the same to maximise our impact.

Whaikaha wants an Aotearoa where social isolation is not tolerated, where disadvantage due to culture, abilities/disabilities, gender, or age is not considered acceptable.

This is what is needed if we are to meet the aspirations of the 1.1 million people of Aotearoa who identify as disabled.

The UNCRPD tells us, and Whaikaha is committed to, the principle of mainstream in the first instance. Our message is that collectively we can work together to make Aotearoa New Zealand a more enabling and inclusive society.

**Partnership**

Please continue to work with us, to build on the momentum these foundations provide.

Our relationship with you, and with other disability organisations, will form the foundation and the future work of Whaikaha.

We must get this right so disabled people and tāngata whaikaha Māori will genuinely be at all the tables, incorporated into decision making process, and designing the future, our future, designed by us and for us.

Thank you again for today, may it be the continuation of a strong relationship between the Deafblind Association and Whaikaha.

All the best for the rest of your seminar, I hope you can make the most of this networking opportunity and importantly reconnecting with one another once again.

Ngā mihi nui

Please now use this opportunity to ask questions and share your thoughts.