# Opening Statement

# New Zealand UN Examination Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

*2,829 words = 20 minutes (calculated at 140 words-per-minute)*

## Introduction

* Thank you Madam Chair.
* Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.
* Hello and warm greetings to you all. My name is Poto Williams and it is an honour to be here as the head of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Delegation to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
* I have been New Zealand’s Minister for Disability Issues since June this year and I am priveleged to lead New Zealand’s first dedicated Ministry of Disabled People – named Whaikaha.
* I would like to begin by introducing our delegation:
  + Ben O’Meara – Deputy Head of Delegation, from the Ministry of Education
  + Brian Coffey – from Whaikaha
  + Amanda Bleckmann – from Whaikaha
  + Fiona Carter-Giddings – from the Ministry of Social Development
  + Matthew Frost – from Whaikaha
  + Victoria Manning – from Te Puna Aonui
  + Hannah Kerr - from Whaikaha
  + And Julia Bergman – from the Ministry of Social Development, who is unable to be here in person but is following these proceedings online in New Zealand.
* Today, we will update you on the progress we have made in delivering on our commitments made through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilies since our last examination in 2014.
* More than one million persons with disabilities live in New Zealand, and the New Zealand Government is committed to building a more inclusive and accessible society to ensure they have the same rights and opportunities as other New Zealanders.
* I would like to make three brief comments on terminology:
  + First, I want to acknowledge that although internationally the term “persons with disabilities” is preferred,“disabled people” remains the preferred official term in New Zealand.
  + The term “disabled people” is a source of pride, identity and recognition that disabling barriers exist within societies and not with individuals.
  + Officials and I will endeavour to use the terminology “persons with disabilities” and apologise ahead of time if, through force of habit we use “disabled people”.
  + Second, the indigenous Māori name for New Zealand is ‘Aotearoa’, and New Zealanders use this term interchangeably with ‘New Zealand’, or use them both together as ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’.
  + Finally, the Māori term ‘tāngata whaikaha Māori’ is increasingly being used in New Zealand. ‘Tāngata whaikaha’ means people of strength, and was gifted to us by Māori persons with disabilities.
* In my opening remarks I will briefly touch on a few areas: New Zealand’s commitment to the Convention and our progress, our new Ministry of Disabled People, our Disability Strategy and Action Plan, the Domestic Forum held earlier this year, tāngata whaikaha Māori, and COVID-19.

### *New Zealand’s commitment to the UNCRPD*

* New Zealand has a strong domestic and international history of protecting, promoting and championing the rights of persons with disabilities, and removing barriers to inclusion.
* New Zealand is a strong supporter of the international rules-based system and is committed to upholding international law, international human rights and ensuring compliance with treaty obligations.
* We were honoured to take a lead role in negotiating the Convention. The Convention reinforces that persons with disabilities have the same rights as others. It is about making sure everyone is always treated with dignity and respect, and that no one is left behind - ‘*nothing about us without us*’.
* New Zealand chose to ratify the Convention because we believe that persons with disabilities should be free from discrimination and be able to live, work and participate in their communities just as others do - in New Zealand and around the world.
* As co-chair of the Group of Friends of Persons with Disabilities, we have a strong focus on driving collective action to advance the full participation and empowerment of persons with disabilities including in times of crisis and humanitarian response efforts.
* Our co-leadership of the bi-annual Human Rights Council resolution on the rights of persons with disabilities allows us to make further progress on advancing implementation of the Convention and progressing international norms and standards. We also support the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy and mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities across other human rights mechanisms.
* New Zealand is working with our partners in the Pacific to address the challenges that persons with disabilities face in our region, including in relation to climate change.
* We continue to support the important role that human rights defenders, civil society organisations, Non-Government Organisations, indigenous peoples, and multilateral partners play in advancing inclusive participation.
* I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge and honour the leadership and advocacy of your Committee.
* I also want to acknowledge Sir Robert Martin. The New Zealand Government was pleased to support the re-election of Sir Robert to your Committee and continues to support his participation in the work of the Committee. Sir Robert’s re-election in 2020 was evidence that his leadership and advocacy is respected internationally as well as in Aotearoa. While he is not participating over the next two days, I want to put his significant contribution to this committee on record.

### *New Zealand continues to make progress*

* Since our first examination in 2014, we have made good progress. At the same time, we recognise that there is much more to do to fully realise the Convention.
* Since becoming Minister, I have written to all of my Ministerial colleagues to express my expectations for the outcomes we need to achieve for the disability community, which will ultimately require an all-of-government approach.
* As a developed country, undertaking its second examination, I acknowledge that expectations for how Aotearoa New Zealand performs are high – as they should be – and I believe this forum will go a long way to helper us achieve these outcomes.
* I would now like to highlight the actions we believe should be understood as key markers of realisation of the Convention in Aotearoa.

### *Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People*

* On 1 July, New Zealand established Whaikaha - the Ministry of Disabled People to lead the national rollout of the ‘Enabling Good Lives’ approach, which focuses on providing persons with disabilities greater choice and control in how their supports are delivered, and by who.
* The ‘Enabling Good Lives’ approach was developed by persons with disabilities and their families, and people who participated in the three pilots, reported living better lives as a result of this approach.
* There is real evidence that giving persons with disabilities choice and control over funding, services, and support creates greater opportunities for participation and inclusion, and reflects the reality that persons with disabilities are the experts in the barriers that they face.
* The Government has committed $100 million through Budget 2022 to support the ‘Enabling Good Lives’ rollout across the country.
* While Whaikaha is responsible for the delivery and transformation of services for persons with disabilities, it has a broader purpose.
* The transfer of responsibility for services from our Ministry of Health to Whaikaha sends a strong message that the New Zealand Government is committed to the social model of disability.
* The full implementation of the UNCRPD, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and New Zealand’s founding constitutional document Te Tiriti o Waitangiwill be key in guiding Whaikaha’s work programmes.
* Whaikaha has the mandate, visibility, and is building its capacity to work across government and alongside persons with disabilities and their families to achieve several objectives:
  + First, lift the profile of disability and drive better outcomes for all persons with disabilities, by accelerating the realisation of the Disability Strategy, Disability Action Plan, New Zealand Sign Language Strategy and full implementation of the UNCRPD.
  + Second, lead work on cross-government strategic policy, stewardship, and public sector capacity and capability building.
  + Third, lead long-term transformative change to achieve equitable outcomes for persons with disabilities across all domains of their lives.
  + Fourth, support government agencies to incorporate disability perspectives and needs into their work to meet their own responsibilities to persons with disabilities and their families. A good life for persons with disabilities is achieved by an all-of-government commitment to disabled peoples’ rights and opportunities.
* The new Ministry has offices across the country and currently has 150 staff, which will grow to around 200 over its first year.
* The Government will soon be announcing the appointment of the permanent Chief Executive for the Ministry, someone who has lived experience as well as a strong background in promoting the Convention.

### *New Zealand Disability Strategy and Action Plan*

* Our key mechanisms for delivering New Zealand’s realisation of the Convention are the New Zealand Disability Strategy and the Disability Action Plan.
* Both the Strategy and Action Plan were developed through comprehensive public consultation and co-designed with persons with disabilities.
* Persons with disabilities who advised in the development of the Strategy advocated for the strategy to be written in “their voice”.
* I would like to acknowledge Victoria Manning who is here with us today, she represented the disability community as co-chair of the advisory group that developed the Strategy.
* The Strategy speaks to our vision, aspirations, direction of travel, and tells us what persons with disabilities have identified as priorities for progress and how those priorities should be achieved.
* The New Zealand Government recognises that strategy without action is simply not enough. The Disability Action Plan presents priority work programmes for government actions, and prioritises improved disability data so that, over time, progress on the Strategy is understood.
* The Action Plan is monitored and held to account through the submission of regular status reports, meetings between Disabled People’s Organisations and officials, and meetings between the Ministerial Leadership Group on Disability Issues and the Independent Monitoring Mechanism.

## *Domestic Forum*

* I want to acknowledge civil society and our Independent Monitoring Mechanism for their continued advocacy, monitoring, and identification of key issues.
* This year, New Zealand hosted our first domestic forum for our Independent Monitoring Mechanism, Government agencies, and civil society, to talk directly with each other about the progress that is being made to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.
* The information provided during the forum assisted the Independent Monitoring Mechanism to make a more up-to-date assessment of our progress in protecting and realising the the Convention.
* Equally important, the forum engaged over 30 government officials with questioning and civil society perspectives, focussed on:
  + how to make change across the whole system – policy, implementation, practice, services and supports
  + raising awareness of opportunities for improvement
  + and the importance of developing policy approaches alongside persons with disabilities and their representative organisations.
* The New Zealand Government recognises that every policy and service decision should be considered an opportunity to create a place where disabled people have an equal opportunity to achieve their goals and aspirations. We have put in place a toolkit to help policy practitioners to:
  + consider the needs and aspirations of persons with disabilities and their family.
  + explore the disability impacts of policy as they move through the policy process.
  + prompt thinking with key questions, examples and links to useful information and data.
  + incorporate Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the New Zealand Disability Strategy, and New Zealand’s obligations under the Convention into their work.

## *Te Tiriti o Waitangi, tāngata whaikaha Maori mō ngā whānau whaikaha*

* The forum raised important challenges and issues on how effectively disability policy and services works for Māori persons with disabilities or ‘tāngata whaikaha Māori’ across Government.
* Data and evidence that was not previously publicly available, highlighted that tāngata whaikaha Māori are not benefiting as much from disability policy and services as other persons with disabilities.
* If we are not realising the Convention for tāngata whaikaha Māori then we are not realising the Convention as intended.
* Over 2022 and 2023 the Waitangi Tribunal - a permanent commission of inquiry, will be hearing from tāngata whaikaha Māori and their families on how disability services have historically under-served and impacted tāngata whaikaha Māori.
* The Tribunal will consider the evidence provided by tāngata whaikaha Māori, Māori health providers, and the Government, and will make determinations that will inform the actions to be taken by Government.
* As a government, we must respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by tāngata whaikaha Māori and that those responses need to be developed with tāngata whaikaha Māori.

## *Accessibility*

* Many New Zealanders have been advocating for systemic accessibility improvements for decades as a result of experiencing significant barriers to accessing infrastructure, communication, information, education, and employment opportunities as well as public facilities which many of us take for granted.
* In July this year, the New Zealand government introduced The Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill, which includes monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements, and expectations for engaging persons with disabilities, their whānau and sectors affected by accessibility issues.
* The Bill creates an enabling framework focused on progressively identifying, preventing, and removing accessibility barriers that persons with disabilities and others with accessibility needs face, so that they have an equal opportunity to achieve their goals and aspirations. It does this in three ways:
  + Firstly, it establishes the Accessibility Committee led by persons with disabilities and their family to provide independent recommendations to myself, as Minister for Disability Issues, on how to address accessibility barriers and grow accessibility practices in consultation with technical experts and affected sectors.
  + Secondly, it strengthens Government accountability by creating strong, clear responsibilities for the Minister for Disability Issues, Chief Executive of Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People, and the Accessibility Committee.
  + And, thirdly, it builds knowledge and awareness of the importance of addressing accessibility barriers, and growing accessibility practices across New Zealand.

## *COVID-19*

* The world continues to change in ways we could not foresee back in 2014 - presenting new challenges and opportunities.
* COVID-19 has had a devastating impact both globally and in New Zealand and has exposed and heightened inequities across and within communities, including for persons with disabilities.
* The last two and a half years have been an intense period of learning for our Government. We have done well on many metrics, but there were many lessons learned.
* One such learning is the value of engaging persons with disabilities in monitoring and oversight and enhancing their voices in decision making.
* This was to ensure disabled people had choice and control, continuity of support to enable equitable public health outcomes, and access to support in a way that worked for them.
* I want to acknowledge that there were at times missed opportunities to ensure an equitable response for disabled people and their families.
* As we move forward from the impacts of COVID-19, we have the opportunity to “build back better” for all people.

### *The Royal Commission of Inquiry into abuse in State Care and Faith Institutions*

* As we speak here today, there is currently a Royal Commission of Inquiry underway in New Zealand, listening to the testimony of people with disabilities and their families on the harm experienced in institutions between the 1950s and the year 2000.
* New Zealand’s move away from the institutionalised care of persons with disabilities in the late 1990s has been important and the right thing to do. It was an important 2008 commitment to our Convention obligations.
* However, it does not take way the very real harm and hurt experienced by many persons with disabilities who experienced loss of personhood, family community, culture and identity, choice and control because they lived in institutions.
* This is a time to acknowledge the bravery of those who have testified to the Commission, a time to make a commitment that government, policy makers and service providers, at the very least, never implement in the future the flawed and damaging policy and practices of the past.
* There will be much more for us to learn as the Royal Commission deliberates and makes it recommendations.
* I have been following these hearings closely and have been receiving regular updates from my officials.

## *Data and evidence*

* At core of addressing many of these issues we need to ensure we have reliable and valid data.
* An increasing need for information about persons with disabilities living in New Zealand is driven by the Government’s commitment to:
* tracking progress in the implementation of the Disability Strategy
* monitoring and evaluating New Zealand’s realisation of the UN Convention; and
* informing disability policy development, service planning, and practice.
* All of Statistics New Zealand’s household surveys contain at least the Washington Group Short Set, allowing for data to be disaggregated by disability status.
* The data we have on persons with disabilities in New Zealand, tells us that much more is required for disabled people to enjoy what every other citizen expects, and also signals signs of positive change, such as new data which shows a significant reduction in the number of persons with disabilities aged 15 to 24 not in employment, education or training.

## *Closing comments*

* In closing Madam Chair, our delegation is here to assist the Committee and explain the progress we are making to progress the rights of persons with disabilities.
* We are here to learn, improve, and reflect on your feedback. We welcome your deliberations so we can consider and take action on what more we can do to progress the realisation of the Convention in Aotearoa New Zealand.
* While promising progress is seen across government there is still much to do.
* I want to again acknowledge the role of civil society and our Independent Monitoring Mechanism for their continued advocacy, monitoring, and identification of key issues.
* It is an honour to serve Aotearoa New Zealand’s persons with disabilities and to be here today to lead New Zealand’s delegation as Minister for Disability Issues.
* I want to finish by saying that while I believe we have made good progress to improve the lives of persons with disabilities living in Aotearoa New Zealand, we are on a journey, there is more work to do, and I look forward to the outcomes of this constructive dialogue to help inform our journey forwards.
* Thank you.