



The Accessibility of Services to Parliament

Fifty-first Parliament
Rt Hon David Carter MP, Speaker
December 2014

Presented to the House of Representatives

Contents

1	Introduction	5
	Role of the Speaker	5
	The importance of accessibility	5
2	Policy and consultation	7
	Government Administration Committee's recommendation	7
	Development of accessibility policy and plan	7
3	Physical access	8
	Government Administration Committee's recommendation	8
	Audit of physical access	8
	Mobility car parks	9
	Signage, accessible walkways and rest benches	9
	Security	9
	Reception counters	10
	Stairway between Executive Wing and Parliament House	10
	Lifts	10
	Assistance dogs	11
	New Zealand Sign Language	11
4	Public information	12
	Government Administration Committee's recommendations	12
	Parliament website	12
	Parliament TV	12
5	Other accessibility issues	14
	Government Administration Committee's recommendations	14
	Support for disabled members	14
	Out-of-Parliament offices	14
	Use of venues outside Parliament	14

1 Introduction

On 28 May 2014 the Government Administration Committee reported to the House on its Inquiry into the accessibility of services to Parliament. The inquiry was initiated to investigate bringing the accessibility of the services provided to Parliament into line with the principles and provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The committee based its investigation on the principle that Parliament is at the heart of democracy in New Zealand and should be accessible to everyone. It concluded that, on the available evidence, Parliament is not regarded as accessible by disabled people. It made a series of recommendations to the House of Representatives and to the Government that in the committee's view would, if fully implemented, make the accessibility of services to Parliament compliant with the United Nations Convention.

Role of the Speaker

As Speaker of the House of Representatives the control and administration of the parliamentary precincts is vested in me. The General Manager of the Parliamentary Service and the Clerk of the House are both responsible to me in the same way that the chief executives of government departments are responsible to a Minister of the Crown. The Parliamentary Service is responsible for providing administrative and support services to the House, while the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives supports sittings of the House and its committees and other matters related to House parliamentary proceedings.

Some of the recommendations in the Government Administration Committee's report were directed to the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk. The purpose of my report to the House is to respond to these recommendations and to inform members about progress and plans concerning accessibility in Parliament. The Government's response to the recommendations made to the Government in the committee's report has been published separately.

The importance of accessibility

In order to sustain and improve public respect for, and confidence in, our parliamentary democracy, it is important that Parliament is freely accessible to all New Zealanders, both in a physical sense and in terms of their ability to follow proceedings and to receive information from and about Parliament.

The Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service are committed to providing accessibility to Parliament that is compliant with the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I support this commitment and will continue to monitor and encourage progress in this area. The Government Administration Committee's report provides useful evidence about where we are and how to proceed. The Parliamentary Service has responded quickly to the report by conducting an audit of Parliament's accessibility, the results of which I have drawn upon in my report.

Considerable progress in accessibility is being made. Visitors to Parliament in 2015, whether actual or digital, will notice a number of changes that improve accessibility as the

year goes on. Not all the planned improvements are easy fixes. Some, particularly those that require alterations to the structure of the buildings or a substantial capital investment, cannot be put in place immediately.

I am pleased to report that Parliamentary Service tours and educational visits were recently awarded the Be Accessible silver standard for accessibility.

2 Policy and consultation

Government Administration Committee's recommendation

The Government Administration Committee made the following recommendation to the House of Representatives:

We recommend to the House of Representatives that it ask the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk to

- develop policies for accessibility, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- devise and implement a plan to address disability access concerns regarding Parliament, including those raised in this report and others that may be raised in subsequent consultation, and to report back to us on progress in twelve months
- consult with disabled people regarding all accessibility issues and upgrades.

Development of accessibility policy and plan

The Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk will lead the development of an accessibility policy for Parliament.

An audit of current services has been undertaken that will be the basis for the development and implementation of a multi-year work programme to improve the accessibility of services in Parliament. This process will be in addition to current initiatives to improve accessibility, and for which budget bids are currently being prepared.

To be effective and credible, the accessibility policy and multi-year work programme must be informed by the views and experience of disabled people and those who have expertise in this area. Therefore an accessibility reference group will be established. Representatives from the Office for Disability Issues and organisations representing disabled people will join Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk staff to form a group that will be centrally involved in the development of the accessibility policy and the work programme. The group will also influence other decisions that affect accessibility and will be a valuable source of informed ideas on how to realise our commitment to compliance with the UN Charter.

I will keep the Parliamentary Service Commission informed of progress on these issues and will seek the advice of the Commission on future developments.

3 Physical access

Government Administration Committee's recommendation

We recommend to the Government that it appropriate funding dedicated to making the parliamentary precincts and processes accessible for disabled people by

- providing mobility car parks close to the main public entrance
- providing appropriate signage, accessible walkways and rest benches in the precincts
- ensuring that information on the security processes is readily available at security checkpoints and on the Parliament website
- providing disability awareness training for security staff
- upgrading the reception counters to ensure full accessibility
- urgently upgrading the stairway between the Executive Wing and Parliament House to ensure full and equal access for disabled people
- upgrading all the lifts to talking lifts
- installing tactile indicators where necessary
- clearing the hallways and walkways of obstacles
- ensuring that the necessary contrast is on all glass windows, doors and walls
- providing toileting facilities for assistance dogs
- providing NZSL interpreters and live transcription services for parliamentary tours, select committee hearings, parliamentary functions, and meetings with members of Parliament.

Audit of physical access

Following the presentation of the Government Administration Committee's report, the Parliamentary Service undertook an audit of accessibility around the parliamentary precincts, using the expertise of the following organisations:

- Warren and Mahoney (architects)
- Be. Accessible (accessibility consultants)
- Batchelor Associates (security consultants)
- Cemac Commercial Interiors
- Otis Lifts.

The commissioning of such a comprehensive audit soon after the committee's report was received demonstrates the importance that the Parliamentary Service attaches to the issue of accessibility. The audit addressed each element of the committee's recommendation on physical access as well as other accessibility issues. It found that the accessibility of the precincts was generally very good, and contained proposals that addressed the committee's recommendations. This is an excellent starting point from which to raise good standards of accessibility to an even higher level.

This information will allow the Parliamentary Service, with the assistance of the accessibility reference group, to draw up a multi-year work programme, taking into account the urgency of particular proposals, the impact they will have on accessibility, and their

cost. The report on the audit was received only at the end of November 2014, so detailed decisions have yet to be made. In the meantime, progress on accessibility will continue as part of the normal work programme.

There follows a summary of the audit's assessment of issues raised by the committee, and of proposals related to its recommendations. They illustrate the range of possible courses of action that may be followed in the short-term or included in the multi-year action plan.

Mobility car parks

This is a security rather than a funding issue. A policy decision was taken some years ago that there should be no car parking on the main forecourt for security reasons. There has recently been a tightening of security around the parliamentary precincts following a serious incident at the Canadian Parliament. The security situation is under constant review, and the provision of mobility car parks close to the main entrance can be considered as part of that process. However, security must be a paramount factor. Arrangements are in place that enable visitors who might use mobility car parks to gain access to the buildings.

Signage, accessible walkways and rest benches

Be Accessible's report contains a range of useful suggestions for better signage in various places across the complex, particularly for identifying accessible routes. They also recommend the use of signs in braille and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). There is clear potential in these recommendations for improving accessibility for a wide range of people at quite a small cost.

The accessibility of walkways throughout the complex received a generally favourable report from Be Accessible. Possible improvements were identified in some locations such as the bridge between the Parliamentary Library and Parliament House, where it is intended that a handrail be installed. There were also recommendations about making better use of colour, for example to draw attention to a change of floor surface. Some recommendations are specified by Be Accessible to be part of the planned refurbishment and renewal process over a number of years. Replacing long-pile with short-pile carpet in all carpeted areas in the complex is an example. This approach has the advantage of achieving long-term improvement at little additional cost.

There were a number of locations within the complex where Be Accessible advised that tactile indicators would aid accessibility, and where more contrast could be in place on glass windows, doors and walls in line with the committee's recommendation.

The recommendation that hallways and walkways be clear of obstacles forms a useful reminder of good practice and is being taken into account as part of business as usual. The presence of such obstacles was not identified as an issue by the audit, except at the main entrance to the complex.

Be Accessible recommended the consideration of additional accessible public seating on main access routes to the main entrance area.

Security

Parliament's security staff perform a wide range of duties and have a good reputation for dealing with people in a sympathetic and helpful manner. Their training already includes elements of disability awareness. This will be reviewed and increased if necessary.

The provision of adequate information about security processes both at entrances and on the website is important. Both public entrances to the complex are fully staffed during working hours and when tours are operating, so appropriate advice and assistance is easy to find.

Reception counters

The experience that visitors have at reception will frame their view of how welcome they are. The reception counters at the main entrance and in Bowen House comply with the New Zealand Standard for such installations, but could be more accessible for wheelchair users. Warren and Mahoney have advised on changes to the counters that would make it much easier for wheelchair users to interact with staff.

Stairway between Executive Wing and Parliament House

The stairway between the Executive Wing and Parliament House is an accessibility issue. It is the main thoroughfare between the Executive Wing and Parliament House. People going from the main entrance to the debating chamber, select committee meetings and members' offices must use it or circumvent it, either by taking the lift to the first floor and crossing there, or by going outside and entering Parliament House via the rubber door with the assistance of security officers. This route is partially uncovered. It is highly desirable that the stairway should be accessible, as the committee recommends.

The report of Warren and Mahoney outlines alternative solutions. It advises that alteration to the building in this area might be complex, because it is a critical point for the seismic resilience of the building. There is also the need to ensure that evacuation routes are protected.

A conventional wheelchair hoist (a small, open lift in layman's terms) would not be an acceptable solution as it would make the existing staircase too narrow in emergencies. A recessed hoist would be an alternative. When needed, the hoist would emerge from a pit and part of the stairs would retract to allow it to function. Warren and Mahoney recommend further investigation of this solution. It would present significant engineering challenges and would be costly. No recessed hoist has ever been installed in New Zealand.

A ramp replacing the stairs would entail substantial remodelling of that part of the building, including the relocation of the west door. The estimated cost of a ramp is not as high as that for a recessed hoist, but is still considerable.

The most straightforward solution would be the purchase of a stair-climbing wheelchair. This would require no modification to the present staircase and could be in place quickly. It would require users to transfer from their own chair. The estimated cost is negligible compared with other solutions. The advice of the accessibility reference group on this issue would be useful.

Lifts

The committee recommended the upgrading of all lifts to talking lifts. Be Accessible made various recommendations about lifts including the increased use of tactile indicators, but did not offer advice about upgrading to talking lifts. It noted that the heritage lift in Parliament House might have its accessibility improved.

The lifts in the Executive Wing could be upgraded relatively inexpensively. An alternative would be to upgrade only the two accessible lifts. It is possible that this would meet the needs of users.

As Bowen House is leased, any modifications to its lifts would be subject to negotiation with the owner as part of a rent review. The lifts in Parliament House are reaching the end of their life and cannot be upgraded without a major overhaul.

Assistance dogs

The committee recommended the provision of toileting facilities for dogs. The Be Accessible report identified ample grassed areas around the complex.

New Zealand Sign Language

The right of members to address the House using NZSL is now included in Standing Orders following the adoption of recommendations made by the Standing Orders Committee in its report on the Review of Standing Orders 2014. The report notes that a number of practical considerations must be taken into account regarding the provision of a simultaneous interpretation service (such as exists when members address the House in Te Reo Māori).

... advance notice would be needed to allow the provision of a simultaneous interpretation service so other members and the public could understand what was being signed. We believe that, as no member has yet sought to address the House extensively in NZSL, it would not be cost-effective to have such an interpretation service always at the ready. This position would need to be reconsidered if a member were elected for whom NZSL was the preferred language.

The report notes that the Speaker could permit a member to have extra time to give a spoken translation from NZSL if prior arrangement had not been made for a simultaneous interpretation service. If this situation arose I would follow the recommended course of action unless there were a compelling reason not to do so.

NZSL interpreters are available on request for select committee hearings, parliamentary tours, meetings with members and parliamentary functions.

4 Public information

Government Administration Committee's recommendations

We recommend to the Government that it provide funding for upgrading the Parliament website to make more information available, to publish educational videos, and to ensure that information and videos are available in additional languages and accessible formats such as easy-read and large print.

We recommend to the Government that it provide funding for Parliament Television to provide live audio descriptions and simultaneous New Zealand Sign Language interpretations of coverage of the House.

Parliament website

The Parliament website is of crucial importance in getting New Zealanders engaged with what is happening in the Parliament that they elected. It must be an authoritative source of information about the House and its committees, provide channels of communication with members and officials for the public and allow people to follow what is happening in the House and select committees.

A major project is being undertaken by the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk to refresh the Parliament website, www.parliament.nz. Changes will be rolled out throughout 2015. The website will have a new look that will make it more welcoming and much easier to search and navigate. The aim is to make it accessible to all New Zealanders. There will be new features that will make it much easier for people to understand what is happening in Parliament and how that will impact upon their lives. These will include topic-based content that will allow people interested in particular issues to find relevant material. Information will be made available in a variety of forms. For example, the use of educational videos and animations will be expanded. These resources will appear on the website during this Parliament as funding allows.

It is important that the enhancements to the website benefit all New Zealanders, including those for whom additional provision has to be made so that they enjoy full access. The new website will make use of a range of technical enhancements designed to improve accessibility. Known issues that can limit the accessibility of websites will be addressed and there will be continuous review and improvement of usability and accessibility. Documents will be published in more accessible formats.

CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart), the software used to prevent automated submissions and spam, is being removed from online contact forms across the website. Select committee online submission forms will have an easier to use version with an audio alternative and phone contacts so that users will be able to engage with Parliament online without impediment.

Parliament TV

The Office of the Clerk has made a commitment to providing live captioning on Parliament TV during the current term of Parliament. The Office is in discussions with Able, New Zealand's television captioning and audio description service, about it

captioning Parliament TV. The captioning service would begin with oral questions and then expand to cover other proceedings. As part of the captioning project, the Office will also consider the provision of captioning on the on-demand video archive from Parliament TV that is currently available on the In the House website (www.inthehouse.co.nz). Captions on all on-demand Parliament TV would be available later on the day on which the proceedings took place, possibly as soon as within an hour of the live broadcast, depending upon the method used.

In the 51st Parliament it is proposed to provide more NZSL interpretation on Parliament TV to improve the accessibility of Parliament for users of NZSL. If a budget bid is successful, NZSL interpretation will be provided for important parliamentary debates and speeches.

5 Other accessibility issues

Government Administration Committee's recommendations

We recommend to the Government that it ensure that sufficient funding and support is provided to enable disabled members of Parliament to carry out their roles as elected representatives fully.

We recommend to the House of Representatives that members ensure that their offices outside Parliament are fully accessible, and that the Parliamentary Service help members to do so.

We recommend to the House of Representatives that it ask the Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service to ensure that all venues used outside Parliament are fully accessible for disabled people.

Support for disabled members

The Speaker's Directions for 2014 make provision for additional support for members who have "a physical or sensory impairment that is beyond the member's control". The cost of that support is met from the Additional Support for Members Appropriation.

In chapter 3 of this report, I outlined the arrangements for the use of NZSL in the debating chamber and select committees.

I am confident that if a new member with a disability were to enter the House, or if an existing member becomes disabled in any way, the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk would be able to provide the member with whatever assistance they needed to carry out all aspects of their role as a member.

Out-of-Parliament offices

The Parliamentary Service offers guidelines for members when opening their out-of-Parliament offices. These guidelines detail members' responsibility to comply with all necessary legislation and regulations, including the need of access for disabled persons. The Service is working with members to improve the accessibility of their out-of-Parliament offices.

Use of venues outside Parliament

The most frequent use of external venues for parliamentary purposes is for select committee hearings of evidence. These tend to be held in established meeting venues such as hotels and conference centres, which usually have a high level of accessibility and staff trained in meeting accessibility needs. Sometimes, committees meet in locations without a great range of possible venues. Accessibility has not presented problems on such occasions in the past, but steps will be taken to ensure that needs are anticipated in advance as far as possible. For example requests to be made aware of individual needs will be included in communications with people attending.

The accessibility policy will include the need for staff to consider accessibility when identifying potential venues outside Parliament.

The Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service are participating in planning to relocate Parliament in the event of a major earthquake, or similarly disruptive event that made it temporarily impossible for the House to sit in Wellington. Planning has taken into account the need to ensure reasonable levels of accessibility should a relocation ever be necessary.