blueprint
for learning

Ātea – Disability 101

Reduce barriers for tāngata whaikaha disabled people

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Mā te whakātu, ka mōhio
Mā te mōhio, ka mārama
Mā te mārama, ka mātau
Mā te mātau, ka ora.

Through discussion comes awareness
Through awareness comes understanding
Through understanding comes knowledge
Through knowledge comes wellbeing.

(Whakatauākī written by Pā Henare Tate)

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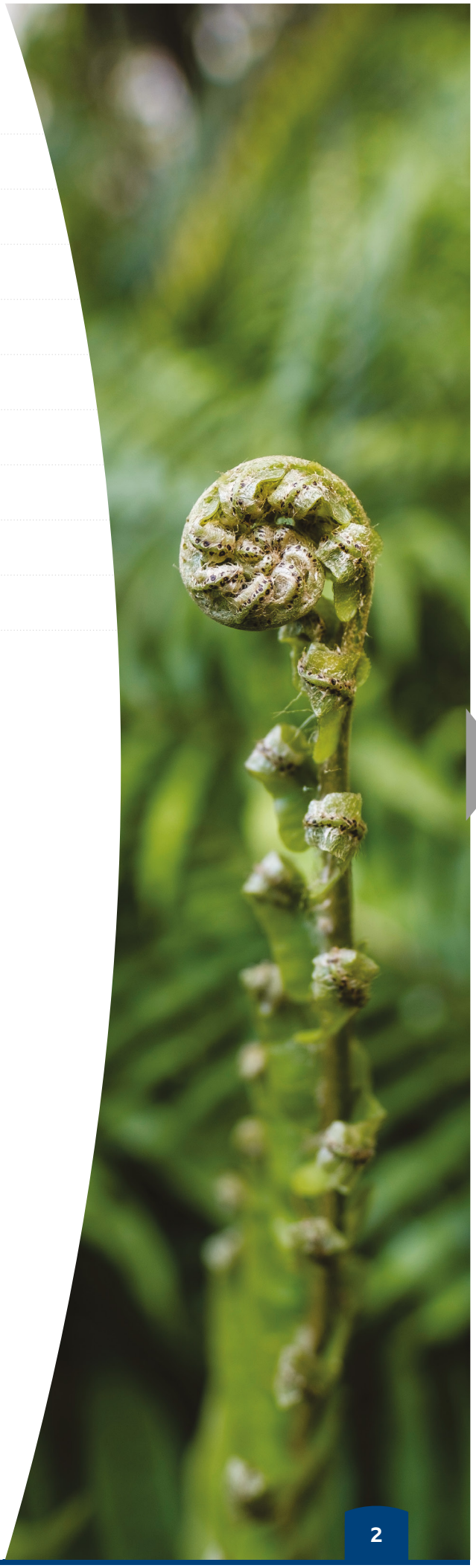


“

Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora te iwi

With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive

(Māori proverb)

Tēnā koe!

Nau mai haere mai ki te mahi o Blueprint for Learning.

Blueprint for Learning has extensive experience developing and running mental health and addiction literacy training since 2008.

Ātea became part of the training Blueprint for Learning offers in 2025. It was first developed by the Disability Workforce Development team in Blueprint for Learning's sister organisation Te Pou, with their Disability Advisory Group providing input and support. Lived experience is central to Blueprint for Learning's training, so Ātea is always facilitated by disabled people.

This workshop provides participants with an understanding of impairment and disability, barriers tāngata whaikaha disabled people may encounter and how to minimise these and include disabled people.

The workshop name Ātea was gifted by Kahurangi Fergusson-Tibble, Blueprint for Learning's Waha Tohutohu Matua – Principal Advisor Māori. Ātea means space, place and time. In this setting, it relates to exploring and learning together. Everyone involved in the workshop can bring their whole selves, including their experiences, knowledge and skills. There is freedom to share and explore wairua (spiritual), hinengaro (mental and emotional), tinana (physical) and whānau (family and community) aspects of people. This leads us to greater understanding of how we can change the physical, psychological and spiritual space around us for all people.

Workshop learning outcomes

After this workshop, participants will be able to:

- engage respectfully with disabled people.
- recognise barriers that stop disabled people from being included
- Identify ways to minimise barriers and include disabled people.

Introducing disability

Disability is any long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder the full and effective participation of disabled people in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

Impairments can affect a person's mobility, senses, mental health, physical health, or the way the brain functions. Some are visible like using a wheelchair or arthritis. Some are invisible like being hard of hearing, dyslexic, having a brain injury, or a health condition.

Accessibility is when barriers do not exist or have been removed so a disabled person can use, understand or participate in an activity or environment.

Images and words

Images, words and how information is shown can affect what people think. This can shape attitudes towards disabled people.

Images are often negative and reinforce stereotypes. Disabled people are shown as super-heroes or victims, or not shown at all. How disabled people are shown in images and words can build equality and inclusion in society.

Activity

How could you use positive images of disabled people in your work or community?

Language is important

The language you use when talking with a disabled person is important. It needs to be respectful, inclusive, build mana, and not diminish who they are as a person.

- Use words that include everybody, like "we" instead of "they" or "them". For example "we benefit from accessible buildings" instead of "they benefit from accessible buildings".
- You don't need to minimise someone's impairment. For example, "partially sighted" is not a better thing to say than "blind". Listen to the words people use themselves.
- A person without an impairment is described as non-disabled.

One aspect of using suitable language is the words we use when referring to a disabled person or disabled people.

- Language changes over time. Check with the person you are talking to what words they prefer.
- Some disabled people's organisations have chosen certain words they prefer. For example, disabled person, autistic person, Deaf person, person with a learning disability.
- Tāngata whaikaha is the Māori term for disabled people. It focuses on a person's strengths, reflecting a desire to create opportunities for themselves and do well rather than being labelled.

Some disability-related words can suggest positive or negative things without us realising. Here are some examples.

- **Invalid:** this word originally meant "weak". In Aotearoa New Zealand disabled people campaigned for a long time to change the name of what was the Invalids Benefit, because being disabled is not the same thing as being weak.
- **Non-disabled people:** this is the preferred term for people who are not disabled by society.
- **Wheelchair-bound:** many disabled people view their wheelchairs as giving them freedom, a way of getting around safely and independently. People are not usually restricted by being tied into their chairs. The preferred words are "wheelchair user".
- **Special:** some disabled people view this as positive, like athletes in the Special Olympics. Others think it is a word that has taken on all the negative parts of disability like being kept separate in education, or that it sounds childish and should not be used for adults.
- **Able-bodied:** this is not a good opposite of disabled people. "Non-disabled people" is much clearer.
- **Normal:** this is also not a good opposite of disabled people. Impairment is a normal part of human life, with around 20% of people being disabled. Use "non-disabled" instead.

The Ministry of Social Development has created a guide to disability language.

www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/accessibility/quick-reference-guides/disability-language-words-matter.html

Social model of disability

The **medical model** views tāngata whaikaha disabled people as needing to be fixed, cured, or changed to fit into society. The disabled person is responsible for making the changes to fit into society, and if they don't they are judged and excluded. This leads to "ableism", the belief that non-disabled people are superior and disabled people are therefore lesser. The attitudes, systems, and structures of society favour non-disabled people and discriminate against disabled people.

The **social model** of disability recognises that people have impairments and it is barriers in society that create disability. Understanding that society creates barriers takes the responsibility from the disabled person and gives us all an opportunity to remove barriers. This model looks at what is wrong with society that needs fixing (Oliver, 1990).

The social model shifts the focus from a person's impairment to the barriers they face in society. Disability is not defined by a person's impairment but by the obstacles created by society. This means it is not the impairment a person has but the barriers they experience that are disabling. These barriers can be attitudes, in the physical environment, or from the way systems work. They prevent full participation in society. Barriers include things like inaccessible buildings, unhelpful attitudes, unclear communication, or systems that exclude people.

The New Zealand Disability Strategy adopts the social model of disability.

Disability occurs when:

- people with impairments are excluded from places and activities
- structures, infrastructure, and systems in buildings and the physical environment don't cater for everyone
- people's attitudes prevent people with impairments from participating in society on an equal basis with non-disabled people.

(Office for Disability Issues, 2022).

The social model of disability is hugely impactful and continues to be a turning point for social change leading to equality and inclusion for disabled people.

Activity

You may want to write ideas you hear as break-out groups share what they discussed after watching Mel's video.

1. What barriers for tāngata whaikaha disabled people are there in your community?

2. What barriers are there for tāngata whaikaha disabled people in your workplace?

3. What things have you seen that take away barriers for disabled people?

In the workshop, we looked at situations which show the medical model and the social model.

Situation	
Removable seats at the cinema enable a wheelchair user to sit with their friends.	
Model	**What it shows**
Social model	The cinema expects people in wheelchairs and has made it simple for wheelchair users to sit with friends.

Situation	
People must have a formal diagnosis to get support they need.	
Model	**What it shows**
Medical model	Two people with the same needs might get different support because of what a doctor writes.

Situation	
Buses kneel so they are easier to get into.	
Model	**What it shows**
Social model	The bus company expects disabled people to ride on the bus and has made it easier to board.

Situation	
Disabled people must live in institutions to get the care they need.	
Model	**What it shows**
Medical model	Disabled people are not expected to live independently in the medical model.

Situation

Stopping people who can't do full-time work placements from enrolling in a course.

Model	What it shows
Medical model	Courses set up only for people who can work or study full-time stop some disabled people from getting into careers of their choice. A social model solution would be to offer part-time placements.

Situation

An organisation offers its information in New Zealand Sign Language, Easy Read, Braille and audio.

Model	What it shows
Social model	The organisation expects that people might need to access information in different ways and has planned ahead so the information is there when people need it.

Considering culture

Tāngata whaikaha Māori

Tāngata whaikaha Māori describes a Māori disabled person.

Using te reo Māori terms can help to build inclusion and connection with tāngata whaikaha Māori. Examples are below, there are more that might be useful in Te Reo Hapai **(www.tereohapai.nz)**.

In English	In Māori
Blind person	Tangata Kāpō
Deaf person	Tangata Turi
Autistic person	Tangata Whaitakiwātanga
Sign language	Te Reo Rongo ā-whatu Reo rotarota Te Reo Turi
Ramp	Rōnaki
Braille	Tuhi Matapō
Accessible toilet	Wharepaku Whakatapoko
Accessible parking	Tūnga Waka Whakatapoko

Whakamanahia Te Tiriti Whakahaumarutia te Tangata – Honour the Treaty Protect the person (Human Rights Commission, 2021) describes experiences of tāngata whaikaha Māori within the Aotearoa New Zealand context of colonisation. The barriers tāngata whaikaha Māori experience are added to the disadvantages Māori already experience as a result of poverty and disadvantage.

The Household Disability Survey 2023 showed higher rates of disability among Māori. Even though Māori have higher rates of impairment and disability, tāngata whaikaha Māori have higher rates of unmet need (Stats NZ, 2025). They also experience greater barriers to accessing support. For example, tāngata whaikaha Māori are more likely to have unmet needs in accessing support equipment when working with health professionals (Ministry of Health, 2015).

Intergenerational trauma

Sometimes a collective group can experience trauma. Trauma from historical events affects people in many countries. This includes refugees and migrants, and those whose countries were colonised. This is sometimes called historical trauma because it started in the past.

In countries where the colonisation of indigenous people occurred, the impact of those traumatic events is passed down to affect current generations. In Aotearoa New Zealand, many Māori experience this intergenerational trauma. The historical loss of land, decline of Māori language and cultural practices, and the colonisation of Māori values contribute to the complexities of trauma experienced by Māori (Wirihana & Smith, 2014).

The original traumatic events were others taking control of Māori land and the land wars. Māori identity is linked to the land by a sense of belonging to it, of being part of it and of being bonded with it (Durie, 1998). For Māori, being separated from land can be like being removed from their family of origin. Separation from the land also destroyed political and protective social structures and economic independence. Loss of land and culture affected the physical, emotional, whānau, spiritual, and economic wellbeing of Māori. Suppression of Māori cultural identity added to this, with a loss of cultural practices and language, and creating a sense of shame in being Māori (Reid et al., 2017).

Trauma can negatively impact future generations due to long lasting effects. We see these effects within Māori communities historically and today. The loss of land, economic stability, and resources had a long-term effect on Māori health (Reid et al., 2014). Current suicide rates, poor health statistics, and increased risk of violence and abuse within Māori communities reflects trauma from colonisation (Farrelly et al., 2005).

These may appear as substance use challenges, anxiety or depression, low self-esteem,anger, self-destructive behaviour, or suicidal thoughts (Wirihana & Smith, 2014).

Recognising the impacts of intergenerational trauma and building strong relationships that develop trust can support affected people. We can also support people to reconnect with their identity, language and culture.

A United Nations report on the rights of indigenous peoples shares this viewpoint on New Zealand's approach to dealing with this trauma: *"... the Treaty settlement process in New Zealand, despite evident shortcomings, is one of the most important examples in the world of an effort to address historical and ongoing grievances of indigenous peoples,and settlements already achieved have provided significant benefits in several cases".*

Learn more about colonisation impacts on Māori in Historical Trauma, Healing and Well-being in Māori Communities, published in MAI Journal, 2014 (Volume 3 Issue 3).

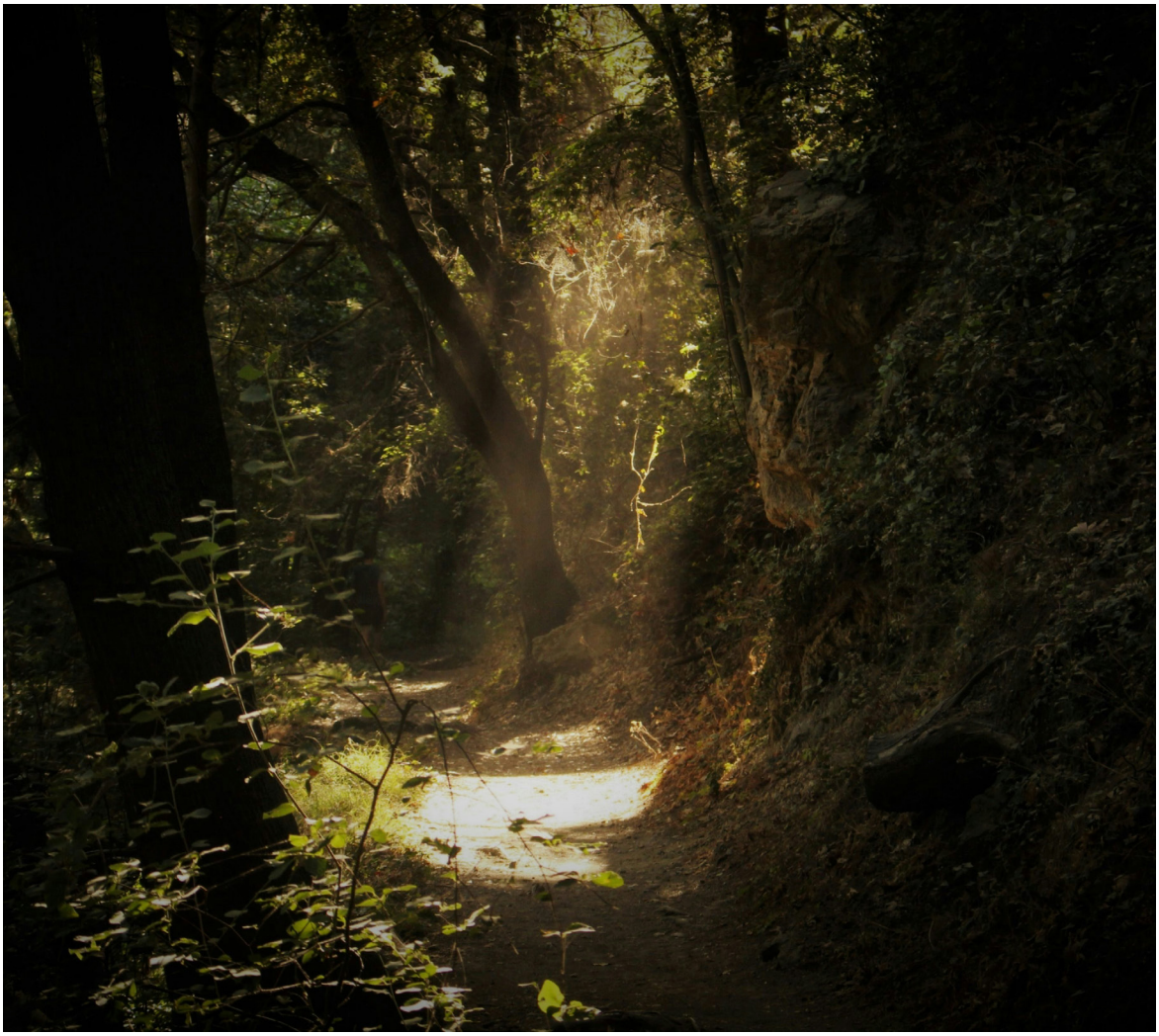
https://tinyurl.com/MAIjournal2014

Watch a video of Jason Haitana talking about the impact of colonisation.

http://tinyurl.com/jason-haitana

Ki Te Ao Mārama Toward light, understanding and growing is a video about intergenerational trauma in Aotearoa New Zealand.

https://vimeo.com/940992775



Ethnically diverse communities

Across the world, there are a variety of ways disabled people are viewed and treated. Over 200 different ethnic groups live in Aotearoa New Zealand with a range of cultures, languages, religions and views of disability. There are a range of views of disability which may be influenced by traditions, religious practices and beliefs, or access to education and resources.

Pasifika cultures are collective and value family, community, and the wellbeing of both. A person with impairments is more than just an individual. They represent their family, community and heritage. Pasifika disabled people are commonly supported by family members or trusted people from their wider community. This is often provided in the person's home, with little access to outside supports (Oranga Tamariki, 2022).

In some communities, disability and impairment can be regarded as a taboo subject where families assume the person will not be able to live an independent or fulfilled life (Kibria, 2021). Some religious teachings encourage treating people with impairments with respect and empathy (Ndlovu, 2016). Other people may see an impairment as punishment for the family doing something wrong or that an impairment has been caused by witchcraft (Baker & Imafidon, 2020; Ndlovu, 2016).

Former refugees with impairments may have experienced additional impacts from the process of being displaced from their home country. A former refugee's impairment may have been caused during war or conflict, carrying with it additional trauma (Pitters, 2022).

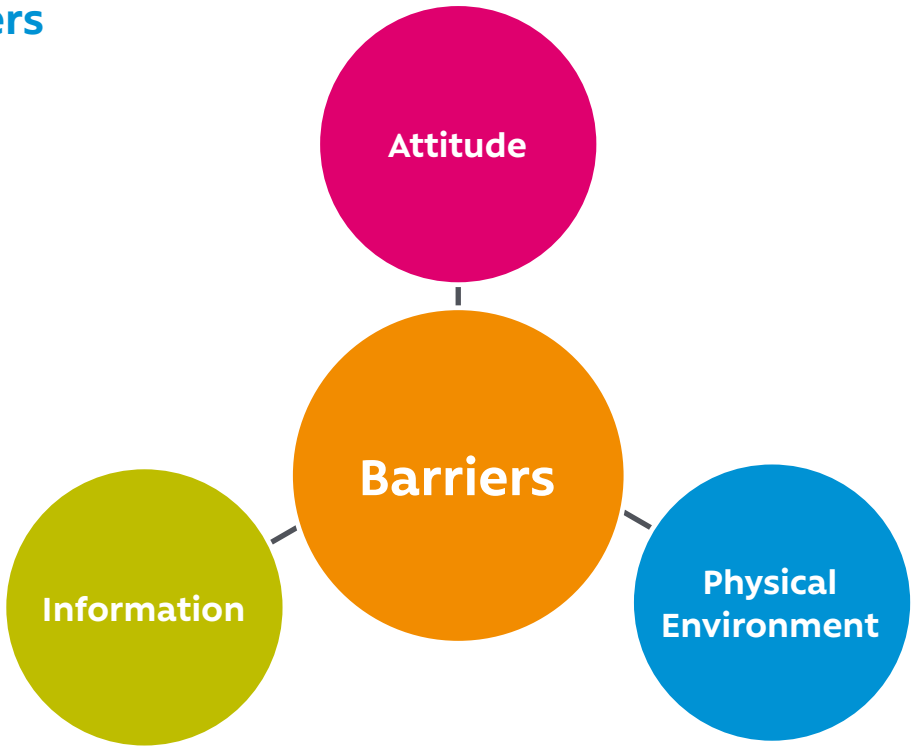
People from any ethnic group are diverse and have a wide range of views, beliefs and practices. Recognise this as the case, focus on the whole person and discuss any support they might need.

Connecting with culture

Access to culture is important for people's wellbeing and identity. It is important to consider the whole person, including their culture.

Tāngata whaikaha disabled people are sometimes excluded from connecting with their culture by barriers. We can all think about ways of removing barriers that stop people connecting. Not everyone will connect with their culture in the same way, so a good starting point is asking.

Barriers



Attitude barriers

Attitudes which create barriers for tāngata whaikaha disabled people can lead to discrimination and people not being treated with dignity. For example:

- expecting a tangata whaikaha disabled person to think and act in ways you assume they will
- relying on general information about the impacts of an impairment instead of asking about a person's own experience
- ableism, thinking non-disabled people are superior and a disabled person needs fixing
- not discussing how much independence a person wants
- thinking you know the best way to proceed rather than discussing options
- assuming a person can or can't speak for themselves
- treating a tangata whaikaha disabled adult as if they are a child
- using language which causes harm
- ignoring an expressed need, thinking you know how to work around it
- deciding who is best to support a person without checking who they prefer.

Check with the tāngata whaikaha disabled person before you act, to make sure you are removing barriers and not creating new ones.

Physical environment barriers

Physical environment barriers can be inside or outside buildings. Outside could be steps instead of ramps or trees overhanging a footpath. Barriers inside means anything which prevents a tangata whaikaha disabled person finding their way, using the bathroom, locating or using equipment, or feeling welcome and comfortable. Physical environment barriers may also relate to transport. For example, limited accessible parking, steps into a bus, train or plane, or the cost of mobility taxis.

Simple designs, clear walkways, keeping furniture in the same place, and removing things blocking walking areas will make buildings easier for everyone to get around.

The best way to identify physical environment barriers is to use a trained accessiblity auditor if one is available in your area. If not, ask tāngata whaikaha disabled people or a disability support organisation to look at your premises and give you feedback on potential barriers and how these can be minimised. Be aware of the time this work takes and pay for people's expertise where possible.

Information barriers

Information needs to be in plain language and available in accessible formats like Braille, large print, suited to screen readers, and in New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). Some tāngata whaikaha disabled people may not be able to access the internet, so providing only digital information is a barrier.

In the Ātea workshop groups discussed ideas to minimise barriers experienced by a tangata whaikaha disabled person in different situations. The ideas suggested for each situation may be helpful examples to help you respond and take action in real world situations.

Organising party which will include a person who uses a wheelchair

- Expect people with mobility impairments at events.
- Co-design the party with the person if possible.
- Arrange a venue on the ground floor or one with a lift if on a higher level.
- Check there are accessible toilets.
- Arrange furniture so there is enough space to move around easily.
- Check there is accessible parking or transport nearby.
- Make sure doorways are wide enough.
- Check plates or seating for eating food are suitable.

Interviewing a job candidate who is Deaf

- Talk about communication preferences before the interview. For example, relay service, NZSL.
- Book a NZSL interpreter of their choice if that is what the person prefers.
- Send building photo, Google map, information and interview questions in advance.
- Have information in plain language or NZSL.
- Allow extra time for lip reading or NZSL interpreting or clarifying questions.
- Chairs not in front of a window, interpreter next to interviewers, faces are well lit.
- Prepare the panel to speak clearly, slightly slower and to not cover their mouth.
- Interview panel has name tags.

Booking overnight travel for a friend who is vision-impaired

- Find out travel preferences. For example, familiar accommodation, using taxi or Uber assist.
- Book and confirm airport assistance if this is required.
- Select accommodation with on-site dining and room service if it's required.
- Make sure the person knows about the route they are taking.
- Make sure transport and accommodation are aware a person with accessibility needs will be using their services.
- Confirm the room is guide dog friendly with a place for toileting, if required.
- Arrange for information to be in formats suited to assistive technology.
- Ask reception to help with orientation to the building.

Planning for a workmate with chronic pain to attend a team-building day

- Involve the person at the start of the planning process.
- Make sure the timetable will be manageable for them.
- Build in the frequency of breaks the person will need.
- Check if the activities will be suitable, if not make accommodations.
- Book parking or arrange transport close to the venue.
- Arrange a quiet and comfortable rest space in case the person needs it.
- Find out seating they require to be comfortable, and provide this.
- Check for any dietary requirements and accommodate these

Going to a concert with a neurodivergent friend with light and sound sensitivity

- Plan your travel so you go in early.
- Check if the venue is part of the sunflower lanyard scheme.
- Find out in advance if entry without lining up is possible.
- Take noise cancelling headphones.
- Take sunglasses in case of bright lights.
- Book seating close to an exit.
- Check if the venue has a quiet room or sensory room available.

Activity

After watching the video about environment hazards, think about examples of these in your workplace and community.

1. What environment hazards can you think of in your community?

2. What environment hazards can you think of in your workplace, or workplaces you are familiar with?

3. How could these barriers be reduced?

Reducing barriers

Being aware that barriers to participating in society exist for tāngata whaikaha disabled people is the first step in reducing the impact of these. Encourage tāngata whaikaha disabled people to give you feedback about barriers or what works well. If you find a possible barrier and do something about it you are contributing to change in line with the social model of disability. You may be able to take action yourself, or you may be able to discuss ideas with someone else who can change things.

Activity

You might like to write down some of the ideas for reducing barriers you hear other groups share from their break-out group discussions.

Supported decision-making

The Ministry of Social Development's website has guidance on how to provide supported decision-making for tāngata whaikaha disabled people.

Supported decision-making is providing support so a person can make their own decisions. This is very different from **substitute decision-making** where someone else makes the decisions, even when focused on the person's best interests. Supported decision-making is mentioned as best practice in the UNCRPD.

To achieve this the person must be given the right information, at the right time, in the right way, and be given the time they need to think about their decision. A family violence or sexual violence service's staff member working with a tangata whaikaha disabled person needs to:

- identify when a decision needs to be made, what decision needs to be made, and what type of support is needed
- provide relevant information in a format the person can understand. This can include information from family and friends which may help to make the decision
- discuss how the person can be supported to think about the decision options
- discuss possible options and their outcomes, presenting them in different ways if this makes it easier for the person to consider them
- give the person time to think about the options and possible outcomes before making a decision
- if the person chooses to take risks, think about ways to put in safeguards
- discuss the person's preferred option and any concerns they have about it
- identify next steps for making it happen. Include actions from other people, the supports that are required, and how long it might take to complete.

The Personal Advocacy and Safeguarding Adults Trust (PASAT) can support clients to make independant decisions or provide training in supported decision making.

www.pasat.org.nz/support-for-decision-making

Action Plan

An Action Plan can help you to reduce barriers and build inclusion of tāngata whaikaha disabled people. Look for things you can change in your workplace or community, or people you can discuss ideas with.

For example, if you want staff to be comfortable using NZSL with Deaf clients and workmates you might:

- organise NZSL classes at work for everyone with customer-facing roles
- arrange classes for the next financial year, allocating funding and staff time for them
- find a teacher for the classes
- arrange a suitable day of the week and time of day that will work for staff.

Action Plan

1. Your focus areas

Think about areas you would like to focus on to minimise barriers and increase inclusion for tāngata whaikaha disabled people. These might be related to:

- stereotypes, words and images
- social model of disability
- connecting with culture
- attitude, physical environment and information barriers.

Focus areas for your Action Plan

2. Action planning

For each focus area, think about actions you could take that feel achievable.

Action planning	Focus area 1	Focus area 2	Focus area 3	Focus area 4
Actions you can take				
How you will do it				
Resources you need				
People you can talk to or get support from				

Useful organisations

Disability and neurodiversity organisations

Organisation	Description	Contact
ADHD New Zealand	Provide practical information and support to people living with ADHD.	**www.adhd.org.nz** Email: **info@adhd.org.nz**
Altogether Autism	Provides free information, advice and answers questions on autism.	**www.altogetherautism.org.nz** Phone: **0800 273 463**
Aotearoa Disability Law	Provides free disability related legal services, legal education and legal activities within the Deaf and disability community.	**https://aucklanddisabilitylaw.org.nz** Email: **info@adl.org.nz** Phone: **09 257 5140**
Arthritis New Zealand	Advocate and support people with arthritis. Online professional development for clinical and non-clinical staff.	**www.arthritis.org.nz** Email: **info@arthritis.org.nz** Phone: **0800 663 463**
Blind Citizens NZ	Advocate on behalf of blind, deafblind, low vision, and vision impaired people living in NZ.	**https://abcnz.org.nz** Email: **admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz** Phone: **0800 222 694**
Blind Low Vision New Zealand	Support people with vision loss, vision rehabilitation, products and assistive technology.	**www.blindlowvision.org.nz** Email: **generalenquiries@blindlowvision.org.nz** Phone: **0800 787 743**
Brain Injury New Zealand	Funds research, education, publications and public events related to neurological conditions.	**www.neurological.org.nz** Email: **info@neurological.org.nz** Phone: **0508 272 467**
CAB	Provides free and independent advice on rights and obligations, and can help people find an advocate.	**www.cab.org.nz** Phone: **0800 367 222**

Organisation	Description	Contact
CCS Disability Action	Support people with all types of impairments by providing services, advocacy and information.	**www.ccsdisabilityaction.org.nz** Phone: **0800 227 2255**
Deaf Aotearoa	A national organisation representing the voice of Deaf people, including providing information and advice.	**www.deaf.org.nz** Email: **hello@deaf.org.nz** Phone: **0800 33 23 22**
Disabled Person's Assembly NZ (DPA)	Advocates for the interests of disabled people to improve their lives.	**www.dpa.org.nz** Email: **info@dpa.org.nz** Phone: **04 801 9100**
Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand	Provides a voice for and services and support to dyslexic people.	**www.dfnz.org.nz** Phone: **03 349 6161**
Epilepsy New Zealand	Support people living with epilepsy. Training for many staff in disability services.	**www.epilepsy.org.nz** Email: **national@epilepsy.org.nz** Phone: **0800 37 45 37**
Language Assistance Services	Provide phone, video and in-person interpreting and translation services for government agencies.	**www.mbie.govt.nz/cross-government-functions/language-assistance-services**
Make it Easy	Produces documents in Easy Read format so they are easy to understand. They provide advice, consultation, training or a translation service to help you convert your information into Easy Read.	**www.makeiteasy.org.nz** **Email: makeiteasy@peoplefirst.org.nz** Phone: **0800 20 60 70**

Organisation	Description	Contact
Muscular Dystrophy Association of NZ	Represents and supports people with muscular dystrophy conditions.	**www.mda.org.nz** Email: **info@mda.org.nz** Phone: **0800 800 337**
NZCL	Provides support to people with disabilities, including residential services and vocation planning.	**www.nzcl.nz** Email: **info@nzcl.nz** **0800 101 057**
People First NZ	Run by and for people with learning disabilities, to foster inclusive communities.	**www.peoplefirst.org.nz** Email: **ask@peoplefirst.org.nz** Phone: **0800 20 60 70**
Personal Advocacy and Safeguarding Adults Trust – Te Kahu Haumaru	Provides advocacy, safeguarding, supported decision making and wellbeing support for adults with care and support needs.	**www.pasat.org.nz** Email: **safeguardingadults@PASAT.org.nz** Phone: **0800 728 7878**
Stroke Foundation	Supports people and their families after a stroke.	**www.stroke.org.nz** Email: **strokenz@stroke.org.nz** Phone: **0800 78 76 53**
VisAble	Equip individuals and organisations who come into contact with disabled or neurodivergent people impacted by violence.	**www.visable.co.nz** Email: **SueHobbs@visable.co.nz**
Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People	Works across government to improve outcomes for disabled people.	**www.whaikaha.govt.nz**

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