

2026 Pre-Election Manifesto

**Hearing, Ear and Balance Health – A National Priority
for Aotearoa New Zealand**



About NZAS

The New Zealand Audiological Society (NZAS) is the professional body for audiologists and audiometrists in Aotearoa New Zealand. We set professional and ethical standards, support evidence-based practice, and advocate for the ear, hearing and balance health needs of all New Zealanders.

Our Position

Hearing, ear and balance health is essential for learning, work, wellbeing, communication, social participation, healthy ageing and economic productivity. Yet too often, hearing, ear and balance health are viewed narrowly through the lens of devices or specialist treatment, rather than as an important part of overall health and wellbeing.

Our Role

NZAS brings together clinical expertise, professional standards, workforce knowledge and a population-wide perspective on hearing, ear and balance health.

Our expertise extends well beyond hearing devices, encompassing prevention, diagnosis, rehabilitation, tinnitus and vestibular care, auditory processing support, paediatric ear health and ongoing adult care.

NZAS is well placed to work with government on the development of policy, service models, workforce planning, professional standards and investment priorities that improve access, protect the public and deliver better outcomes for New Zealanders.



Our Message to Political Parties

Hearing, ear and balance health is not a niche issue. It affects how children learn, how people participate in work, whānau and communities, and how older New Zealanders maintain their independence, safety and connection.

Yet it remains an under-recognised health, social and economic policy issue. Earlier and more equitable access to prevention, assessment, treatment and rehabilitation can prevent avoidable harm, support workforce participation, productivity and overall wellbeing, and reduce downstream pressure across health, education, disability, aged care and other public services.

NZAS calls for a national, integrated and equity-led approach to hearing, ear and balance health that prioritises prevention and early intervention, supports people throughout their lives, and makes full use of the audiology workforce.

Our Commitment

NZAS is ready to be a key professional partner to government and Health New Zealand in designing and implementing a more integrated approach to hearing, ear and balance health. We will bring clinical expertise, professional standards, workforce knowledge and sector leadership, while working alongside iwi, Pacific providers, disability and consumer organisations, educators, researchers, allied health professionals and industry.



Why Action Matters

Unaddressed hearing, ear and balance health issues can have consequences across a person's life. They can affect children's language development, learning and social participation; adults' employment, productivity, relationships and connection; and older people's independence, safety, communication and ability to participate fully in their communities.

Earlier access to prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation can improve quality of life, strengthen whānau and community participation, support children to learn and people to remain in work, and help older people maintain independence and connection. It can also reduce avoidable disability and ease downstream pressure across health, education, disability, aged care and primary care services.

Domestic and international evidence shows that integrated ear and hearing care can deliver significant downstream social and economic returns. For Aotearoa New Zealand, better access is an investment in people and communities as well as the health system – supporting wellbeing, workforce participation, productivity and independence throughout life.

Key Facts for Aotearoa New Zealand

- An estimated 880,350 New Zealanders lived with hearing loss in 2016, representing 18.9% of the population.
- Hearing loss was estimated to cost New Zealand \$4.9 billion in 2016, including direct economic costs and the value of lost wellbeing.
- Economic analysis for New Zealand shows hearing loss affects employment, productivity, early retirement, aged care and informal care needs, quality of life, and children's learning and development.
- Recent New Zealand estimates place hearing loss prevalence between 7.5% and 20.8% across the population, depending on the definition and data source used.
- Self-reported hearing loss among working-age New Zealanders increased from 7.4% in 2018 to 8.2% in 2022.
- New Zealand research on the B4 School Check found Māori and Pacific children, and children living with higher deprivation, were less likely to receive hearing screening; when screened, these children had higher rates of middle ear disease and poorer access to follow-up primary care.
- Noise-induced hearing loss remains a preventable source of harm in New Zealand, with ACC datasets tracking claims over time and national research identifying occupational noise as a significant contributor.

Policy Priorities

1. Make ear, hearing and balance health a national prevention and early intervention priority

Government policy should recognise hearing, ear and balance health as central to children's development, learning, workforce participation, safety, brain health, healthy ageing and social connection. NZAS calls for coordinated national action across prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation, with clear accountability across health, education, disability, ACC, aged care and social investment settings.

2. Improve equitable access to publicly supported services

Access to hearing, ear and balance care should not depend on income, geography, age, disability status, ethnicity, or the ability to navigate complex funding pathways.

NZAS supports stronger publicly funded access for Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, rural communities, people on low incomes, children and whānau with unmet ear health needs, and older adults at risk of isolation and avoidable loss of independence.

New Zealand evidence shows that inequitable access is not only about individual service use; it reflects structural barriers such as cost, transport, workforce distribution, appointment systems, referral pathways, health literacy, cultural safety and the availability of community-based services.

For Māori, Pacific peoples and rural communities, these barriers can be cumulative. Children and whānau with the greatest need may be less likely to be reached by screening, diagnosis or timely follow-up, while adults may face delayed access to assessment, rehabilitation and specialist care. NZAS therefore supports proportionate universalism – services should be available to everyone, with additional investment, outreach and culturally grounded models where unmet need is greatest.

3. Fund the full scope of audiology care, not just devices

Hearing aids and hearing technologies are important, but audiology is broader than device provision. Public policy and funding should support comprehensive clinical care, including diagnostic assessment, paediatric services, tinnitus management, vestibular and balance care, auditory processing disorder support, communication rehabilitation, counselling, follow-up care and outcome measurement.

4. Use the audiology workforce to reduce pressure across the health system

Audiologists and audiometrists are an under-used part of the allied health workforce. Better integration into primary, community, public health, paediatric, aged care and specialist pathways would improve timely access to care and reduce avoidable pressure on general practice, ENT, emergency, education support and aged care services. Advanced audiology roles, including otitis media and paediatric ear health models, show how specialist capability can be used closer to communities.

Equity also requires services to be closer to home. Rural communities need practical access to audiology, ear health, tinnitus, vestibular and rehabilitation services through outreach, telehealth where clinically appropriate, mobile/community clinics, and stronger links with primary care, kaupapa Māori providers, Pacific providers, schools and early childhood services.

5. Build national leadership, data, standards and accountability

New Zealand needs stronger national leadership and better visibility of unmet need, access gaps, service outcomes, workforce distribution and the social and economic value of hearing, ear and balance care.

NZAS should be a key professional partner in developing national service standards, workforce planning, clinical pathways and outcome measures. Better data, transparent standards, culturally safe practice and strong professional accountability will help guide investment, improve care and protect the public.



What Government Should Do Now

- Develop a national ear, hearing and balance health plan in partnership with NZAS that is aligned with the New Zealand Health Strategy, disability priorities, child wellbeing, healthy ageing and workforce participation.
- Expand publicly funded access to assessment, rehabilitation and follow-up care, with targeted investment for communities with the greatest unmet need.
- Support multidisciplinary community models that include audiology within primary and allied health teams.
- Fund care pathways for tinnitus, vestibular and balance disorders, auditory processing disorder, paediatric ear health and adult rehabilitation.
- Work with NZAS to strengthen and invest in the audiology and audiometry workforce, including through advanced practice, rural and kaupapa Māori and Pacific service models, workforce planning and strong clinical governance.
- Measure outcomes that matter, including earlier access, reduced inequity, improved communication, learning, employment, independence, safety, social participation value for money.

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