



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Justice Committee
Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Ture

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English Language Bill

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English Language Bill

Recommendation

The Justice Committee has examined the English Language Bill and recommends by majority that it be passed without amendment.

About the bill

The coalition agreement between the National Party and New Zealand First included a commitment to legislate for English as an official language of New Zealand. The English Language Bill would provide legislative recognition of the status of English as an official language.

We consider that the bill as introduced needs no amendment.

Official languages in New Zealand

New Zealand has three official languages at present, of which two have their official status set out in legislation. The status of te reo Māori is established through Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori 2016 / Māori Language Act 2016, and that of New Zealand Sign Language through the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006. The English language currently has *de facto* official language status. That is, it is widely used and accepted as an official language but its status is not set in legislation. If the bill is enacted, all three official languages in New Zealand would be recognised in legislation.

Main issues raised by submitters

We received written submissions from 1,601 people and groups, and heard from 22 submitters in oral hearings. We summarise below the main issues raised by submitters.

Advantages and disadvantages of the bill

Submitters who support the bill told us that the advantages of making English an official language in legislation include clarifying the long-accepted status of English as an official language. They suggested that little harm would arise from the bill because of its declaratory nature; that is, the bill would create no new rights and make no operational changes. Submitters also told us that it would remove any possibility for confusion as to the status of English and could remove any concerns that English is being treated differently from other official languages in New Zealand.

Almost two-thirds of submitters opposed the bill, on the basis that they did not consider it necessary, and they raised several possible disadvantages of recognising English as an official language in legislation. These include:

- undermining the two other official languages—te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language—and their respective legislation
- creating unnecessary division within society

- having unintended consequences, such as affecting the current status of the English language
- being an unnecessary use of resources.

Respective status of New Zealand's official languages

Several submitters expressed concern that the bill could negate or displace the official status of te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language or undermine their protections and usage requirements as found in their respective Acts. Some submitters suggested that the bill should be amended to insert a clause noting the English language's relationship to, or lack of effect on, the two other official languages and their Acts.

We note that an official language is generally understood to be a language that is recognised by a state for use in government functions, such as legislation, courts, education, and public administration. A language can be a *de facto* official language (widely accepted and used as such but not legislated as an official language) or it can have its official status expressly set out in legislation.

We note that the legislation for te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language was considered necessary for specific reasons. Their Acts give certain rights and obligations in relation to these minority languages, and provide for their use in legal proceedings and for the means to support the use of the languages.

We consider that English does not need the same support as te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language for its accessibility and development. Accordingly, the bill would establish no substantive new rights or obligations. On this basis, we think that the bill's recognition of English as an official language would not affect the status or use of the two other official languages of New Zealand, as provided for in their respective Acts.

Status of the English language

We heard that the bill could cause confusion about the status of English as an official language (through its *de facto* status). There was concern that there might be a risk that it may only be considered to have official status from the date of Royal assent of the bill. Some submitters proposed amending the bill to clarify the status of English, suggesting that the official status of English could be considered *de jure* (that is, by common law), or that similar protections for English were needed as for the other official languages. Submitters also raised concerns about a possible hierarchy of official languages. Some suggested making English the primary official language, and others proposed that te reo Māori should be given this status.

We note that English currently has official language status and will continue to have official language status even if the bill is not enacted or if the enacted bill is later repealed. This is because there is wide acceptance that the English language has official status in New Zealand as a matter of fact by way of custom and usage. We consider that the bill would not change the status of the English language, nor its use. We note that the bill does not propose any primary official language status for English nor a hierarchy of official languages.

New Zealand English

Several submitters commented on the unique features of New Zealand English, including some unique additional vocabulary and the inclusion of te reo Māori words. Some submitters suggested amending the bill to legislate for the dialect of English spoken in New Zealand and to include a definition.

We recognise that English has hundreds of dialects and we are aware that people who speak English can generally understand one another despite differences in pronunciation, grammar, and certain vocabulary. We note that overseas jurisdictions that have legislated for the official status of the English language have used the generic term and have not specified the dialect relevant to the country. In comparison, sign language is not universal and cannot be commonly understood in any location. Therefore, New Zealand Sign Language is its own language, rather than a dialect of sign language and has been legislatively defined.

We gave serious consideration to whether the bill should be amended to specify that “New Zealand English” should be legislated for, given the unique characteristics of the dialect. We discussed the risks and the likelihood of unintended consequences if the bill specified “New Zealand English”. For example, court documents might be invalidated if they were written with an automated drafting setting that used American English. We consider that there would also be increased uncertainty in some contexts if “New Zealand English” was used officially. For example, specifying the use of “New Zealand English” rather than “English” on a Customs form could cause confusion for travellers arriving in New Zealand.

We understand that there is no commonly accepted definition of “New Zealand English”, and it does not appear in any existing legislation. We were advised that defining “New Zealand English” would not be straightforward. For example, the New Zealand dialect has incorporated many words from te reo Māori, and New Zealanders use words such as “jandals”, “chilly bin”, and “bach” or “crib” that are not used in other English dialects. We consider that wide consultation would be needed before appropriately defining “New Zealand English”.

We were advised that amending the bill to specify “New Zealand English” could raise issues with legislative drafting and interpretation, particularly with existing references to “English” in the statute book. Nearly 200 existing principal Acts refer to the generic term “English”. We discussed whether specifying “New Zealand English” might raise questions as to the treatment of these existing legislative references. We were advised that assessing the effect of amending the bill, including consulting with the various agencies responsible for the nearly 200 principal Acts, would be a major undertaking. Given the risk and uncertainty involved in amending the bill to specify “New Zealand English”, we have decided not to recommend this change.

Three official languages in one bill

Some submitters suggested that it might be beneficial to recognise all three official languages of New Zealand within one piece of legislation. We recognise that the intent of the bill is to recognise the status of English as an official language in legislation. We think that legislating for all three official languages within their own respective Acts reflects the particular circumstances and requirements of each language. Therefore, we do not recommend recognising all three official languages in one piece of legislation.

Possible consequential effects of the bill

Many submitters told us that there could be wider consequences if the bill is passed. Among their concerns was that the bill could entrench English as the default language, leading to reduced accessibility to the other official languages. We heard from some submitters that the bill could compromise social cohesion, increase instances of racism in New Zealand, and distort the Crown's obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi | te Tiriti o Waitangi.

We consider that the bill would not have these effects. The bill would not affect the Crown's obligations under the Treaty because it would not create any rights or requirements and is solely declaratory in nature. Regarding the concerns raised around social cohesion, we think that it could be difficult to identify a specific correlation between legislating English as an official language and any changes to social dynamics.

New Zealand Labour Party differing view

This bill is unnecessary and a waste of parliamentary time. It also risks complicating a straightforward situation because English is already an official language through custom and usage in New Zealand. Through its introduction it undermines efforts to revitalise Te Reo Māori and Sign Language, and additionally risks stoking division.

As stated in the Departmental Report, almost two-thirds of submitters opposed the bill, primarily on the basis that they did not consider it necessary. Legislation on official languages is usually written to protect languages that are or were under threat, like legislation around Te Reo Māori here in NZ or Welsh in the UK, for example.

As officials have advised, it is clear to everyone in New Zealand that English is an official language. An official language is generally understood to be a language that is recognised by a state for use in government functions, such as legislation, courts, education, and public administration. Under that test, English is clearly already an official language in New Zealand, although this is not enshrined in statute law. Passing this bill is completely unnecessary as the clear and common use of the English language is so widespread and accepted.

Legislation for Te Reo Māori and NZ Sign Language was and is necessary to recognise both of these important and significant languages that are, despite revitalisation and education efforts, still only used by a minority of the population. English does not need the same support to ensure its survival.

There were several compelling submissions stating that a way of improving this bill and providing a genuine reason for its introduction would be to change the definition of English to "New Zealand English" and make this an official language, and to recognise the distinct type of English and dialect spoken in this country. This suggestion was sadly rejected by the committee. Official advice was that including "New Zealand English" as a definition would require significant consultation and work to ensure this was properly implemented. There appears to be no appetite from Ministers for this work.

Despite assurances, the fact of bringing this bill to the House is a signal to those who advocate for Te Reo that they have gone too far, and this bill, alongside other Government policies undermining the expansion of use of Te Reo (for example, making it second rather

than first in official documentation and the removal of Māori names) aims to prevent the further use and expansion of New Zealand's indigenous language. This is regretful as the Government should be focussed on increasing the number of Māori speakers and use of Te Reo Māori.

There are over a billion English speakers worldwide, illustrating that the English language continues to flourish.

This bill, in practice, changes nothing. It is a waste of time, and offensive to those who fought hard to make Te Reo Māori an official language in 1987 and NZ Sign Language an official language in 2006.

Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand differing view

The Green Party does not support the English Language Bill. As seen in other comparable jurisdictions, such as the United Kingdom or Australia, *de jure* status is redundant for English in Aotearoa New Zealand since it is already the *de facto* language. This is also noted by the majority of the submitters who opposed this bill.

In general, an official language status is provided to protect languages under threat in order to put a spotlight on the need to protect and resource their survival and revival. Here, in Aotearoa New Zealand, that status has been granted to te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). Legislation was required to provide specific rights and obligations in relation to these minority languages to provide for their use in legal proceedings and to provide means to support the use of the languages where this was previously not the case. Māori fought for more than a century to keep the language alive and fought for decades to see it afforded the status that it has today. NZSL was given official status in the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006, which sets out principles to guide government departments on matters relating to NZSL and accessibility. English does not present such a need.

Submitters have also raised concerns that by legislating English as a *de jure* language it would have unintended consequences, such as the risk to social cohesion and increased likelihood of racism in Aotearoa New Zealand, as has been seen in the United States. Furthermore, it could undermine te reo Māori and NZSL, such as by adding procurement and funding pressure and make te reo Māori and NZSL feel optional.

Instead of using Parliament time to address the more urgent needs of our communities in the midst of a cost of living crisis and fuel crisis, this bill is a frivolous and petty issue for this Government to take forward. The Green Party reaffirms our sentiment that this bill is merely a distraction, driven by a desire to divide because the Government wants us distracted, they want us divided, and they want regular people exhausted, fighting amongst themselves.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The English Language Bill was referred to this committee on 3 March 2026. We called for submissions with a closing date of 27 March 2026. We received and considered submissions from 1,601 interested groups and individuals. We heard oral evidence from 22 submitters.

As part of our consideration of the bill, we have examined its consistency with principles of legislative quality. We have no issues regarding the legislation's design to bring to the attention of the House.

We received advice on the bill from the Ministry of Justice. The Office of the Clerk provided advice on the bill's legislative quality. The Parliamentary Counsel Office was available to assist with legislative drafting.

Committee members

Hon Andrew Bayly (Chairperson)
Hon Ginny Andersen (until 25 March 2026)
Jamie Arbuckle
Carl Bates
Camilla Belich (from 25 March 2026)
Tākuta Ferris
Rima Nakhle
Dan Rosewarne (from 25 March 2026)
Tom Rutherford
Todd Stephenson
Vanushi Walters (until 25 March 2026)
Hon Dr Duncan Webb
Dr Lawrence Xu-Nan

Related resources

The documents that we received as advice and evidence are available on [the Parliament website](#).