

**ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE**

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**COLLECTIVE STATEMENT OF ŌTAUTAHI TĀNGATA TURI**

Dated: September 2022

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**BENNION  
LAW**

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## **Introduction**

1. We are a group of Whānau Turi, based in Ōtautahi, who wish to give our evidence as a collective. Our evidence is focused on our collective experiences as Whānau Turi, and our wishes for the community for the future.
2. Whānau Turi are Tāngata Turi (Māori Deaf) our whānau and support people.
3. Whānau Turi met with Royal Commission kaimahi and lawyers on 7 September 2022 in Ōtautahi. A wānanga was held to discuss our collective experiences of:
  - a. Pākehā Deaf schools;
  - b. Our experiences as Whānau Turi;
  - c. The impacts of our experiences; and
  - d. The barriers Whānau Turi face to reconnecting with te ao Māori.
4. Our collective voices from this wānanga are set out in this statement. We have decided to share as a collective because, as Whānau Turi, we identify as a collective and share many experiences. Therefore, individuals have not been identified in this statement. This statement represents all of our views.

## **Pākehā Deaf Schooling (Sumner School for the Deaf/Van Asch, Kelston)**

### ***Experience as tamariki***

5. For most of us as Deaf tamariki, our parents were told that their only option was to send us away to Pākehā Deaf schools. The doctors told our whānau that there was no assistance available for them to raise and educate us at home. Our whānau lost confidence in themselves through this process:

*“How do the parents feel? Their confidence diminishes, their kid has been taken away, maybe they come back for holidays.”*

6. Our experiences in these institutions were largely negative. Oralism was the focus and we were not allowed to use sign language. We were forced to wear heavy hearing aid boxes and were repeatedly put down for not being able to vocalise properly or understand what the teachers were telling us. When we would try to sign, we would be punished. When we would use some Māori words, we were told that we were not allowed to, we had to speak English because it was the only language our teachers could speak.

7. None of the teachers were Māori. We were disconnected from our whānau, hapū, iwi and te ao Māori generally. These institutions were very isolating for us, being removed from our whānau at such a young age and sent away to live with people we did not know:

*“I wasn’t happy when I stayed at Van Asch, because I was on my own. I was apart from my whānau and it was very difficult for me, I didn’t like being away from them. It was hard for me when I went back home, I couldn’t communicate with people at home, I was very isolated, even when I was home at marae. For many, many years I was lonely.”*

### **Experience as adults**

8. Some of us have returned to these Deaf schools to work directly with tamariki turi. We act as carers, role models and supervisors for them. We often end up being fixer-uppers, because these schools do not treat Māori Deaf equally to Pākehā Deaf children. Schools like Van Asch and Kelston have a track record of many Māori students being exited from their rolls.

*“Sometimes we would get the odd kid that wants to ignore everything. But we tried to change behaviours and attitudes. And then there was a decision made that a Deaf Māori kid who didn’t listen would have to leave the school, it went to committee.”*

9. There have been instances of Van Asch contacting us directly when they have a tamariki turi that they do not feel they can handle:

*“I got an urgent call from Van Asch, one of the students was displaying some terrible behaviour, I went there to support the student, to calm them down. The student was really upset, I managed to get them to a calm place. But they had no understanding of the importance of a student feeling comfortable with the adult supporting them.”*

10. These institutions do not understand the importance of Māori Deaf supporting other Māori Deaf. Many of our community prefer to speak only with other Māori Deaf. There is automatic trust between us. We have lived experience as tamariki turi in these institutions, and we understand what these tamariki need. Many of our attempts to support them go ignored, and often we are told that

our ways are not the right way, or that we do not have qualifications so we cannot get into these schools to help.

*“Teachers at the schools get paid, but they don’t understand. But we have the experience, but we can’t get paid. Current qualifications are not working for Deaf Māori, we can’t get into the schools to help because we don’t have the qualifications.”*

11. They also do not understand the importance of tamariki turi having Tāngata Turi role models. These tamariki only have Deaf Pākehā to look up to, who have very different ways of working and very different skills. They tell us they don’t need Māori role models, they just need role models for everyone. But there are specific cultural needs that only we know about, and the tamariki need to know this too.
12. We have seen first-hand how the staff in these institutions pay more attention to non-Māori kids, and they just kick out the Māori kids. There is no budget for supporting tamariki turi. Some of us have tried to help these tamariki ourselves, a number who we have supported have become successful, but many are lost.
13. A lot of the work we are doing is unpaid. We do this mahi because we know how important it is for tamariki turi to be supported. Often, we are not paid because we do not have specific official qualifications. It makes no difference that we have been working with Tāngata Turi for many, many years.
14. Not only do these institutions not understand the importance of having Tāngata Turi there to support tamariki turi, but they lack cultural competency. We had very little to no access te ao Māori when we were at school and there are still issues today.
15. The teachers and staff still do not understand the significance of tamariki turi connecting with te ao Māori, nor do they understand the different ways that Māori learn:

*“In 2015 when I worked at Van Asch as teacher aide, I supported a Māori Deaf kid. I tried to work with him to improve his signing and written English, but he wasn’t interested, he liked to do practical stuff. He wanted to learn kapa haka, to go to marae and find out more about where he was from, he wanted to be able to know where he and his iwi are from. He*

*didn't know. I tried to explain the concept and he did understand, but his parents had never explained any of his history to him. He had a Deaf aunty, I asked her for the information, I found it really hard to access it, probably because many whānau don't have sign language."*

16. We have tried to work together with these Deaf schools to improve the environment for tamariki turi. Sometimes they are responsive, but often when a Tāngata Turi working in these schools leaves, they are not interested in continuing on the mahi:

*"We always worked together, [Tāngata Turi advocate] and I. He passed away. I went back to Van Asch to speak to his replacement, and they said nope we're not doing that anymore. But I was the one who helped to set it up in Van Asch, set up the wharenuī, I'd do the hangi everything, I'd teach them how to do that."*

### **Impacts**

17. Many of us had negative experiences in Pākehā Deaf schools when we were young. Most of us attended Van Asch (previously known as Sumner School for the Deaf). When we were at Van Asch, we were not allowed to sign. We were only taught orally. The teachers were very negative towards us and the other pupils, always telling us that we were never speaking right, never pronouncing things correctly.

18. This would make us feel very negative about ourselves, and you can see the effects of this today:

*"I think what they [Tāngata Turi] got was that they were always wrong, they could never do things correctly. They grew up with that in their heads, so as adults they became very negative in their heads."*

19. Many of Tāngata Turi community today seem to only focus on the negative aspects of life, and part of the reason for this is how much blame the teachers put on us for getting things wrong. The teachers were just constantly negative. We have then passed on these negative experiences down through the generations.

20. When schooling ends, a large number of Tāngata Turi return home, often back to rural areas, and are lost to the wider Tāngata Turi community. They are very

isolated, and are the only ones in their whānau who can sign. They have not been well educated in these Pākehā institutions, and given their isolation face a lot more barriers than urban Tāngata Turi. We only meet these Tāngata Turi at tangi, and its extremely difficult to support them when we don't know where they are.

### **Whānau Turi**

21. The removal of tamariki turi from their whānau to Pākehā Deaf schools has caused huge amounts of pain, disconnection and harm to Whānau Turi. And it is still ongoing. The Ministry of Education advice was always to send your children away to Deaf school, and parents would accept that. There was not any alternative support available to Whānau Turi, particularly no support for whānau to develop communication. This caused a lot of pain not only for the tamariki who was isolated far away from their whānau amongst people they didn't know, but for the whānau, who were left at home to worry about their tamariki:

*“Back then, for your age group, the doctors said there is no help for the parents, you have to send kids to Deaf school. However, for us as Māori whānau at home waiting for our special brother to come back, it was heart-breaking.”*

22. Tamariki turi who were boarding in these Deaf schools were often only able to see their whānau during holidays, about three times a year. Because our whānau were not supported to learn methods of communication, like NZSL, communication was extremely difficult when tamariki returned. This created further barriers between tamariki turi and their whānau:

*“[They were] happy to see each other but biggest problem is communication, they come back home, and they can't communicate with whānau.”*

23. Not only was communication within the whānau effected, but some tamariki were taught negative ideas by staff and other pupils about their whānau and Māori generally. This further isolated them from their whānau, hapū and iwi, and increased their disconnection from te ao Māori:

*“We had our own signs, our own comms. We could go be mischievous together, but when he came back from school, he had lost the will to dream, he was conditioned. We were no longer happy to be together as brother and sister, he was told your family will steal everything from you, that’s how Māori are. I was sad that he thought this way about me. I looked at our family and I saw that nobody knew how to sign, nobody had kept up the life to be in his world. They were told there was nothing they could do for him just to send him away.”*

24. Because there were only two Deaf schools in Aotearoa, Whānau Turi would either have to move to the Tāmaki Makaurau or Ōtautahi, or accept living far from their tamariki.

### **Deaf Organisations**

25. Many of us have worked in Deaf organisations, particularly Deaf Aotearoa. These organisations are Pākehā-run and Pākehā-focused. In our experience, these organisations mainly employ Pākehā and when they have hired Māori we are treated as puppets. We have faced a lot of discrimination and racism while working in these spaces:

*“I used to work for Deaf Aotearoa, and the discrimination as a Māori working there was disgusting. I stayed on longer to fight that battle. I am angry that they get huge funding for Māori, and they do nothing. It is only lately that they finally hired a Tāngata Turi ... one Māori Deaf person to represent them all. When they spoke up about Māori Deaf, they were gunned down.”*

*“We have over 20 emails challenging the manager at the Christchurch Deaf Club because the Deaf Māori group wanted a pōwhiri this week on Friday for the 100-year celebration of the Christchurch Deaf Club. I wasn’t happy, as the President said that the Māori Deaf have no relationship with the Club so why would you need a pōwhiri. That isn’t right. In the past, at the 75-year celebration the Māori Deaf got to do that, but now no.”*

26. These experiences make us quite disappointed and upset.

27. Often, we have felt like we are just being used by these organisations so they can get funding. The funding all seems to go to Pākehā organisations, not to Tāngata Turi. They have one or two Tāngata Turi sit on their boards, but they will not listen to us. We feel that we are only there to ensure that the organisations get as much funding as possible. This funding almost never goes towards Tāngata Turi-focused initiatives either. Deaf Aotearoa and other Pākehā organisations are only focused on supporting Pākehā Deaf. They ignore our ideas for what Tāngata Turi specifically need and do not understand why we do voluntary mahi directly with our Whānau Turi:

*“I was involved with Deaf Aotearoa for years ... It was a huge responsibility, but I was aiming to get Māori Deaf recognised in that organisation. I went to visit with Māori Deaf and their whānau in the weekends, and Deaf Aotearoa kept asking why are you doing that? They didn't understand, it was quite isolating. In the interview they spoke about qualifications etc. but doesn't mean much if you don't know the people. They don't appreciate that. They are just using us to get funding and do with it as you please. I spoke with the CEO about this, and I told him they are just using us. So, I resigned. I was upset with the board. No thank you for my hard work, no card, no text, nothing. I was just a puppet, they are the puppet masters, “thank you Mr. puppet for getting us the funding.” Once I worked that out, I left.”*

*“When Māori Deaf applied for funding, they were told Māori could not handle funding and finances. I would like to see that funding that Deaf Aotearoa receives is given to a Māori Deaf rōpū to run with people in place to help them, who will run it properly and be held accountable.”*

28. Tāngata Turi are excluded from Deaf culture and te ao Māori:

*“I think obviously colonisation has played a big part for everyone, especially for Māori Deaf. There's no place for Māori Deaf to stand confidently and be heard”*

29. Another example is NZSL week and Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori. Tāngata Turi are not a part of either of these weeks.



## Supporting Whānau Turi

30. Many of us do extensive unpaid mahi to support Whānau Turi, outside of our paid employment. We understand how much support Whānau Turi need that they are not receiving from the Government or Pākehā Deaf organisations. For many of us, this means travelling all around Aotearoa visiting Whānau Turi and providing them with assistance, often with how to communicate with and support their tamariki turi.

*“Who is going to work with those [lost] kids, I will try and teach [NZSL to] those kids from 15-21, really late in life to be learning things, so that makes it quite difficult teaching kids later on in life. I taught one kid who went to prison, they just gave up on him. Starting with kids when they are older it’s a little bit too late really. Something has to be done.”*

31. We have been advocating and lobbying for Tāngata Turi to be properly supported for decades. We have held 4 national Māori Deaf hui in the last 30 years, and we would like to have held more, but we are doing what we can with the resources we have. Despite our many years of lobbying, advocacy, holding hui and supporting whānau directly, many of the issues are still the same as they were 30 years ago:

*“...there’s still oppression and suffering and wanting and going without. For us its behavioural, we are pretty tired of the situation, it just goes on and on and on. We do what we can do, we stand up again and again and again for Māori Deaf and Māori Deaf youth. We need them to grow, give them more Deaf power. So that’s what I’m here for. It’s been a long time coming.”*

*“I’ve seen [Tāngata Turi advocate] travel to meetings, involved in lots of different organisations. He is one who has done a lot of lobbying, but it is never successful, and they are getting weary. Māori Deaf are tired. There is a lot of suffering. They have travelled throughout NZ, lobbying over and over again but nothing.”*

32. From working in these Pākehā spaces and from our decades of supporting Whānau Turi, we know that Tāngata Turi need their own Tāngata Turi-run organisation that is working on behalf of them.

## **Barriers to reconnecting with Te Ao Māori**

33. By removing tamariki tūri from their whānau, they are removed from their whenua, their whakapapa, their hapū, their iwi, their culture, and their identity. Many of us have had to start our Māori journeys later in life and have struggled with our disconnection from te ao Māori. In Deaf spaces, we have not been able to engage with our Māori identity, and in Māori spaces there are many barriers to our connection, particularly communication:

*“Our iwi are struggling to become part of your world. Our iwi, marae, hapū who are Māori who are half of your world are not allowed to talk to you unless there are qualified interpreters.”*

*“When I was younger, in 1994 that’s when I started at Te Wānanga O Aotearoa. When I started, I didn’t know nothing about Māori. It was coming back into my life. I remembered Māori words from when I was little, my parents didn’t teach me, but I knew it from waiata. Now I’m older, I’m really proud of myself for what I’ve done.*

34. Whānau Tūri have had no access to learning sign language, which continues to uphold barriers between Tāngata Tūri and Whānau Tūri. We want to be able to return to our marae, to learn our reo, our whakapapa kōrero, but it is largely inaccessible:

*“I did te reo through Te Wānanga O Aotearoa, I have lived in te ao Māori. I would be the only deaf one in the class... I’m involved with Māori deaf, what I see them do is they don’t know nothing about it. We have to learn te reo Māori, iwi hapū all that stuff we need to know that. I want to go back to my own marae, I asked the whānau can I go back home to learn whanaungatanga? I need to know, its back in my marae, but there is no signing. I asked whānau back there, I wanted to see the whānau, they said yes, you should come here and teach us signing I said no, I came here to learn whakapapa.”*

## **Looking Forward**

### **Whānau Tūri for Whānau Tūri**

35. Whānau Tūri need funding so we are able to support ourselves. Pākehā organisations have shown us that they will not support Māori Deaf, and that they do not know how to. We know how to. We have lived experience as

whānau and Tāngata Turi and we understand what our community needs. We have started many different Tāngata Turi organisations, but funding has been our biggest hurdle:

*“The funding never goes to deaf Māori, always to Deaf Aotearoa etc. We have all these ideas, we work for ourselves. We can work as a team.”*

*“The funding is all there, I want to see how many people come to use that funding. Why have they [Deaf Aotearoa] got the money and not us?”*

36. We are treated differently to these Pākehā organisations, simply because we are Māori. We are held to a higher standard of accountability and often our funding applications are turned down because of who we are:

*“They have worked so hard to try and be the Māori organisation that is not going to spend the money, they will show all the money, to prove you can give them the money. There is a stigma.”*

37. We would like to be role models for our tamariki turi, because they need to be able to have Tāngata Turi to look to. Working with tamariki turi is a priority for us, because so many of them lose their way:

*“My dream is to have support workers with youth, they are depressed or their confidence is really low from whānau telling them they can't do things, it would be a great way to support them.”*

*“We need to set up a working team to help Deaf kids, so we can visit them.”*

### **Access to Sign Language**

38. We want to be able to reach out to iwi and hapū to find Whānau Turi and give them the knowledge and tools they need to better support their turi whānau. Tamariki turi need to stay within their whānau. In particular, we would like to see more Whānau Turi learning sign language:

*“Sign language is a rich resource, but not accessible for Māori Deaf.”*

*“...we can give presentations about what it’s like to be Deaf and what their kids experience, and they can choose whether they want to be part of the Deaf Māori world or not. Ask how do you need us to help you look after tamariki, how to get parents to learn signing, where do you want that to be.”*

39. When the whānau signs, their tamariki turi can communicate well with them, and their life with the whānau is more stable and connected. Through this, tamariki turi can stay more connected to te ao Māori as well:

*“So when the kiddies learn sign, they grow strong in their own identity, and they have an understanding of their Māori world, that encourages the hearing whanau too.”*

40. We believe that signing will help the whole whānau, not just their tamariki turi. They will develop these skills, and then pass them on to others. This is one way we can develop more trilingual interpreters. Sign language should also be developed in our kohanga and kura reo. There are very few trilingual interpreters and it is very hard to find them. If we have Whānau Turi around the country all learning to sign, we will have many more trilingual interpreters.

### ***Te Reo Māori Sign Language***

41. We would also like to see more sign, specifically Māori sign, introduced at kohanga reo. We have seen first-hand how much tamariki at that age enjoy using their hands to kōrero. It is also very valuable for them to learn these skills. They will be able to sign in later life, and will be trilingual. When the tamariki learn to sign, their parents are also more likely to be interested in learning. Increasing rates of fluency in sign will lead to Whānau Turi being more connected with their wider whānau, hapū and iwi.

*“For that age group, you want to make it more flexible in their lives, just play with their toys and kōrero at the same time. Cunning way to get language in. My sister said why are you teaching them sign when they’re young? Its valuable to teach then young, because when they get older it is valuable.”*

*“Parents see that, say wow my kids can do it so I can too. Then they use body language to pick it up. It grows from there.”*

42. Many of us have worked to develop te reo Māori sign and have built our own methods of teaching it. We would like to be funded to continue developing Māori sign, to create resources to teach it, and to work directly with Whānau Turi to teach them Māori sign:

*“I would like to offer matua [Tāngata Turi] a way to present his reo, to present his concept on how he believes te reo Māori should be formed. I love his ideas for how sign language should be formed in te ao Māori. I would like to see his kaupapa brought to fruition and the way in which he creates his reo to be replicated around Aotearoa.”*

### **Interpreters**

43. There must be more funding for interpreters. Tāngata Turi should be able to access funding for interpreters for events like conferences or iwi hui. There is some funding available, but nobody knows about it. We often have to take our own interpreter if we want to go to these events. A number of us attended Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, and while there were other Deaf there, there were no interpreters. Access to and funding for interpreters and interpreter development needs to increase.

### **Identity**

44. We would like to see a change in the language used to describe us. We do not identify as having a disability or being disabled. We are Tāngata Turi. Disabled does not describe us:

*“For me, my language works fine, I have hands that work. I don’t think of myself as disabled, nor do I think hearing people are disabled because they can’t sign.*

*Think about the word: The first part – “Dis” meaning can’t, and the second part – “Able” meaning can. Those two parts of the word don’t make sense, I don’t know what it means anymore. I know I can’t hear, but I don’t think of myself as being disabled. I can see for hearing people, come closer if you can’t communicate the way I need you to, read lips, I see people. I drive. You can walk, I can walk.”*

45. We do not want to be described or thought of as the minority of the minority community either. People say this about Māori Deaf, and give it as the reason why there will never be any funding for us, because there are not enough of us:

*“Can we stop referring to our Deaf community as the minority of the community. Māori Deaf identified as a minority, within a minority.”*

46. The Government needs to keep better records of Māori Deaf. We do not actually know how many Tāngata Turi there are, because those records are not available. The Government has not provided any information on how many of us there are. Many Tāngata Turi are lost to us, and we would like to find them and support them as they may need. These Tāngata Turi are lost after they leave school, they disappear, and many of them are trying to find their turi whānau. Without this information being publicly available, we will not be able to find them and introduce them to their community.

47. Deaf spaces are very important to us, and while there are many Deaf clubs around the country, we do not have a Māori Deaf space. We do not fit into these Pākehā Deaf clubs, and so we would like to build our own:

*“I think it’s important for Deaf people to find somewhere they fit and feel comfortable. Somewhere to go and be themselves. That’s why we go there. But as Deaf Māori, we don’t fit there, what is the space we feel most comfortable in? It’s trying to find the right way to find the best where for Deaf Māori, we need to find out how to set that up. Then they can bring their whānau as well.”*

*“Yes, that’s the thing, where do we fit...Think of other ways of joining in with these guys here, maybe a marae, somewhere we are together. That’s Māori culture and where does Deaf Māori culture fit into that.”*

### **Collective statement**

This statement represents the views of the Whānau Turi in attendance at the Royal Commission hui held at the Risingholme Community Centre in Ōtautahi on Wednesday 7 September 2022.

This statement was drafted by Bennion Law as members of the Commission’s Legal Assistance Panel. The purpose of this statement is to provide evidence to the Royal Commission in a format that can be made public.