

# PAULA TESORIERO MNZM, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, WHAIKAHA – MINISTRY OF DISABLED PEOPLE



Paula Tesoriero

Breaking down barriers and challenging perceptions

## Paula Tesoriero is the first chief executive of Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People. Kirsten Rose catches up with her.

Paula Tesoriero MNZM is a force to be reckoned with. The Chief Executive of Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People is no stranger to breaking down barriers and perceptions of what disabled people can achieve.

Growing up on the Kapiti Coast, Paula embraced cycling as it gave her a sense of freedom. She could keep up with peers, often overtaking them.

By her thirties, Paula had become a gold-medal-winning Paralympian in cycling and had carved out a reputation as an astute legal advisor at the Ministry of Justice, culminating in senior management positions, first at the High Court and then at Statistics New Zealand. In June 2017, Paula became the Disability Rights Commissioner at the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, a role she took on with gusto, protecting and promoting the rights of around 1.1 million disabled New Zealanders (24 percent of the population). Her impressive leadership and athletic aptitude led her to be appointed Chef de Mission at the 2020 Summer Paralympics in Tokyo, a challenging role due to COVID-19 restrictions impeding the build-up and competition.

### Another challenge

Now Paula has taken on yet another challenge: leading the newly established Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People.

“It is still very early days, and there is a lot of work to do, but I am excited to be at the helm of Whaikaha and getting down to business. It means a lot to have a ministry led by a disabled person because representation matters. The first time I joined my colleagues at a full meeting of public service chief executives, I was struck by the significance of having a disabled person at the table for the first time,” she says.

“My experience as a Paralympian and Chef de Mission taught me a lot about how disabled people can change perceptions and transform society through powerful vehicles like the Paralympic movement. I think Whaikaha can drive change in a similar way. Many disabled people fought hard to make Whaikaha a reality, and the success of our organisation really matters to our community. It matters to all New Zealanders from an equity perspective, and as a disabled person myself, it really matters to me.”

From the outset, Whaikaha has involved the disabled community in its development. In the establishment phase, an online

platform was created – AmplifyU – that allowed disabled people to engage with decision makers and provide feedback on the make-up of the Ministry, including its name.

As Chief Executive, Paula now takes on overseeing Whaikaha’s establishment and ensuring the community feedback is reflected in the development of policies and processes.

“Our aim is to drive change towards a better, more independent future for disabled people, tāngata whaikaha, and their whānau. As we build Whaikaha, we will be empowering communities to drive change and support barriers coming down across the whole system. No one knows their impairment better than a disabled person, so continuing to listen to the experiences of disabled people and working at that community level across government agencies is going to be really important.”

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### Driving change

Over the past three months, the team has been focused on ensuring a smooth transfer of existing services and support from the Ministry of Health for the approximately 43,000 disabled people receiving support on any given day. It is also recruiting staff, engaging with disabled community partners, planning, and agreeing on work priorities.

“It is a big job, but we’re making good progress,” says Paula.

“The success of Whaikaha is really visceral for me. As we grow our capacity and capability, I am hopeful that we will be in that position to really start to drive change across government, for a transformed system across key government areas.

“From next year, Whaikaha will begin work towards implementing the Enabling Good Lives approach to disability support services on a national scale. This work will be done in partnership with the disability community and with Māori. It will take time to do this effectively – to ensure it results in improved outcomes for disabled people and their whānau.”

Paula sees similarities and synergies between her new role and her previous role as Disability Rights Commissioner.

### Drawing people together

“Whaikaha aims to achieve change, equity, inclusion, and better

lives for disabled people. That is something I felt passionately about as Disability Rights Commissioner and continue to champion. Achieving this will require strong partnerships between disabled people, whānau, friends, officials, and service providers. A lot of my time as Disability Rights Commissioner involved bringing these groups closer together, which was a good foundation for the role I am in now,” she says.

## MANY DISABLED PEOPLE FOUGHT HARD TO MAKE WHAIKAHA A REALITY.

“The main difference is that I’m now part of an organisation that can pull the levers of government, while also changing the way disability support services are thought about at a government level. Our view is that, rather than government agencies deciding what disability support services should look like, we need to empower disabled people and their whānau to lead these decisions. They have told us what they need to live a good life. It is our role to enable them to go and live it. This will open up huge opportunities for disabled people to access the things they want in their lives.”



Paula sees the responsibility and accountability for effective services and policies for disabled people as the responsibility of every government agency.

“Legislation has provided us with a stewardship role to work alongside other government departments and entities. Together, all of government is responsible for providing support and services to all New Zealanders, including the 24 percent of people who are disabled.

“It is vital that all parts of the public sector continue to take responsibility, in their respective domains, for improving the rights and wellbeing of disabled people just as they do currently for different population groups.”

## Change across all the public service

“We want to help stimulate change in broader government policies and practices. Whaikaha has an important role in working with and advising other government agencies on disability issues and providing leadership in establishing cross-government mechanisms, such as the Disability Action Plan and reporting on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

## WE NEED TO EMPOWER DISABLED PEOPLE AND THEIR WHĀNAU TO LEAD THESE DECISIONS.

“The UN Committee made sixty really powerful recommendations that cut across most government agencies to deliver change for disabled people, so that gives you a sense of the breadth of the change.

“For a long time, disabled people have been calling for change across a number of areas, such as better support when children

are young, an inclusive education system, and good access to healthcare services. We know some of the barriers to those services have been around cost, transport, accessible buildings, and attitudes, so helping to break those barriers down will be a focus for us. If underlying attitudes can change, then that, in and of itself, will really start to reduce those barriers and move us forward,” says Paula.

“The reason for Whaikaha’s existence is to deliver bold and transformational change for disabled people. We hope that, in time, Whaikaha will really be influencing the way Aotearoa New Zealand thinks about disability and enabling disabled people, and will be breaking down those barriers; because, at the end of the day, people are disabled by the barriers that exist in society, and that is what we need to change.”