Report of the Petitions Committee

Petition of Citizens Advice Bureau New Zealand: Leave no-one behind—Campaign to address digital exclusion

April 2022

Contents

Hon Jacqui Dean
Chairperson

Petition of Citizens Advice Bureau New Zealand

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of Citizens Advice Bureau New Zealand—Leave no-one behind – Campaign to address digital exclusion—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Concern that digital exclusion leaves New Zealanders behind

The petition was presented to the House on 7 July 2021. It requests:

> That the House of Representatives urge the Government to address digital exclusion so that no-one is left behind because they can't or don't wish to engage online; to implement accessibility and inclusion standards for public services that include offline channels; and to ensure Citizens Advice Bureau is resourced to address the impacts of public services going online; and note that 7,394 people have signed a petition online and on paper to this effect.

The petition included letters of support from The Salvation Army, IHC, Grey Power NZ, the Human Rights Commission, the Disability Rights Commissioner, Rural Women New Zealand, the Disabled Persons Assembly, Age Concern NZ, Digital Equity Coalition Aotearoa, and Consumer New Zealand. It also included a joint submission from Blind Low Vision NZ, Kāpō Māori Aotearoa NZ Inc, Parents of Vision Impaired NZ Inc, and Access Advisors.

We sought and received further submissions from the Digital Public Service branch of the Department of Internal Affairs, the Office for Disability Issues, the Office for Seniors (both offices sit within the Ministry for Social Development), and the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment.

What is digital exclusion?

Citizens Advice Bureau New Zealand—Ngā Pou Whakawhirinaki o Aotearoa (CABNZ)[1] defines digital exclusion as situations in which people face barriers to participating fully in society because of information and services being online.[2] This can mean they find it difficult to access information or services, encounter obstacles when trying to act on their rights or fulfil their obligations, or face complex challenges in navigating processes and systems.

One in five New Zealanders are digitally excluded

The Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) estimates that 20 percent of New Zealanders experience some form of digital exclusion. People most at risk of digital exclusion include

---

[1] CABNZ is a registered charity that provides free, confidential, independent information and advice. Its services are provided by more than 2,500 trained volunteers in 83 locations around the country, supported by a national database of information.

[2] Citizens Advice Bureaux New Zealand, CAB Spotlight Report: Face to Face with Digital Exclusion.

those in social housing, disabled people, Māori and Pasifika, people living in larger country towns, people with low incomes or literacy levels, older people, offenders and ex-offenders, migrants and refugees, the unemployed, and those not actively seeking work. These groups are also more likely to have lower levels of general wellbeing.

For the service's 2020 report on digital exclusion, CABNZ workers in over 80 locations collected information from clients about their experiences. Within a three-month period, CABNZ volunteers recorded 4,379 client interactions where digital exclusion was identified. This represented 10 percent of total interactions. The petitioner submitted that this data did not include the many additional services not recorded as full client interviews, in particular the people who visit CABNZ only to get paper copies of forms.

What are the barriers to digital inclusion?

Lack of access to computer and internet

We heard from CABNZ that many clients cannot readily access a computer or other appropriate device, or are without reliable, affordable internet access. In the 2018 census, 14 percent of households stated they did not have access to the internet. CABNZ told us that this is likely to be an under-estimation, given the digital exclusion issues with that census and its all-time-low response rate.

Language barriers

A lack of confidence with written English is a particular challenge. Clients become anxious when completing important online processes in a language that is not their mother tongue. In the past, clients were able to access CABNZ services in a range of languages through its dedicated multilingual service, Language Connect. We were told that the service averaged 14,000 inquiries a year. It was closed in December 2018 after Immigration New Zealand discontinued its funding.

Disability

We were told that disabled people also seek help from CABNZ because of challenges with accessing the internet, and with navigating online information and services. The petitioner pointed out that digital exclusion through disability is a possibility for anybody at any time, given a change in circumstances.

Lack of desire to be online

Many CABNZ clients have stated that they prefer face-to-face support. Some seek human interaction for reassurance or clarity. DIA said that after well-publicised security breaches, and cyber-attacks on agencies, not everyone trusts the Government or private institutions with their data. We note that, even if all other barriers to digital inclusion could be removed, this one will likely remain.

How has COVID-19 affected digital exclusion?

We heard that the COVID-19 pandemic has sped up the move to online services. It also amplified the role that digital engagement plays in New Zealanders' daily lives. As well as increasing the need to undertake transactions online (such as grocery shopping, or paying bills), lockdowns saw many New Zealanders moving online for social connections.

Other issues

Other barriers include the following:

- Limited digital literacy: many people lack the skills or confidence to carry out tasks online and need help to navigate digital processes.

- Financial barriers: as well as the need to own and maintain a computer and internet connection, some people are unable to make payments online.

- General literacy: difficulties with reading, writing, and language comprehension make online information and processes inaccessible for some.

CABNZ believes Government is creating digital exclusion

The petitioner told us that government agencies are shifting online, taking a "digital only" or "digital first" approach, without a public mandate for doing so. Offline channels are being deliberately phased out, and inclusive services are disappearing. Many agencies are reducing access to paper-based resources, and encouraging people to use online services, such as RealMe, MyMSD, MyIR, MyACC, and connected.govt.nz.

CABNZ said it believes that New Zealand public services are failing to meet their mandated purpose, which is to serve the public. In its 2020 report "Face to Face with Digital Exclusion", CABNZ gave the following examples of government agencies scaling back on non-digital channels, reducing access to paper-based resources, and in some cases making digital the only option.[3]

Inland Revenue is undergoing significant digital transformation

Inland Revenue's changes have aimed to modernise the tax system so people can more easily pay tax and receive entitlements. New Zealanders can now use online services for all tax processes. Inland Revenue (IR), the Accident Compensation Corporation, and several banks have phased out cheques.

CABNZ told us that many of its clients are challenged in setting up or using MyIR, the portal through which New Zealand employees can check their tax data and transfers from employers. Clients may not have an online device, an email address, nor the digital skills and confidence needed to operate online. Clients also come to CABNZ to access and complete tax-related forms. Some clients face difficulties in understanding IR's information or correspondence.

We heard that Inland Revenue is now "looking more broadly at the accessibility of its service, having recognised that its digital transformation had some unforeseen consequences". It has recognised that many people have never returned to their MyIR account: they are missing notifications of payments due, or entitlements to a payment. It is beginning to dismantle some of the digital exclusion barriers caused by its new processes.

---

[3] Citizens Advice Bureaux New Zealand (2020) <u>Face to Face with Digital Exclusion: A CAB Spotlight Report into the Impacts of Digital Public Services on Inclusion and Wellbeing.</u>

Immigration NZ ceased printing forms, and closed all public counters

CABNZ told us that no face-to-face service is possible with Immigration NZ without an appointment, which can only be arranged through the Contact Centre. We heard that in 2018 Immigration NZ also ceased bulk printing of visa-related forms, leaving CABNZ to print hundreds of thousands of pages for clients each year. Immigration NZ did not forewarn CABNZ that clients were being redirected to it.

Further examples of digital exclusion from government agencies

- Tenancy Services made the option of completing a paper-based application to the Tenancy Tribunal almost invisible on its website.

- The Department of Internal Affairs stopped printing passport renewal forms in 2019.

- The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment made the system for requesting Employment Mediation Services an online process, with no accessible paper-based option.

- Many people faced difficulties using RealMe, the government-operated online authentication service. This included being told by a government department not to use Gmail to register, and to use a "proper computer" instead of a phone or tablet. Gmail is the most popular email system worldwide, with over one billion users.

- Many clients struggle to use the KiwiSaver withdrawal process, and need in-person help from CABNZ.

One example of inclusivity

In contrast, we heard that when My Vaccine Pass went live online, and digitally excluded people approached CABNZ for help, agencies responded quickly. The Ministry of Health added capacity to its phone line, and offered in-person support in participating pharmacies. This is an approach to inclusivity that CABNZ wants to see across all government agencies.

A failure to design for accessibility

A joint submission in support of the petition told us that many digital solutions fail to design for accessibility.[4] This failure effectively excludes disabled people, and is inefficient.

For example, CABNZ told us that in May 2020 the COVID-19 tracing app was found to be unusable by blind people and those with low vision, and had to be fixed retrospectively. Submitters told us that subsequent retrofitting is time-consuming, expensive, and often less useful than incorporating accessibility into the design phase. We recognise that the retrofitting of My Vaccine Pass, described above, probably fits this description.

Who is most affected by digital exclusion?

Māori and Pasifika are disproportionately disadvantaged

The petitioner told us that in its survey, Māori and Pasifika were over-represented among CABNZ clients experiencing digital exclusion. Māori accounted for 20 percent of digitally

---

4   Blind Low Vision NZ, Kāpō Māori Aotearoa NZ Inc, Parents of Vision Impaired NZ Inc, and Access Advisors provided a joint submission which was included in the submission from CABNZ.

excluded clients, but made up only 13 percent of all clients. Likewise, Pasifika made up 14 percent of those experiencing digital exclusion, but only 8 percent of all clients.

The petitioner referred us to the New Zealand Survey of Adult Skills, which measures skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.[5] This survey reports that one in five Pacific people aged 16 to 65 years either had no computer experience, did not pass a simple computer-use assessment, or declined to use a computer. This compared with one in ten non-Pacific people in the same age bracket.

CABNZ noted that the government team leading the development of the Digital Inclusion Blueprint for Aotearoa commented that in their engagement with tāngata whenua,

> …we found factors such as poverty, health, education and social needs that disadvantage Māori generally, also have direct correlation to the access, motivations, trust and skills that are related to digital inclusion / exclusion.[6]

Despite this awareness, CABNZ said,

> the digital transformation of government services appears to be barrelling forward without regard for the negative impacts on Māori and the ways in which digital exclusion is exacerbating existing inequalities.

The petitioner said that the Government has articulated a clear aspiration to lift Māori and Pacific incomes, skills, and opportunities, but that the effects of digital exclusion are likely to have the opposite effect. The disproportionate disadvantage experienced by Māori and Pasifika demonstrates that the move towards a "digital first" approach is not being designed to meet the needs of all groups equally.

The digital exclusion of disabled people

According to the 2013 Statistics NZ Disability Survey, 24 percent of New Zealanders identified as having a disability. Blind Low Vision New Zealand told us that, currently, 180,000 New Zealanders are blind, deafblind, or have low vision.[7] Māori had a significantly higher disability rate than non-Māori across all age groups. Older people also had higher disability rates.

The joint submission by Blind Low Vision NZ and others noted that te reo Māori is now included in many government websites. However, no guidelines exist about how to include te reo without negatively affecting screen reader users and people with language processing issues.

The Office for Disability Issues (ODI) and the Office for Seniors referred us to the 2019 DIA-commissioned report by Motu Economic and Public Policy Research, "Digital Inclusion and

---

[5] Ministry of Education, 2018: Survey of Adult Skills: Pacific adults' literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills.

[6] Citizens Advice Bureaux New Zealand (2020) Face to Face with Digital Exclusion: A CAB Spotlight Report into the Impacts of Digital Public Services on Inclusion and Wellbeing. p 16.

[7] Blind Low Vision New Zealand is the operating name of the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind.

Wellbeing in New Zealand".[8] This told us that, in 2018, 17 percent of disabled people reported having no internet access, compared with 5 percent of the full sample.

IHC New Zealand (IHC) told us that disabled people are among the poorest in New Zealand.

> They may have an older phone that cannot display certain websites, they might not have any data and they may not have access to a device that lets them access the internet in a private and safe way.

The Motu report found that disabled people were at greater risk than others from an internet violation (such as virus infection, or phishing).[9] The Disabled Persons Assembly New Zealand said that some disabled people may need ongoing support, "especially those who are more at risk of harm online and those who may not be able to access support from mainstream organisations".

The Disability Rights Commissioner told us that, in addition to covering the costs of being online, "many economically disadvantaged disabled people face the added costs of specialised devices and software to access government information and services". For example, some specialised screen reading technologies cost at least $10,000.

IHC said that many intellectually disabled people do not feel confident going online. Many prefer to deal with government services face-to-face. "If the settings are right for intellectually disabled people, they will probably be right for all."

Older people often lack digital skills

The Motu report also found that internet use and access diminishes with age. Up to 25 percent of people aged 65 and over do not have access to the internet. This figure rises to 35 percent for people aged over 75. The CABNZ 2020 report on digital exclusion found that over 40 percent of people aged over 60 faced barriers to accessing government information and services online.

The Office for Seniors told us that "the overlap between older people and several of the other digitally disadvantaged groups points to the possibility of more severe digital exclusion among a smaller proportion of the older population". This submitter referred us to a report from the Bank of New Zealand, "Digital skills for life in Aotearoa 2021".[10] It found that:

- One third of people aged 60–69 lack digital skills. This rises to half for those aged 70–79, and 79 percent of all those aged over 80. Only 53 percent of those aged over 80 use the internet frequently.

- Confidence in using digital devices also diminishes with age. Ninety percent of people reported being confident with them, reducing to 81 percent for those aged 60–69, 69 percent for those aged 70–79, and 67 percent for those aged over 80.

---

8   Motu Economic and Public Policy Research 2019: Digital inclusion and Wellbeing in New Zealand.

9   Phishing is the fraudulent practice of sending emails that purport to be from reputable companies. The senders of these emails intend to induce people to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers.

10   Bank of New Zealand 2021: Digital skills for life in Aotearoa.

- Seventy-three percent of people aged 70–79 reported having the skills to manage their money and transact online securely. This fell to 55 percent for those aged over 80.

The rural community is disadvantaged by digital exclusion

Rural Women New Zealand (RWNZ) told us that digital exclusion creates inequities for the rural population across health, financial, education, and social services. It also affects financial and regulatory services, including banking transactions and compliance. Inability to file tax returns or payroll data exacerbates rural people's stress.

RWNZ referred us to its recent "Quality of Life" report, which identified a lack of quality digital technology as the biggest issue for rural communities:

> Being excluded from digital transactions in their homes, on their farms and in their communities has profound effects on rural communities' ability to…transact their lives and businesses, implement digital innovations on-farm and contact emergency services and/or others in an emergency.

RWNZ commented, "It seems that the policy, programme and service changes we are seeing have not included a rural impact analysis at the development level." It argued that this is unacceptable, given that digital exclusion has such a disempowering effect on the health, social, and economic wellbeing of rural communities.

Youth are not immune from digital exclusion

The CABNZ findings reinforce that digital inclusion is not guaranteed for youth. Those aged under 30 accounted for 8 percent of clients experiencing digital exclusion. One CABNZ volunteer said that she had helped many students who were "displaying state-of-the-art phones and well versed in their operation, yet unable to complete final transactions and finish what they started". She attributed this to "second-rate" online programmes and set-up.

The Digital Equity Coalition Aotearoa told us that, during a 2021 meeting, the Race Relations Commissioner said that in a recent visit to Massey High School in Auckland he found that 35 percent of students were without devices. Of those who did have devices, 65 percent did not have internet access in their homes.

We heard that children and young people who may be negatively affected by having digitally excluded caregivers are not counted in any statistic relating to digital exclusion. Therefore, people aged under 16 are likely to be disproportionately represented in those digitally excluded. This challenges the assumption that it is mostly older people who struggle with online services, and that this problem will phase out over time.

What is the impact of digital exclusion?

CABNZ believes digital exclusion breaches human rights obligations

We heard that digital exclusion is breaching:

- Te Tiriti o Waitangi—obligations to Māori

- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 9

- the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 21

- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- wider human rights obligations to all New Zealanders.[11]

Some feel disempowered and fearful

CABNZ's 2020 report found that older clients said they do not feel valued because they "don't understand the internet", and that this makes them "feel depressed". They feel they have no say and that change is being forced upon them. If they can access online information and services they may still struggle to understand them, and can "feel stupid" having to ask for help.

Grey Power told us that off-line access to public services is imperative. Many of its members feel disempowered and hopeless because of their inability to use the internet.

An autistic man quoted in CABNZ's submission said,

> I am becoming an outsider in my own life…I don't understand online. I find it too hard to find the right things and then it's written in a way that I am not sure if it's what I am supposed to do…I don't need screens and lists and more lists of information to trawl through and still not be able to find the answers to my questions so that I can make decisions. I can't "just look something up"…I don't know what the rules are and it makes me sad and stressed and sick…I fear I am being left behind. I fear I am not worthy. I fear the government doesn't care.

Exacerbation of disadvantage

Among the top ten areas of enquiry by CABNZ clients experiencing digital exclusion were income support, budgeting and general financial difficulties, and material (non-financial) welfare assistance. CABNZ told us this indicates that online solutions are not meeting the needs of those already experiencing significant disadvantage. A clear example of this is the digitisation of aspects of the social welfare system, and the barriers some people face when they are told to apply online, or to use MyMSD, when what they really need is time with another human offering face-to-face support.

CABNZ submitted that,

> For those who are already disadvantaged in society and who struggle to interact with the Government, the digital transformation of the public sector often makes things harder and fails to meet people's needs. This is particularly problematic in areas where difficulty accessing services has a negative impact on wellbeing.

Community services left to fill the gaps

CABNZ told us that, while government agencies undergo digital transformation and withdraw from physical presence in communities, CABNZ and other services such as libraries are implicitly relied on to fill the gaps. This role does fit within CABNZ's core mandate. However,

---

[11] Human Rights Commission: Access to government services is a human right.

volunteers are under increasing pressure, and are inadequately resourced to meet the level of need.

For example, as a result of Immigration NZ's decision to stop printing forms, CABNZ's 40 sites together have been printing 34,791 pages of immigration forms per month. Over a year this equated to over 400,000 pages of Immigration NZ documents printed by CABNZ. One CABNZ volunteer said,

> We started a clinic specifically to help clients with immigration forms. It has shown that INZ's estimate of the time it takes to apply is totally unrealistic. I have taken 8 hours with one family who then had to return the next day with more information to upload.

CABNZ said that dealing with complex issues and helping clients to fill in forms can be time-consuming. For the digital exclusion enquiries analysed for their 2020 report, 23 percent involved interactions of 30 minutes or more. The barriers to digital inclusion that people face, such as language, literacy, or disability, will often also be barriers that affect the amount of support required.

Two and a half thousand CABNZ volunteers reported seeing digital exclusion daily in their work. We heard that some CABNZ sites are subsisting on $20,000 a year to provide a full-time service with a part-time manager.

The Human Rights Commissioner mentioned his concern that CABNZ volunteer services are being used by government agencies to substitute for services that accommodate everyone, including those not online. Libraries and other community organisations are also under pressure to fill these needs.

The petitioner's proposed solution

A universal design of services

CABNZ emphasised that the answer to digital exclusion is not merely its opposite, digital inclusion. A response that focuses only on digital inclusion would be inadequate. However, CABNZ told us, this has been the Government's primary focus to date, as epitomised by the developing Digital Strategy for Aotearoa.

In contrast, the petitioner and its supporters want all government services to be provided through an "integrated, equitable, holistic, person / whānau centred, omni-channel (choice of channels) approach". It envisions a "streamlined, cross-government entry point". Off-line options should be seen as a critical part of a well-functioning public service. People should be able to access and transact with public service in a range of ways.

The petitioner told us that the Government should expand the Digital Service Design Standard into a "Public Service Design Standard".[12] The proposed standard should "explicitly identify standards for services to be available across channels, to reduce the social exclusion that happens with digital-only services". They said minimum service

---

[12] New Zealand Government: Digital Service Design Standard.

standards should be identified and mandated across all government services, as required under the Public Service Act 2020.[13]

ODI also encouraged a stronger focus on universal design of services, in accordance with its New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016–2026.[14] It said that careful consideration should be given to the approaches promoted in the Government's 2019 Digital Inclusion Blueprint.[15] This promotes the development of motivation, access, skills, and trust for those excluded from accessing digital services.

The petitioner cited Taiwan, Canada, and New South Wales as examples of good international models of inclusivity. Taiwan is a leader in digital government. It does not distinguish between online and other services. It looks at community needs and builds services in response. Canada and New South Wales have a single point of entry to public services that leads to an omni-channel approach, facilitating whatever the public needs to interact successfully with government agencies.[16] [17]

Ensure public services are people-centred and accessible to all

The petitioner said that public services should reflect the "spirit of service to the community" outlined in the Public Service Act. This includes treating all people with dignity and compassion, as well as understanding and meeting people's needs. The Motu report argued that internet access needs to be treated as an essential service, like water, electricity, and waste.

ODI said that accessibility is mandated in the New Zealand Disability Strategy, the Disability Action Plan, and the New Zealand Sign Language Strategy. Accessibility underpins inclusion, participation, and wellbeing. Disabled people must be able to freely access services so they can "participate in and belong to the world" and achieve their fundamental human rights to housing, transport, public buildings and spaces, as well as to information, communication, and technology.

The joint application from Blind Low Vision NZ and others told us that government agencies must engage early with digital accessibility consultants to help design digital public services. This is more cost effective than attempting to retrospectively adjust websites, applications, and online forms.

CABNZ told us that the work it proposes is not about turning back the clock, but requires a "purposeful reorientation" to align service delivery with people's needs. It said,

> The work to take this forward must be coordinated, across all-of-government, and have strong leadership. This is clearly within the purview of the Minister for the Public Service, and Te Kawa Mataaho—the Public Service Commission.

---

13 Public Service Act 2020, sections 13 and 16.

14 Office for Disability Issues: New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016–2026.

15 Department of Internal Affairs: The Digital Inclusion Blueprint—Te Mahere mō te Whakaurunga Matihiko.

16 Government of Canada: Service Canada.

17 NSW Government: Service NSW.

Develop an integrated strategy to address barriers to inclusion

The Government is developing a digital strategy for Aotearoa. We heard that the proposed strategy could be founded on three pillars: mahi tika (trust), mahi tahi (inclusion), and mahi ake (growth).

CABNZ says that instead of a digital strategy, the Government must work with the social sector to develop an integrated strategy that focuses on actively reducing the barriers to inclusion. This strategy needs to position digital inclusion in a wider context of social inclusion. It cannot merely cover access to digital devices, or courses that support improved digital literacy. Government needs to recognise that the same barriers people face in achieving social equality affect their opportunities to be online, and their experiences while online.

CABNZ also asked that all government policies and services be publicly measured and monitored against the Treasury's Living Standards Framework, to ensure that decisions are informed by what will best support improved wellbeing.[18]

The petitioner said that in relation to the specific barriers to digital inclusion identified in its report, the Government should:

- ensure that all New Zealand's communities, particularly rural communities, have reliable and affordable connections to the internet
- increase access to free Wi-Fi and digital devices for those in low-income households
- support disabled people to access appropriate equipment and technology, and ensure that service design is informed by disabled people, and by universal design principles
- ensure that offline services are available, accessible, and part of the proactive design of improved public services
- make access to paper copies of government forms and resources as easy and straightforward as possible (such as a "Request a paper copy be sent to you" option)
- make all government websites zero-rated, so they can be accessed without data-use charges (an approach currently used by several health and wellbeing websites)[19]
- ensure that free-access computers, printing services, and facilities for scanning and uploading documents are readily accessible in the community
- ensure that free language assistance is available to those who need it so people can fully understand information and make informed decisions
- provide ongoing learning opportunities with the aim of increasing basic digital literacy and confidence, and include ongoing helpdesk-type support.

Provide increased resourcing for intermediary organisations

The petitioner told us that the Government needs to ensure CABNZ's survival through adequate funding, and support CABNZ's capacity for strategic engagement on digital

---

18   The Treasury: Living Standards Framework Dashboard.

19   Ministry of Health: Sponsored Data.

exclusion and inclusion. It asked that all community intermediaries be provided with specific funding to meet the demand and cost-shifting that has resulted from government services going online. This includes funding for printing, hardware, software, and facilities, and learning and development for staff and volunteers. CABNZ also wants the Government to provide dedicated customer support and escalation mechanisms for community intermediaries so they can provide timely support.

The Department of Internal Affairs acknowledged CABNZ's role in supporting and providing alternative pathways for individuals, whānau, and communities who are unable to, or choose not to, access online services. The Office for Disability Issues supports additional funding for CABNZ, which it said will mitigate the risks of digital exclusion for some groups. However, it emphasised that this proposal needs to be considered within the context of other organisations or networks that may connect more effectively with the groups most affected by digital exclusion.

Enforce the Web Accessibility Standard

DIA named the New Zealand Government Web Standards as one of the "range of initiatives focused on creating a digitally inclusive Aotearoa".[20] Every public and non-public service agency must meet the Government's Web Accessibility Standard in all its websites, whether public- or internally-facing.

However, not all New Zealand websites are accessible or comply with the standard. The Office for Disability Issues referred us to the research report, "Digital inclusion user insights—Disabled people", in which interviewees stated that web accessibility is still generally poor, and that there is a need to enforce the standard.[21] DIA told us it is working on further ways to improve user accessibility, usability, and experience across all government and other websites.

How is the Government already supporting digital inclusion?

The Department of Internal Affairs acknowledges digital exclusion

The Department of Internal Affairs acknowledged that some government services are leaning too heavily on an online approach. DIA's Digital Public Service branch told us that it leads an all-of-government digital inclusion work programme. This seeks to lead, connect and support a co-ordinated approach that will digitally include all New Zealanders who wish to be.

The department told us that it is examining all the barriers to digital inclusion, and working with Māori, Pasifika, disabled people, and new migrants with English as a second language, to understand what makes it difficult for them to engage online. It said that the Government is

> …working to ensure that people who cannot or do not want to engage in the digital world are still able to participate in society, and are able to

---

[20] Department of Internal Affairs: NZ Government Web Standards.

[21] Department of Internal Affairs: Digital inclusion user insights—Disabled people.

access government services and entitlements in a way that does not rely on digital connection.

We look forward to hearing about the practical results from these initiatives.

What is the Government's vision for digital inclusion?

The Government's 2019 Digital Inclusion Blueprint defined digital inclusion as "an end state where everyone has equitable opportunities to participate in society using digital technologies".[22] It stated that to be "digitally included", people must meet these four criteria:

- motivation (interest, time, and benefits)

- access (computer and connection, including accessibility, affordability, and convenience)

- skills (training, support, and knowing how to use)

- trust (security, and protection of identity).

In its "Digital inclusion stocktake", the Department of Internal Affairs identified that the element least attended to by existing digitisation programmes is motivation. Only 8 percent of government initiatives and 11 percent of community initiatives had this as their focus.[23] However, CABNZ told us, motivation is often presented as an ultimatum: get online, or get left behind. The result is that rather than feeling motivated, people can be left feeling disrespected and unsupported.

In the discussion document "Te koke ki tētahi Rautaki Matihiko mō Aotearoa, Towards a Digital Strategy for Aotearoa", digital inclusion is described as a state where "all New Zealanders have the tools, services, and skills they need to participate in, contribute to, benefit from, and lead in the digital world."[24] We support this vision, while acknowledging CABNZ's understanding that some New Zealanders may never be comfortable online.

CABNZ said it was disturbed to see that the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2020–2021 clearly articulates, "…we recognise non-digital access will be time-bound as more and more government services will only be available online in the future".

The Government's goals and targets

The current Government has placed wellbeing at the centre of its vision for New Zealand, noting that "Wellbeing is when people are able to lead fulfilling lives with purpose, balance and meaning to them."[25] CABNZ told us it believes the Government's approach to providing digital services needs to be examined within this framework, and that it continues "to see people experiencing unnecessary and avoidable harm as a result of government agencies taking a digital-first, rather than a people-first, approach".

The Government's "Strategy for a Digital Public Service" recognises that,

---

22   Digital.govt.nz 2019: The Digital Inclusion Blueprint.

23   Digital.govt.nz: Digital inclusion stocktake: What digital inclusion looks like in New Zealand communities.

24   New Zealand Government: Te koke ki tētahi Rautaki Matihiko mō Aotearoa, Towards a Digital Strategy for Aotearoa.

25   The Treasury, 2019: The Wellbeing Budget 2019.

> …some people can't or don't want to engage online or use digital services. Digital transformation is about how we meet everyone's needs through better design and collaboration, whether online, face-to-face, through others or by phone.[26]

Under its plans for delivery of better public services, the Government has also stated that improved interactions with Government means that, "People have easy access to public services, which are designed around them, when they need them".[27] This goal is accompanied by a new target that "80 percent of the transactions for the twenty most common public services will be completed digitally by 2021".

CABNZ submitted that, based on the experiences of its digitally excluded clients, these two goals may oppose each other.

Improving New Zealand's digital connectivity

The Communication Policy team within the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) develops policy, funding, and regulatory settings that underpin the Government's digital connectivity infrastructure (DCI) programmes. It referred us to the petitioner's request that the Government improve digital structure, particularly for rural communities. It said the Government has invested a total of $1.7 billion in improving New Zealand's connectivity infrastructure. Both DIA and MBIE said that when the existing investment programme in DCI is completed in 2023, 99.8 percent of New Zealanders will have access to improved broadband connectivity.[28]

They noted that Government has also invested $65 million into upgrading infrastructure to bolster capacity in rural networks. Budget 2021 funded a further $10 million for radio spectrum to promote rural deployment of 5G technology.

We heard that officials from the Communication Policy team have developed advice for the Government to help set the priorities and direction for future initiatives and government investment. This will improve connectivity in New Zealand.

Boosting digital capability for business

DIA told us that the 2019 Digital Technology Industry Transformation Plan is under way. This, along with the Digital Boost Programme, will "increase the digital capability of New Zealand businesses and help accelerate the growth of our vibrant and growing digital technology sector".

Improved digital inclusion for seniors

One of the goals for digital inclusion in the Government's "Better Later Life—He Oranga Kaumātua 2019–2034 Strategy" is that "as people age, they safely use technology to improve their lives".[29] An initial action in the strategy is to "improve the digital skills and

---

[26] Department of Internal Affairs, 2019: Strategy for a Digital Public Service.

[27] State Services Commission, 2017: Better Public Services: Improving interaction with government.

[28] These programmes are occurring through the Rural Broadband Initiative Phase Two, the Mobile Blackspot Fund, and the Marae Connectivity programme. The programmes are being implemented by Crown Infrastructure Partners.

[29] Office for Seniors—Te Tari Kaumātua: Better Later Life—He Oranga Kaumātua Strategy 2019 to 2034.

inclusion of older people". The first Better Later Life Action Plan was developed in 2021.[30] This sets out central government actions for 2021 to 2024 to implement the strategy over the next 12 years.

In Budget 2019, the Government allocated $600,000 to provide digital literacy training for seniors over three years. Digital Inclusion Alliance Aotearoa and 2020 Communications Trust were contracted to provide essential digital skills and literacy training for up to 4,700 people through the Digital Literacy Training for Seniors programme.[31]

The Office for Seniors said that it also recognises the need to support those who do not want to, or cannot, use digital technology to access the services they need. To achieve this, it is important that "different ways of accessing government services that meet the needs of all older people (eg, face-to-face and online) are considered".

Other digital skills training

- DIA said that during 2019/20 and 2020/21 it invested $10 million in digital skills training for individuals and whānau, and a further $5 million supporting small to medium-sized businesses to build their digital capabilities.

- In 2020, the Tertiary Education Commission gave education providers around $4.2 million to deliver foundation-level information technology courses. These contribute to improved digital literacy.

- In 2019, the Government provided $30 million for the National Libraries Partnership Programme. This aimed to keep and upskill public librarians, so they can support library users' digital literacy.

The Office for Disability Issues told us that accessible, inclusive digital services create new options for disabled people who historically may have experienced transport, print, built environment, or time barriers to accessing services. Disability funding streams have made digital devices and technology available to disabled people, bridging the gap between the effects of impairment and access to services. The efficiencies achieved through effective digital technologies should fund better investment in personalised service approaches, and access to devices for disabled people and others who may be digitally excluded.

Free data

DIA told us that the Ministry of Health, Kāinga Ora, and the Ministry for Social Development (MSD) run zero-rated (or sponsored) data initiatives. These allow the public to access key websites via mobile phone or laptop, without incurring data use charges. The websites include a wide range of health sector sites, and MyKāingaOra, MyMSD, StudyLink, and Working for Families.

We strongly encourage the ministries who run these initiatives to ensure that there is wide awareness of them in the sectors most likely to be experiencing digital exclusion.

---

30   Office for Seniors—Te Tari Kaumātua: Better Later Life—He Oranga Kaumātua Action Plan 2021 to 2024.
31   Office for Seniors—Te Tari Kaumātua: Digital literacy training for seniors.

Other government initiatives addressing digital exclusion

MSD is leading a comprehensive policy programme in partnership with Access Alliance, and the Disabled Peoples' Organisations Coalition.[32] This programme is looking at a range of options, including legislation, to achieve more accessibility for all New Zealanders.

The across-government Accessibility Charter is a commitment by all government agencies to ensure the accessibility of public information, communications, and services for disabled people.

Time-limited COVID-19 funding

DIA told us that, in 2020, time-limited funding from the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund helped to overcome digital exclusion.[33] Funded initiatives included the Ministry of Education's Equitable Digital Access for Students programme, which provided internet service to around 45,000 households, and approximately 37,000 devices.[34]

Solving the CAB's funding issues

DIA told us that "in recognition of its important work supporting New Zealand communities", CABNZ is funded by DIA, MBIE, MSD, Inland Revenue, and the Lottery Grants Board. It further said that the Government

> …recognises that resourcing and funding community services appears to be an ongoing challenge and that community organisations providing local solutions need sustainable funding.

DIA referred us to "services provision reporting that CABNZ is to undertake under the funding partnership agreement". DIA said that this reporting "will help inform and provide a basis for future agency decisions around funding". We hope that these decisions come soon enough to help offset the pressures on CABNZ and other social agencies who are absorbing the impact of Government moving online.

Our response to the petition

We commend the Citizens Advice Bureau New Zealand for its work on this very thorough submission, and its co-operation with other contributing organisations. We acknowledge the descriptions from petitioners and advisors of how digital exclusion affects different groups of New Zealanders, many of whom are already disadvantaged. We concur that digital inclusion needs to be positioned within a governmental commitment to wider social inclusion.

We urge the Government to consider the omni-channel examples of Canada, Taiwan, and New South Wales. We understand that work is already under way to improve New Zealand's digital connectivity and skills, but we encourage the Government not to leave behind those New Zealanders who may never be comfortable online. We agree with the petitioner that a more human-centred approach is needed.

---

[32] The Beehive: Disability Action Plan 2019–2023.

[33] Ministry of Social Development: COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund Conditional Grants.

[34] Ministry of Education: Home internet access.

We agree that organisations like CABNZ have taken up much of the work created by government agencies moving their services online. We hope that the Government acts soon.

We encourage the House to take note of this report, and in particular members of the Economic Development, Science and Innovation Committee, the Social Services and Community Committee, the Education and Workforce Committee, and the Governance and Administration Committee. We intend to send a copy of this report to the other committees for their information.

We intend to write to the Business Committee to recommend the House hold a special debate on this petition, to highlight the matters raised in the committee's report.

National Party differing view

National members are deeply concerned at the digital exclusion of many New Zealanders and the withdrawal of physical "face to face" and hard copy services from centres across New Zealand without appropriate replacement options. People across New Zealand have been digitally excluded for a myriad of reasons, from poor connectivity options in our rural and urban fringe, to socio-economic and learning support circumstances making it difficult for them to access digital service.

National members believe the House should look to the National Party view presented as part of the report by the Economic Development, Science and Innovation Committee on the petitions of Louise Johnston and Wayne Lowry who, alongside others from the West Coast, North Auckland, the Bay of Plenty, and other parts of New Zealand, have faced unacceptable levels of connectivity support from an infrastructure level.[35] In particular National members reiterate the following points presented in that report:

> National members believe the following actions should be immediately undertaken by the Government to uplift rural connectivity and ensure communities affected can get online:
>
> 1. Government must explore better relationships with satellite broadband providers to support communities where fibre is not financially or topographically feasible to install; as more satellite service providers have become available to New Zealand from the international telecommunications community the cost and quality of service has continued to improve in a way that can provide some relief to rural households.
>
> 2. Give Crown Infrastructure Partners and the fibre services providers more flexibility to work outside their mandate in regards to the provision of fibre installation where it is clear new infrastructure developments undertaking related civil construction may significantly reduce cost.
>
> 3. Recommend that local governments are required to advise Crown Infrastructure Partners of any new large-scale urban development resource

---

[35] New Zealand Parliament, Report of the Economic Development, Science and Innovation Committee: Petition of Louise Johnston: Upgrade broadband infrastructure in Dairy Flat and Coatesville; Petition of Wayne Lowry: Include Lower Kaimai in Ultra Fast Broadband area.

consents that fall outside the current UFB phase mandates with an explanation of how the developers will address connectivity issues.

4. Adopt a commitment to future focus connectivity investment by identifying new greenfield developments and communities with significant population uplift that could face connectivity disruption and ensuring suitable digital infrastructure is in place before the community is affected by existing services.

5. Hold a public inquiry into telecommunications infrastructure in New Zealand with a particular remit on government investment into digital infrastructure since 2008 and future planning towards 2050.

6. Recommend that the House set aside time for a Special Debate focusing on this and related topics.

National members believe it is not acceptable for community organisations like Citizens Advice Bureau to be left picking up deficiencies in the Government's duties to New Zealanders who are digitally excluded and must take action today.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was referred to the Petitions Committee on 7 July 2021. We met between 12 August 2021 and 14 April 2022 to consider it. The committee received written submissions from the petitioner, the Office for Disability Issues, the Office for Seniors, the Department of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment. We heard oral evidence from the petitioner and the Department of Internal Affairs.

Committee members

Hon Jacqui Dean (Chairperson)
Rachel Boyack
Liz Craig
Shanan Halbert
Nicole McKee
Todd Muller
Teanau Tuiono

Melissa Lee participated in this item of business.

Evidence received

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on the Parliament website, www.parliament.nz. You can also watch the oral submissions here.