OUT OF THE MAZE
BUILDING DIGITALLY INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

A report by

Vodafone New Zealand Foundation
InternetNZ
The Workshop
Digital inclusion improves social inclusion, and to lift New Zealand’s digital capability is to lift social outcomes for all. InternetNZ and the Vodafone Foundation welcome Out of the Maze as an opportunity to give a platform to voices of those who experience digital exclusion.

New Zealanders have come a long way in making the most of the Internet. But while we are making strides in some areas, the effects of digital exclusion are impacting some of our most vulnerable people and communities. This paper is focused on hearing and learning from them. We believe placing the voices of those with lived experience at the centre of the conversation will help us achieve our goals and vision of a digitally connected Aotearoa New Zealand.

Out of the Maze shows that it is critical to work with communities who are affected by digital exclusion and keep their voices heard. This means:

- enabling community led development - collaborate, co-design, bring everyone on the journey
- building capacity of communities to solve their own problems
- understanding and hearing the voices of vulnerable New Zealanders.
- continuing to ask the question: what does it mean to be a digital society?

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We welcome you into our journey of helping to improve the lives of New Zealanders.
Summary of findings

The people we heard from in this research affirmed what previous research had shown. Having access to affordable and accessible digital devices and services at a convenient time and place, as well as the motivation, skills, and trust to use the Internet to pursue and realise meaningful social and economic outcomes, is essential to social inclusion.

They also told us losing access can have a disproportionately harmful impact on people who are already experiencing social exclusion in other ways. Becoming disconnected can have a devastating impact on people going through times of particular vulnerability or instability. A woman leaving a violent relationship, for example, or a young person leaving home without any family support.

People outlined a range of barriers to digital inclusion, including cost, a range of barriers to physical access, low motivation, resilience to setbacks, mixed levels of skills, a lack of trust or safety online and insufficient capacity.

While most of this was consistent with research in other countries, the conversations in this project have given us a more nuanced and detailed picture of how a variety of different social and economic factors can act together to impact a person’s digital inclusion at different times throughout their life, and how becoming disconnected can, in turn, exacerbate existing problems.

Participants made suggestions for improving digital inclusion in New Zealand ranging from national policies to reduce housing transience through to kid-safe data plans to help parents support safe digital access for their children. There are suggestions here for central government, local government, iwi, Internet providers, tech companies and charitable organisations.

For a small number of the people we heard from, removing specific physical or financial barriers to digital access may be sufficient to enable them to benefit from digital inclusion. Overall, however, this research points to a need to remove broader social and economic barriers, in order to create more conducive conditions for interventions designed specifically to increase digital inclusion.
Internet access is extremely important to people. The range of things people use, or want to use, the Internet for includes accessing government services, engaging in education, communication, research, entertainment, banking, shopping, and navigating.

People described the impact of not being able to access the Internet in terms of exclusion, isolation, powerlessness and limited opportunity. For disabled youth, losing connectivity could impact their ability to take part in essential daily activities such as their education or using Google Maps for navigating around. Participants also emphasised that losing the ability to be digitally connected can have a disproportionately harmful impact on people in vulnerable or tenuous times, or when moving through a life transition.

I can’t contact my kids, I can’t apply for a benefit. I basically can’t do anything without it. I feel disempowered.

Barriers to digital inclusion

The barriers people identified to digital inclusion fell into five broad categories:

- Cost
- Physical access
- Motivation
- Trust and safety
- Skills
Motivation

Overall, the people we talked to were motivated to access the Internet. Some people told us poverty and other forms of social exclusion could result in people having little in the way of hope, which in turn undermined their motivation to learn new skills, and digital skills in particular.

People with low motivation and self esteem and low vision about a future... don't have dreams, they can't imagine something [for themselves].

Social worker, Westport

Cost

Cost was often the first barrier people identified, and it recurred in every discussion and interview. This included the cost of devices, including adaptive devices for people with disabilities, and the cost of getting connected and ongoing contracts or data plans. Participants talked about the general financial hardship they and others in their communities were experiencing. In times of transition, such as women leaving a violent relationship or young people moving away from unsupportive or unsafe families, the additional costs of moving connections or cancelling was prohibitive.

Physical access

While some rural participants told us they lacked both broadband and cell phone data coverage, a more common theme was the challenge of accessing free Internet in public places, which many people use regularly.

I couldn't even fricken walk a couple of months ago. How could I go outside to find a free WiFi?

Women's refuge group, Auckland

Some people with disabilities need specialist, often costly, technology to use the Internet. This technology sometimes breaks, and if people's conditions change they may require new devices. As a result, disabled people can wind up without digital access. This has stark implications for people who use technology to schedule their day, navigate, communicate and socialise. Even when they are able to get online, some people with disabilities face further barriers from inaccessible software and design.

Trust and safety

Most participants told us that digital access came with risks. They had concerns around physical safety, financial scams and pranks, emotional wellbeing and false and misleading information. Some participants had been victims of financial scams or cyberbullying. Overall, however, despite widespread awareness of the risks of being online, most participants said they hadn't really changed their behaviour to reduce these risks.

I think people worry about [risks online] but still don’t understand how to protect themselves against it.

Wananga, Kawerau
Some people had taken steps like adjusting the privacy settings on their Facebook accounts. Others said they hadn’t made any changes, despite a lingering sense that they probably should.

**Capacity**

Even when people had some motivation to get online, they could face further barriers in terms of their capacity to do so. This included a lack of time, energy or resilience to persevere when faced with technical difficulties. People told us that they didn’t have time to keep up with connectivity on digital platforms.

I’m a solo working mum. I’ve got so much to do… there’s a whole expectation of being connected and that responsibility falls to you as a parent … I don’t have time.

Westport

Some of the young people with disabilities told us that their ability to persist in the face of barriers was reduced by the effect of their disability on their health and energy levels.

The energy I have means that if something is put out of my reach by money, I will just do without.

Disabled Youth

**Skills**

Overall, the participants in this research rated themselves fairly highly on most digital skills, although they tended to give themselves lower rating for their skills in keeping safe online.
Changing individual skills and behaviour

Almost every group had suggestions for education and training. One suggestion was to implement ‘Internet Studies’ as a subject at school, including training to evaluate the information students find online and a programme focused on positive social skills to reduce online bullying. Training was also suggested as a solution for youth leaving school who were not in formal education or employment, and for parents and guardians to help them see the value of the Internet, and ensure their kids were safe online.

changing the context

Participants proposed ways the context could be changed to make the Internet a more accessible place. Most were aimed at making digital inclusion the norm, however some made the point it was important to ensure people still had offline options.

People recommended creating community hubs where people could gather to connect and use technology. These would provide more than digital access by creating space for people to develop skills and confidence, and where parents could learn alongside their children.

People also said tech companies, especially social media platforms, could do more to make the Internet safer and more humane, like timeouts to encourage healthy use and prevent addiction. Creating a version of the Internet that was safe for kids was also suggested multiple times.

Solutions

Changing socio-economic factors

When asked to describe the causes of digital exclusion in Aotearoa, people talked about the social and economic conditions experienced by many people in our country. These included poverty, family and sexual violence and intergenerational trauma, institutional racism, homelessness and poor quality housing, unemployment and insecure work.

out of the maze: building digitally inclusive communities
The people we heard from made suggestions for improving digital inclusion in New Zealand ranging from changes in national policies through to changes in parental practice. A common theme in all the suggestions is the need to consult with excluded people and to work in partnership with trusted community groups to ensure the problems are solved. Here are some of the key suggestions for each sector.

### Suggestions for policy makers in central government

1. Revisit the baseline for social inclusion and consider basic Internet in every home.

2. Ensure a decent standard of living for all families with children. This includes; reducing transience in housing and providing a caring, trustworthy state support system that simplifies processes and does not result in shaming.

3. Provide free wifi and devices to target groups and communities facing economic and other barriers to digital inclusion.

4. Ensure equitable support is provided to people with disabilities, irrespective of cause, and ensure all public services are accessible to people with disabilities.

5. Make Internet safety a core part of the curriculum, including evidence-based programmes to help young people evaluate the information they find online and manage online social interactions with confidence and care.

### Suggestions for local government and iwi

1. Create welcoming and free spaces where people can come together to access digital devices and services, and develop the skills, motivation and confidence.

2. Extend free wifi to cover more spaces which are safe and easy for people to access and to use outside of business hours, including with children.

3. Ensure all public services are accessible to people with disabilities, and people who don’t have digital access - including those who choose not to use digital services.
Suggestions for Internet service providers

1. Provide contracts that allow people to move easily between different plans, without penalty, in response to insecure work, housing and changing income.

2. Provide affordable prepaid packages for mobile devices, which don’t charge people without a fixed address a higher rate for data.

3. Create ‘kid safe’ data plans, which limit access to pre-vetted child-safe sites.

4. Create custom mobile access portals specially designed to ensure that people in times of transition or heightened need can access ‘essential services’.

5. Where these services exist, work to increase awareness, accessibility and uptake.

Suggestions for tech companies (including platforms)

1. Proactively move towards more humane, safe and healthy design of software, digital platforms and services.

2. Design more kid-safe platforms and programs, to make it easier for parents to help their children access digital services and devices safely.

3. Take appropriate, timely action when cyberbullying, online harassment and other forms of harmful digital behaviour do happen in their spaces, to reduce future harm.
This research was conducted by The Workshop on behalf of InternetNZ and the Vodafone Foundation. The lead researcher and author of the report was Marianne Elliott, with research assistance from Ella Brownlie and advice from Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw.