# DPA Response to the Digital Council

**Digital Council have asked:**

 *“Please tell us about how you, your organisation, or the communities you serve, are leveraging digital and data-driven technologies to support New Zealand through the lockdown, in a unique way (compared to pre-COVID-19 business as usual). What are the barriers that prevent you from leveraging digital and data-driven technologies?”*

**Disabled Persons Assembly NZ response to Digital Council. 7 May 2020**

The current COVID pandemic has brought into sharp focus the impact of the digital divide for many disabled people. DPA is currently working on collating and identifying the issues.

Below is a summary of where DPA’s research into this issue is at present.

Please note that this is still work in progress.

**Digital Access for Disabled people: Key areas for action.**

DPA has identified three priority areas that need addressing for disabled people to improve digital access.

These are

* affordability of digital access, including internet and devices
* accessibility of online services,
* support to assist disabled people to gain digital skills.

Possible actions to improve digital access for these areas are given at the end of this paper.

**Digital Access: Issues for Disabled People**

In NZ, many people have become significantly more reliant on the Internet for work, study and social interaction. It is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a significant digital divide, between those who have access to the internet and to services and goods provided online and those who, for a variety of reasons, are excluded from the Internet.

The 2019 Motu Working Paper[[1]](#footnote-2)  looking at digital inclusion and wellbeing in NZ found that those who do not have internet access tend to have lower subjective wellbeing than those who do have access.

They also identified a number of demographic groups that have relatively low access to the internet. Two groups - those living in social housing and disabled people - are particularly disadvantaged with respect to internet access[[2]](#footnote-3). The Motu paper be argued that increasingly internet access needs to be treated as an essential service in the same way as water, electricity and waste is.

The Motu report also found that disabled people were at greater risk than others from an internet violation (i.e. a virus infection or other internet interference) which highlights the need to ensure that there is appropriate ongoing support to ensure that they can access the internet safely.

Another recent report by the Citizens Advice Bureau[[3]](#footnote-4) - Face to Face with Digital Exclusion - also puts the spotlight on digital exclusion in New Zealand.

The impetus for this report has been the concern of CAB volunteers at the number of people struggling to access government services and support because digital is the only option provided or other options are hard to find and access.

The CAB report identified the following barriers to internet access.

Many of these apply to disabled people.

1. Lack of access to computer and internet – many are still without ready access to a computer or other appropriate device, or to reliable and affordable internet access.

2. Limited digital literacy - Even with access, many people lacked the skills or confidence to carry out tasks online and needed assistance to navigate digital processes.

3. Financial barriers – Cost was an issue, not just in terms of having and maintaining a computer, and an internet connection, but because of the barriers some people face when payments are expected to be made online.

4. General literacy difficulties – For others it was difficulties with reading, writing and language comprehension, that meant online information and processes were inaccessible.

5. Language barriers –A lack of confidence with written English was a particular challenge, with a resulting anxiety about completing important online processes in a language that is not the person’s mother tongue.

6. Disability – People with a range of disabilities also sought help from the CAB because of challenges accessing the internet and navigating online information and services.

**Issues for disabled people during COVID**

DPA has found that the COVID Pandemic and lockdown has further increased the digital divide identified in the Motu and CAB reports. Increasingly essential information, goods and services, including essential government services, are primarily or only able to be accessed online.

This has posed significant challenges for members of the disabled community especially for those already experiencing digital exclusion. For example, many websites of companies offering online shopping do not meet accessibility standards making online shopping for basics such as food difficult or inaccessible for some disabled people.

Enabling internet use can be regarded as a key intervention to improve the opportunities for disabled people to connect with the rest of society and build resilience for major events such as the current COVID pandemic.

DPA has identified three priority areas that need addressing for disabled people to improve digital access.

These are affordability of digital access and devices, accessibility of online services, and support to assist disabled people to gain digital skills

**Options for Action**

1. **Affordability**
* Ensure affordable access to the Internet focusing on the groups who have the lowest level of access to the Internet, including those in social housing and disabled people.
* Social housing providers and care agencies should provide internet access and install Wifi in their properties.[[4]](#footnote-5)
* Devices and necessary adaptive technology should be provided to people on low income at low or no cost.
1. **Accessibility**
* Ensure all online services, including those provided by government agencies, but also the private sector, are accessible for use by disabled people.
1. **Digital Support**
* Extensively expand support for people to gain the skills to operate online and to do so safely.
* Ongoing support may need to be provided to some disabled people, especially those who are more at risk of harm online and those who may not be able to access support from mainstream organisations.
1. <https://motu.nz/our-work/wellbeing-and-macroeconomics/well-being-and-sustainability-measures/digital-inclusion-and-wellbeing-in-new-zealand> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Just 69% of those living in social housing report having access to the internet, compared with 91% reporting access across all respondents and only 71% of disabled people report having internet access.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. “*Face to Face with Digital Exclusion”* <https://www.cab.org.nz/assets/Documents/About-us/Social-Policy/Digital-Exclusion/9c5f26012e/FINAL_CABNZ-report_Face-to-face-with-Digital-Exclusion.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Recommendation from Motu report [↑](#footnote-ref-5)