DPA Feedback on the Draft Digital Strategy.

Disabled Persons Assembly NZ Inc.

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**Introducing Disabled Persons Assembly NZ**

The Disabled Persons Assembly NZ (DPA) is a pan-impairment disabled person’s organisation that works to realise an equitable society, where all disabled people (of all impairment types and including women, Māori, Pasifika, young people) are able to direct their own lives. DPA works to improve social indicators for disabled people and for disabled people to be recognised as valued members of society. DPA and its members work with the wider disability community, other DPOs, government agencies, service providers, international disability organisations, and the public by:

* telling our stories and identifying systemic barriers
* developing and advocating for solutions
* celebrating innovation and good practice

**UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

**Government accountability**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provides the mandate for disabled people to hold the Government to account on ensuring the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by disabled people.

**Partnership with DPOs**

The implementation of the UNCRPD depends on a partnership between DPOs and the Government. This is highlighted in Article 4.3 which says governments shall consult closely with and actively involve disabled people, including disabled children, through their representative organisations. This partnership goes beyond just consulting with disabled people, it mandates Governments to actively involve disabled people and our organisations in everything that affects us.

**UNCRPD is the minimum standard**

DPA upholds the UNCRPD as the minimum standard for our participation in society.

**Right to Access Information and Communications Technologies and Systems**

Of particular relevance to the Digital Strategy are clauses 2 g) and 2 h) of article 9 which outline governments responsibility to

* promote access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet;

and

* promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost.

**DPA Overall Comment on the Digital Strategy**

The current COVID pandemic and regional lockdowns has brought into sharp focus the impact of the digital divide for many disabled people. 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 accessible appropriate support to assist disabled people to gain digital skills and confidence online.

While the development of a digital strategy for Aotearoa NZ is welcomed, DPA is concerned that if the digital strategy does not have a strong focus on digital equity for disabled people; including a commitment to addressing known issues around affordability, accessibility and digital skills, disabled people risk being even further digitally disadvantaged as the digital sector grows.

**Specific Feedback on Digital Strategy Themes**

**Mahi Ake — Growth**

DPA is particularly concerned that there is the risk that this theme with its focus on growth in digital economy, products and services will have the unintended outcome of growing the digital divide for disabled people unless there is priority given to improving digital equity, affordability, accessibility, and digital skills for those who are currently digitally excluded.

**Mahi Tika — Trust**

To build trust and confidence in using digital services there is an urgent need to strengthen online safety for disabled people. We know from this Motu Paper[[1]](#footnote-2) in 2019 that disabled people are at greater risk than others from an internet violation (i.e. a virus infection or other internet interference),

Their data highlights how vital it is to ensure that there is appropriate and accessible ongoing support to enable disabled people to access the internet safely.

There are three key elements to building trust, all of which need to be addressed.

1. Prevention of online abuse,

2. Protection from viruses, hacking or other internet interference and

3. Data privacy.

DPA is aware that at present there are very few people who have the training and skills to teach and support disabled people - particularly those with learning and other cognitive impairments – how to use digital technology and how to operate online safely. This needs to be given high priority. It is also essential that all digital resources relating to internet safety be available in accessible formats, including easy read.

**Mahi Tahi — Inclusion**

Ensuring digital equity for people who are currently digitally excluded must be paramount. Again, we know from the Motu working paper referenced previously that two demographic groups - those living in social housing and disabled people - are particularly disadvantaged with respect to internet access.

Another report by the Citizens Advice Bureau[[2]](#footnote-3) - Face to Face with Digital Exclusion - also puts the spotlight on digital exclusion in New Zealand.

This report highlights how many people still lack access to a computer or other appropriate device, or to reliable and affordable internet access. This must be addressed as a matter of priority.

DPA strongly agrees with the proposal in the Motu paper that Internet infrastructure and access need to be viewed as an essential service in the same way as power and water are. All social housing should have internet access provided.

The CAB report also highlights that even with digital access many people have limited digital literacy and lack the skills or confidence to carry out tasks online and need assistance to navigate digital processes.

This is a particular issue for many disabled people as many digital education services are not accessible for disabled people or do not address their particular needs. For example, DPA is aware of a mobile bus that visits rural towns and communities to provide on the spot support with online banking. Unfortunately, the bus is not accessible for wheelchair users which means that they are not able to access this service.

There needs to be detailed action plans that lay out how digital inclusion will be achieved for the demographics most impacted by the digital divide including disabled people.

Below are some key actions that these plans need to include.

**Key Actions to improve Digital Access and Inclusion for Disabled People**

**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.
* Devices and necessary adaptive technology should be provided to people on low income at low or no cost.

**Accessibility**

* Ensure all online services, including those provided by government agencies, but also the private sector, are accessible for use by disabled people.

**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. “*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-3)