



11 November 2022

A fair chance for all: Breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage

Submission to the New Zealand Productivity Commission



Digital Equity
Coalition Aotearoa

Introduction

Who we are and what we stand for

1. The Digital Equity Coalition (DECA) welcomes this opportunity to submit on the New Zealand Productivity Commission's interim report, "[A fair chance for all: Breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage](#)".
2. DECA's mission is digital equity. We believe that every Kiwi should have clear, appropriate and affordable pathways to participate in digital life. Digital equity exists when everyone can access and effectively use digital technologies so as to participate in our society, democracy and economy.
3. Digital inclusion is the means to achieve the goal. Digital inclusion refers to the initiatives and actions we undertake as we work towards digital equity.

Summary of submission

We support...

4. We greatly appreciate the report's focus on "upstream" settings in the public management system that perpetuate disadvantage.
5. DECA also believes that persistent disadvantage in society is caused by systemic structural issues that will not be easy to overcome.
6. Digital exclusion is one area where this kind of persistent disadvantage is apparent. With everything from banking to government services going online, people who are not able to access those services are increasingly disadvantaged.
7. The catalyst for DECA came out of Aotearoa's 2020 COVID lockdown, when the scale of digital exclusion was starkly revealed and the necessity of digital inclusion was beyond doubt.
8. Although some programmes attempted to address digital exclusion, it is still evident that the current level of support is insufficient. With that in mind, we would like to see future recommendations address digital inclusion, with an emphasis on providing government funding and resourcing not just for connections and devices, but also **community-based** training and ongoing, wrap-around support for those in need.

Want more detail? Get in touch.

9. We would welcome the opportunity for further dialogue on the points we present in this submission.
10. Please contact co-Chair Kris Dempster-Rivett via info@digitalequity.nz

Addressing persistent disadvantage

11. One of the most promising elements of the report is the recognition that disadvantage is not just about being “income poor” (p. 2).
 - a. The Commission’s report clearly outlines the ongoing issue of persistent disadvantage in Aotearoa, as well as the complexities of the issue which make it a challenge to address.
12. There are a number of other points made in the report that DECA fully supports and wants to reassert, including:
 - a. the need for change in the way public finances are allocated (p. 4);
 - b. a demand for change that helps communities to support themselves, including more accessible “wrap-around” support (p. 10), and;
 - c. the inclusion of "knowledge and skills" and "engagement and voice" as "domains" of wellbeing (p. 21).
13. We welcome the Commission’s stated goal of adopting a broad vision of social inclusion with strong links with Māori and Pacific peoples’ perspectives on wellbeing (p. 2).
 - a. DECA respects Māori heritage and the knowledge, wisdom, and best practices that come with tikanga Māori. We acknowledge Te Tiriti o Waitangi and apply its ancestral intent to help us create spaces for all to be self determined.
14. Finally, we are encouraged by the stated focus on "system change" (p. 12) as a path to addressing disadvantage.
 - a. DECA similarly recognises that current models and frameworks are insufficient for addressing the various forms of persistent disadvantage in society today.
 - b. We believe that a change in approach at the government level, including more support and resourcing, is a much-needed and important starting point.
 - c. However, we also strongly believe that those resources need to go to supporting community-based organisations to take advantage of the trust they have already built with people in those communities (including Māori and Pasifika communities).

Digital exclusion and disadvantage

15. While we appreciate and support the objectives of the report, it does not discuss the issue of digital exclusion in detail. However, digital exclusion is a pervasive and significant issue in Aotearoa that directly contributes to persistent disadvantage.

- a. Access to the digital world is now a basic necessity, just like running water to a house. Yet, at least 10% of people in Aotearoa are digitally excluded and over 20% struggle to access necessary services to get on with life.
 - b. The groups who have the most to gain from the digital world, including families on low incomes, seniors, Māori, Pacific peoples, those with disabilities, those new to Aotearoa and our remote communities, are often the ones who face barriers.
 - c. With everything from banking to government services going online, people who are not able to access those services are increasingly disadvantaged.
16. The report's vision for breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage can, however, easily support digital equity and digital inclusion.
- a. Of course, the income poor are frequently among those digitally excluded. Low income has a direct effect on the ability to afford suitable internet connections and devices.
 - b. However, there are also some structural issues that limit digital equity and digital inclusion. For example, infrastructure limitations such as the availability of fibre or high speed mobile data connections are unrelated to income.
 - c. Moreover, digital inclusion requires more than just affordable and available Internet connections and fit-for-purpose devices. People also need the skills to set up and use those things effectively and have support for issues that arise.
 - d. DECA sees these elements—connectivity, devices, skills training, and support—as four 'pillars' of digital inclusion.
17. Despite an increase in the reliance on online services on the part of government services and businesses, funding and support of initiatives to improve digital inclusion is severely lacking.
- a. For example, there was no funding for digital equity in the 2022 Budget.
 - b. Meanwhile, temporary supports for digital inclusion via the Ministry of Education and libraries, initiated during the COVID pandemic, are ending, with no plans to renew or replace them.
 - c. The recently released Digital Action Plan also does not provide details concerning support for digital inclusion and digital equity.
18. As a result, just as the Productivity Commission's report highlights, those who want to engage online but are currently excluded from doing so are facing persistent disadvantage.

Possible paths to digital inclusion and equity

19. We strongly believe that public management can play a role in addressing this ongoing digital disadvantage, just as it can for all forms of persistent disadvantage. However, to be successful, responses will require the kind of systemic change discussed in the report.
20. For example, for the income poor, government could provide subsidies through the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), which would support the Digital Strategy for Aotearoa.
 - a. However, subsidies would need to be able to support robust connections; ‘budget’ plans don’t have enough data, especially for families.
21. Government could also negotiate with device manufacturers and suppliers for discounted devices for those in need.
 - a. These devices would need to be fit for purpose, however. While a smartphone can be a powerful tool, it is insufficient for many activist such as online learning.
 - b. In the meantime, government could encourage and support device donation and refurbishment programmes that work to get devices to those in need.
 - c. Device donation is only a stop-gap solution, however; charitable organisations are already unable to meet demand for devices.
22. Another option DECA strongly supports is **funding and support for community-based programmes** to address digital inequity.
 - a. By working with established community leaders and organisations, new initiatives can build upon the trust people already have in people in those communities.
 - b. This dynamic would be especially important in rural areas as well as in Māori and Pasifika communities, all of which are disproportionately affected by digital exclusion.
 - c. In addition, community-based programmes would be context specific; those in the community already have an understanding of what needs their community has and how to get resources, whether they are connections, devices, or training, to where they need to go.

Moving forward

23. The ideas listed here are just some of the possibilities for addressing digital inequity and exclusion.

24. To reiterate, we are hearted and encouraged by the report's focus. We feel it is important, however, that the Commission recognise and address how these forms of inequity contribute to persistent disadvantage.
25. We thank the Commission for its consideration of these comments and look forward to a fruitful discussion in the future.