

## Digital Inclusion now the goal - General - Rural Connect

Written by John Allen

Thursday, 01 December 2011 09:01

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With the election now a done deal, it is clear to me that the inclusion of every person in the coming digital society is not yet on the agenda of the new government. Their focus was on broadband infrastructure and the economic advantages that will bring, principally in the areas of health, education and the delivery of government services. With the provisioning of that infrastructure now in process, they think their job is nearly done. It is not.

The government have initiated a study through the Ministry of Economic Development exploring the demand drivers that will use broadband infrastructure. The MED's study is a necessary part of the process of ensuring that the taxpayer's \$1.8Bn investment will realise the promised economic returns.

The government's role will conclude only when they have ensured that every person has equal opportunity of access to digital services and is thus included in the digital age.

So what is digital inclusion and why does it matter?

Digital inclusion is the capability of individuals, groups and businesses to access and use information and communication technologies. This covers not only access to the Internet, but also the availability of hardware and software; relevant content and services; and competence in digital literacy skills.

Digital inclusion matters because it is becoming central to social inclusion. The benefit of the societal transformation we are going through is not technological, but social and cultural. To not include everyone in digital capabilities is to exclude some from social engagement.

With the exception of the Maori Party, pre-election policies around digital inclusion were lacking in the manifestoes of the major parties. A beneficial policy would have been an action plan that overcomes the key issues of a digital society.

Implementing an action plan needs to be led by an eminent person. The appointment of a

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'national digital champion' is seen as a first step towards digital inclusion because that person will be focused on people rather than economics.

Principles to guide the development of a digitally inclusive society will go beyond access to technologies. People, businesses, and institutions need to understand the digital technologies and how to use them effectively to achieve their economic and social goals.

The plan needs to provide for access to broadband networks at a minimum guaranteed speed, so avoiding the creation of a new digital divide.

The plan needs to include the creation of community centres, where people from low-income, rural or indigenous communities can connect with the technology before it becomes available where they live.

Safely navigating the digital world is an area of government policy that needs to be covered in the plan. As do guidelines for civic engagement by central and local government because they are key drivers of acceptance of digital technologies by residents.

To ensure resilient communities and the best possible emergency preparedness, the plan needs to cover the effective deployment of digital technologies. The promotion of social engagement and the pursuit of productive and creative interests needs to be included.

In preparing a Digital Inclusion Plan, stakeholders, including local government and public agencies, community-based organizations and the business community along with residents, need to be convened to create a shared vision of economic, social and environmental development.

Then the plan needs to be implemented which will require resources, including funding, followed by an evaluation and possible revision of the plan.

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If our small economy is going to bring us increasing prosperity and resilience, then we must be part of the trends that define the global digital economy.