

Position Paper 2026:

Access and Inclusion – Connecting Every New Zealander by 2030

Executive Summary

As TUANZ marks 40 Years championing a brighter digital future for every New Zealander, we stand at a pivotal moment in our nation's digital journey. We have successfully built one of the world's most advanced fibre foundations, with 87% of the population now having access to ultra-fast broadband. However, our vision has evolved from simple infrastructure to meaningful inclusion, ensuring that every New Zealander, regardless of location, income, or ability can live and thrive in the shared digital future by 2030.

By achieving universal digital equity, we unlock massive national benefits including support for our \$17 billion tech export sector, improved rural health outcomes, and a resilient economy capable of leading on the global stage. This position paper outlines how we can bridge the final divide by treating connectivity as core infrastructure and ensuring no community is left behind.

The Current Landscape

New Zealand's digital environment is a story of significant achievement paired with an urgent need for the "final mile" of inclusion.

- **Infrastructure Success vs. Rural Reality:** The Ultra-Fast Broadband (UFB) programme has been a world-leading success. Yet, the remaining 13% of premises are in rural or hard-to-reach areas where costs increase progressively with remoteness, especially when you get beyond the level of 95% coverage. Rural users currently face a "mixed experience," often paying 29% more for broadband and 40% more for mobile plans than their urban counterparts.
- **The Fragility of Lifelines:** Recent severe weather events served as a wake-up call, with a large number of rural users experiencing weather-related outages. It is now clear that we must "build back better" with infrastructure that can withstand climate-driven threats.
- **The Inclusion Gap:** Despite our progress, 1 in 10 households still lack internet access at home. This exclusion disproportionately impacts Māori, Pasifika, and disabled people, the latter of whom are twice as likely to be unconnected.
- **The Skills Threshold:** Connectivity is only half the battle; 20% of New Zealanders lack the essential digital skills to use the internet safely, and only 31% of Kiwis say they understand the AI tools they are already using.

Our Position

TUANZ is the strong independent voice for users navigating a digital world. We assert that connectivity is an essential public good, equal in importance to electricity and water. Consistent with our 2026 Action Plan, our position is that Aotearoa must transition from a technology-led strategy to an outcomes-based framework. We advocate for "meaningful connectivity" that includes not just "bars on a phone", but affordable devices, reliable speeds, and the capability to use them. We believe in a technology-neutral approach that utilises a mix of fibre, wireless, and satellite solutions to reach every Kiwi cost-effectively. Above all, we believe that an inclusive digital nation is a more prosperous and equitable nation for all.

Recommendations for Action

To achieve universal inclusion and close the digital divide, TUANZ recommends the following four specific actions:

- **Formally recognise that connectivity is core infrastructure equal to electricity or water:** This requires a dual focus on hard infrastructure and human capability to ensure meaningful technology for all of New Zealand. To close the rural-urban gap and ensure geography, income, or technical confidence do not dictate opportunity, we must prioritise resilience, equity, and broader socio-economic benefits over simple commercial ROI. Achieving this demands continued Government investment and improved collaboration among WISPs, satellite providers, marae, and community groups to deliver targeted, inclusive solutions for the final remaining unserved populations.
- **Establish a National Connectivity and Resilience Register:** Collaborate with the industry to develop a register linking every address to its connection type and resilience profile. This tool could be built on the current Broadband Map and will ensure emergency aid is directed to the right people during crises and identify "not-spots" for targeted infrastructure investment.
- **Co-design "Affordable Connectivity" solutions :** The Government, industry, and community should co-design approaches to providing meaningful digital access for low-income households. This could include subsidised home and mobile data, alongside a "bulk funding" model for devices and wrap-around skills support.
- **Mandate "Inclusive by Design" for Digital Public Services:** All new government digital implementations, such as Digital Identity, must address the concerns of those hesitant to trust technology. This includes adopting a "Code of Practice for Inclusive Use" and ensuring alternative, non-digital pathways remain available for the most vulnerable.

Conclusion

Closing the digital divide is not merely a technical challenge; it is a foundation for our national wellbeing. By embracing a "whole of New Zealand" approach, we can ensure that our economy continues to grow while providing every citizen with a lifeline to health, education, and opportunity. The decisions we make today will lock in Aotearoa's digital trajectory for the rest of the decade. TUANZ is committed to championing this brighter, more inclusive digital future where no New Zealander is left behind.