

## Evaluation summary: Aotearoa People's Network

Summary prepared August 2008

The Aotearoa People's Network (APN) is about providing free access to broadband internet services in public libraries so that all New Zealanders can benefit from creating, accessing and experiencing digital content.

It is funded by the Community Partnership Fund of the New Zealand's Digital Strategy and by other government funding through the National Library of New Zealand.

The network currently extends to 58 libraries across New Zealand, mostly in smaller, rural communities, with another 28 libraries in the pipeline.

In April and May 2008, evaluation firm Research First undertook an evaluation of the APN. The overall objective of this evaluation was to identify the immediate impact of Phase One of the APN.

### Uptake of the Network

There has been considerable uptake of the APN by users across all the libraries involved in Phase One of the roll-out. This uptake has been such that some libraries are implementing operational strategies for managing use.

### Impacts

The impacts of the APN for users, and their communities, have been significant:

- a) **Increased Confidence and Capability:** For the adult users in particular, there are clear signs of increased confidence. There were numerous examples of adult users who had learned to do new things through interacting with the APN, such as producing professional CVs and applying for jobs on-line.
- b) **Increased Connection:** Users talked about how accessing the APN meant their communities no longer felt as 'isolated from the world', and that users were able to access up-to-date information that had previously been unavailable. For rural towns in particular, the availability of high-speed internet connections through the APN is of significant benefit to the population, increasing their ability to engage with knowledge bases in the 'outside world'.
- c) **Diversionsary Activities:** Young users comprise a significant proportion of APN users across all the libraries studied. The APN is particularly popular among those youth who may otherwise not have access to the internet, thus increasing digital inclusion in these communities. This means that these youth are more likely to feel part of those digital communities that many of their peers belong to. In addition, it has been noted that these youth were now spending time in libraries, meaning that their social interaction is now in a positive location.
- d) **New Library Users:** In many cases, the presence of the APN in libraries has transformed those libraries into meeting places for new types of library users. This includes both meeting people on-line and the development of real time, local communities with other users. The APN is clearly drawing a wider range of users, and higher numbers of users, into the libraries.
- e) **New Challenges for Library Staff:** The impact on staff from the introduction of the APN has been significant. Library staff have been busy learning the functions of the APN, and of the internet in general, as they train others about how to use it. While this is useful as a professional development function, other aspects of managing the APN have been less welcome – in particular, the need to manage the behaviour of some groups of users has been a challenge.

## Potential for Improving the APN Service

- a) **Extending Capacity:** Both staff and users noted that there can be problems with a lack of privacy, and that crowding (particularly where several people want to work together on one computer) can be an issue. In addition, many adult users find groups of younger users intimidating. This would suggest that thought should be given to increasing the number of terminals in these libraries, and to how these can be laid out to ensure a more convivial user environment.
- b) **Explaining Access:** There is a perception among some users that the APN restricts their access to some on-line facilities such as chat rooms. These users talk about these 'restrictions' being too strict, and argue that additional benefits could be unlocked from the APN through less restrictive access. In reality, there are limited restrictions, suggesting there is a need to better explain how risks to the APN are managed, and why.

## Stakeholder Views

Six interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from the public libraries sector, local government and the National Library. Themes arising included:

- a) **Overcoming Digital Exclusion:** The APN was seen as one way the Government was delivering on its goal of 'digital inclusion' (or overcoming digital exclusion). As participation in the digital world is seen as a critical component of modern citizenship, overcoming digital exclusion is a key step in empowering participation. The APN provides a tool to address the risk of disenfranchisement among certain groups in the community, and provides a tool to deliver 'life-long learning' to those citizens.
- b) **Potential for Up-scaling:** Realising the benefits of the APN will depend on being able to scale the APN accordingly. Currently, the limited scope of Phase One of the APN roll-out means stakeholders were reserved about the kind of benefits likely to be delivered on the ground. In time, however, the synergies resulting from multiple users in multiple communities will further increase the impacts of the programme.
- c) **Importance of Centrally Designed and Managed APN:** The nature of the APN (i.e., as a centrally-designed and managed APN) is also important as it provides the ability to target areas of greatest need. This also means that the structure of the APN needs to be sufficiently flexible to meet local needs across a range of diverse communities.

The full report is currently in draft form, and will be released later this year.