



Briefing Note: Expanding COVID-19 related household connectivity

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
Date:	20 July 2020	Priority:	Medium
Security Level:	In Confidence	METIS No:	1266046
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Messaging seen by Communications team:	No	Round Robin:	No

Purpose of Briefing

This briefing updates you on next steps to continue our work on proactively establishing new household connections to the internet ahead of any further possible further COVID-19 related school or kura closures.

It follows your joint agreement with Hon Grant Robertson, Minister of Finance to expand the Equitable Digital Access project to maintain resilience in the education system through the 2021 school year as well as your agreement to begin proactively connecting new learner households to the internet [METIS 1248643, 1252165 respectively refer].

The purpose of this paper is for you to:

- **Note** the update on the Ministry's work to proactively provide internet connectivity to learners in 45 secondary schools and kura across South Auckland since March 2021 (covering approximately 31,000 learners);

Noted

- **Note** that we are currently only funded to provide subsidised internet connectivity until 31 December 2021 and that, while creating new internet connections is complex and requires significant lead-time, it is our intention to continue to connect households until September 2021 due to the high-level of social and educational benefit derived from access to the internet;

Noted

- **Note** that, on the basis of available data, we anticipate a total demand of approximately 450 new connection requests across Auckland and a further 1,500 nationally (we currently have funding available for 2,000);

Noted

- **Note** our intention to now expand the proactive connection roll-out beyond schools and kura in South Auckland into wider Auckland, Northland, Bay of Plenty and Waikato - continuing to prioritise learners in Years 9-13+, and that this will commence with Regional Offices on 22 July 2021;

Noted

- **Note** that, while we are currently only funded to provide subsidised internet connectivity until 31 December 2021, the Ministry has been exploring mechanisms to support the cohort of households connected to the internet under this initiative from 1 January 2022, and has engaged a telecommunications industry expert to liaise with the industry, regulators and government agencies on approaches to address the connectivity access and affordability gaps;

Noted

- **Agree** that this Briefing will not be proactively released at this time due to ongoing commercial sensitivity.

Agree / Disagree

Summary

- While proactively connecting households to the internet is complex and can take significant time, the social and educational benefits derived are both broad and deep, particularly in the context of ongoing COVID-19 uncertainty.
- Since March 2021, the Ministry has been working to proactively provide internet connectivity to learners in 45 secondary schools and kura across South Auckland (covering approximately 31,000 learners). Work is ongoing but, to-date, schools and kura have provided us with connection requests for 480 learners across 364 households.
- Of the household connection requests we have received through this process, 42 are completely new to us while 241 have previously existing connection requests sitting with internet service providers but which had been held-up due to poor address and identification information.¹ The proactive connections process is significantly enhancing our capability to finalise these connections and enhance the overall impact of the Equitable Digital Access initiative. Fixing these data issues in relation to existing requests will not impact our ability to make 2,000 new connections as separate budget remains available to cover this.

¹ The remaining 81 households require ongoing dialogue with schools and kura to ensure accuracy of data.

- On the basis of available information, we anticipate a total demand of around 450 new connection requests across Auckland and a further 1,500 nationally.
- As we have funding available for up to 2,000 total new proactive connections, it is our intention to now expand the proactive connection roll-out beyond schools and kura in South Auckland into wider Auckland, Northland, Bay of Plenty and Waikato - continuing to prioritise learners in Years 9-13+. This work will commence with Regional Offices on 22 July 2021.

Pauline Cleaver

Pauline Cleaver
Acting Deputy Secretary
Early Learning and Student Achievement

20/07/2021

[Signature]

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

11 / 8 / 2021

Background

1. The Ministry's emergency distance learning response to COVID-19 Alert Levels 3-4 from March 2020 included contracting with internet service providers to connect some private households to the internet and supplying fit-for-education devices to identified learners at a cost of \$36.4 million [CAB-MIN-20-0136 and METIS 1234656 refer].
2. The Ministers of Finance and Education jointly agreed to expand this work to maintain resilience in the education system through the 2021 school year while COVID-19 resurgence remains a risk by reprioritising up to \$10.2 million of Equitable Digital Access (COVID-19 Response and Recovery) funding [METIS 1248643 refers].
3. Since March 2021, the Ministry has been working to proactively provide internet connectivity to learners in 45 secondary schools and kura across South Auckland (covering approximately 31,000 learners) [METIS 1252165 refers].
4. Work is ongoing but, to-date, schools and kura have provided us with connection requests for 480 learners across 364 households.
5. Connecting large numbers of households to the internet is complex and can take significant time. However, we have previously communicated to you how the social and educational benefits derived from internet access are both broad and deep, particularly in the context of ongoing COVID-19 uncertainty.


Progress update

6. This proactive engagement process has allowed us to identify both new demand as well as yielding better information to connect learners already progressing through the ongoing education COVID-19 connectivity campaign.² Work is ongoing but, to-date, schools and kura have provided us with connection requests for 480 learners across 364 households.
7. Of the household connection requests we have received through this process, 42 are completely new to us while 241 are existing connection requests sitting with internet service providers but had been held-up due to poor address and identification information.³ The proactive connections process is improving our ability to finalise these connections and enhance the overall impact of the Equitable Digital Access initiative. Fixing these data issues in relation to existing requests will not impact our ability to make 2,000 new connections as separate budget remains available to cover this.

² Over the course of our COVID-19 response, we have 'allocated' a total of around 64,900 addresses to internet service providers for connection. Once allocated, over time, households are either successfully connected or 'rejected' by providers (for technical or data reasons). At the time of our previous update to you, we had 45,900 addresses 'allocated' (i.e. not rejected). Latest provider data shows that around 22,000 households have been connected or have connections in progress (this number is lower than in our previously reported 26,000 due to the corresponding number of 'in progress' allocations which have since been 'rejected'). We are awaiting reports from providers on the remaining 18,000.

³ The remaining 74 households require ongoing dialogue with schools and kura to ensure accuracy of data.

Next steps

8. Comparing the information provided by schools and kura with both roll-return and internet service provider data, we estimate a total demand of approximately 450 new connection requests across Auckland and a further 1,500 nationally.
9. As we have funding available for 2,000 total new proactive connections, it is our intention to now expand the proactive connection roll-out beyond schools and kura in South Auckland into wider Auckland, Northland, Bay of Plenty and Waikato - continuing to prioritise learners in Years 9-13+. This work will commence with Regional Offices on 22 July 2021.
10. We are currently only funded to provide subsidised internet connectivity until 31 December 2021. While creating new internet connections is complex and requires significant lead-time, it is our intention to continue to connect households until September 2021 due to the high-level of social and educational benefit derived from access to the internet.
11. The Ministry has been exploring mechanisms to support the cohort of households connected to the internet under this initiative beyond 1 January 2022, and has engaged a telecommunications industry expert to liaise with the industry, regulators and government agencies on approaches to address the connectivity access and affordability gaps. As previously advised [METIS 1262151 refers], this work is not yet complete, but is indicating that there are considerable economic benefits from universal access, and there are viable options that can be taken at a national level, leveraging the government's existing and envisaged infrastructural investment (including that in a broad emergency communications network).
12. 9(2)(f)(iv)


Devices

13. You have also previously agreed to establish a small pool of fit-for-education devices (2,000) as a further measure to maintain COVID-19 resilience in the education system through the 2021 school year and to address possible new demand which had arisen since our initial roll-out [METIS 1248643 refers].
14. We do not intend to take any further action in relation to these devices at present. As there remains ongoing risk of possible COVID-19 disruption, we intend to hold these devices in contingency with a review and advice to you in early 2022. Decisions on next steps are then likely to be dependent on overall COVID-19 context.

Evaluation update

15. As previously reported, the Ministry is well-underway with evaluation work to assess the impact which access to the internet and fit-for-education devices has on both education and wider social outcomes for learners and their whānau [METIS 1248643 refers]. This will help to leverage COVID-19 response work into longer-term systemic change. We expect to be able to provide you with an update on indicative findings after the evaluation process concludes in October 2021.

Proactive release

16. We recommend that this Briefing not be proactively released at this time for reasons relating to commercial sensitivity.