

Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Collective Project Report
Funded by Internet NZ
Reporting Period: August 2024 – July 2025

Executive Summary

This report summarises the progress, activities, and evolving insights from the Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Collective over the 2024–2025 period, funded by Internet NZ. It captures a region-wide effort led by a collective of local organisations to advance digital equity through place-based, kaupapa Māori approaches. The initiative included targeted projects across infrastructure, skills development, innovation, and storytelling. It also launched a digital innovation challenge and a regional roadshow to reach rural communities and support localised responses.

As of July 2025, all Innovation Challenge projects are in progress, and several of the collective workstreams have been delivered. This report documents both completed and ongoing efforts, alongside the learnings and reflections that have emerged through this dynamic process.

Project Overview

The Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Collective brings together Tāiki e!, Tōnui Colab, Te Weu Research, Tairāwhiti Technology Trust, Tolaga Bay Innovation and Rāngai. We have also worked closely with Te Aroha Kanarahi Trust and the Wairoa Business Hub. The collective aims to address digital exclusion across the region through three primary workstreams:

1. Digital Equity Projects
 2. Ecosystem Building and Regional Engagement
 3. Innovation Challenge Funding
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Core Project Summaries

Alexa Workshops for Kaumātua

Lead: Tairāwhiti Technology Trust

Status: Completed

A four-part workshop series was delivered across multiple sites, involving 67 kaumātua. Workshops included hands-on training in the use of Alexa smart home devices, distribution of smart bulbs and plugs, and whānau-led learning environments. Participants explored everyday uses such as music, reminders, weather updates, and home security features.

The project concluded with a graduation celebration attended by over 40 participants. Feedback highlighted increased digital confidence, a greater sense of safety at home, and enhanced social connection. A few participants experienced setup difficulties, leading to a recommendation that local troubleshooting and setup support be embedded in future initiatives. There is growing interest in follow-on workshops exploring smart tracking devices (e.g. Samsung SmartTags or Apple AirTags).

This initiative demonstrates the power of relational, face-to-face learning, and confirms the importance of wraparound support when introducing new technology to older adults.

Digital Learning Hubs

Leads: Tolaga Bay Innovation

Status: Completed

Three community-based digital learning hubs were successfully established across Tairāwhiti in Tolaga Bay, Wharekahika, and Wairoa. These hubs were designed to provide accessible, culturally grounded spaces for whānau, pakeke, and rangatahi to gain digital confidence and build practical skills.

- **Uawa (Tolaga Bay):** Set up included a computer workstation, podcasting suite, and a high-quality video conferencing system. The space supports rangatahi storytelling, community meetings, and whānau-led learning.
- **Wharekahika (Hicks Bay):** Hosted at Te Aroha Kanarahi Trust, this hub included installation of two computers donated by Rāngai and a working video conferencing setup. Plans are underway to expand the space further with a 3D printer, laser printer, TV mount, and Alexa device to support creative learning and community use.
- **Wairoa Business Hub Digipod:** This newly launched hub features video conferencing capability and a dedicated computer system, providing small business owners and whānau with the tools to participate in remote learning, online business development, and community knowledge sharing.

Alongside these activations, a **seven-week online workshop series** was delivered by Hayley Waitoa (Tairanui) to support upskilling for whānau and small businesses across the coast. The workshops covered:

- Xero and Hnry for self-employed whānau
- Google Workspace and Gmail productivity

- Canva for visual storytelling
- Shopify for e-commerce
- ChatGPT and generative AI tools

These hubs are becoming trusted community resources, allowing people to engage with technology in ways that are relevant to their aspirations and circumstances. The success of these spaces was made possible through generous donations from JPRO and Rāngai, who provided high-spec computers and new video conferencing units to support connectivity, creativity, and learning. These contributions ensured that each site was equipped not just with basic infrastructure, but with quality tools that enable professional-grade experiences and confidence in using advanced digital platforms. Participants noted the value of localised delivery, kaupapa Māori approaches, and the availability of ongoing mentoring support.

Digital Equity Storytelling

Lead: Rāngai Studios

Status: In Progress

The goal of this project is to produce a 30-minute documentary capturing Tairāwhiti's digital equity journey, through community voices, collective projects, and intergenerational kōrero. Filming is underway, with footage being gathered from roadshow stops, Alexa workshops, digital hub launches, and Innovation Challenge wānanga.

The documentary will highlight:

- Regional barriers to access and participation
- Community-led solutions and stories of transformation
- Local voices from kaumātua, rangatahi, whānau, and digital champions

This narrative will serve both as a learning tool and as a call to action for broader investment in community-led digital equity solutions. A working draft is expected by late September 2025.

Ecosystem Mapping

Lead: Te Weu Research

Status: In Progress (Phase 1 complete; tool development underway)

The ecosystem mapping initiative is designed to provide an evolving, strategic view of digital equity and innovation infrastructure across the Tairāwhiti region. Led by Te Weu Research, the project began with the development of a kaupapa Māori-aligned framework outlining key

domains such as connected infrastructure, tech access, capability development, leadership, investment, and economic opportunity.

In this first phase, the team trialled a subsection of the framework focused on “capability development.” Collective members were invited to participate by contributing both qualitative descriptions of their activity and a self-rated assessment of their access or presence across various components (e.g., tech meetups, peer learning environments, advanced digital tools). This mixed-methods approach yielded useful insight into strengths, gaps, and variations in digital support across the ecosystem.

Members of Tāiki e! are now working to refine and expand the framework with tiered descriptors for each domain and are developing a digital tool to support consistent data input and analysis. This tool will enable:

- A clearer understanding of collective infrastructure and capability
- Ongoing mapping of ecosystem growth and gaps
- A data-informed, regional strategic planning process

This is intended to be an evergreen tool that matures over time, supporting both community storytelling and evidence-based investment. It will provide a shared and living picture of how digital equity and innovation are developing in Tairāwhiti.

STEM Festival

Lead: Tōnui Colab (Shannon O’Connor)

Status: Planning Phase

The Tairāwhiti STEM Fest has been designed as a one-day regional celebration of science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM), to be held in Gisborne. Originally slated for Term 3, 2025, the event has been rescheduled to 2026 to allow for expanded partner engagement and funding.

Key event components:

- 30 interactive booths (robotics, renewable energy, coding, traditional knowledge + science)
- Keynotes, powhiri, and innovation showcase
- Workshops for whānau and community groups
- Strong focus on connecting STEM to Te Ao Māori

The festival is designed to uplift local innovation and inspire tamariki and rangatahi across Tairāwhiti to explore tech and science through a cultural and creative lens.

Regional Roadshow

Lead Coordination: Tāiki e!

Status: Completed

Between May and June 2025, the collective undertook a regional roadshow designed to directly engage rural communities in conversations about digital equity. The kaupapa was less about showcasing solutions and more about creating space for dialogue, listening, and connection with hau kāinga. Stops included Tolaga Bay (Hauti Marae), Wairoa Business Hub, Patutahi (Turanga Health Hui Kaumātua), Tokomaru Bay, and Rangitukia. Although Hicks Bay was originally planned, it was cancelled due to logistics.

At each stop, the team facilitated discussions on local digital equity challenges and opportunities, delivered Alexa training for kaumātua, and shared updates from collective partners. Importantly, these sessions surfaced strong interest from hau kāinga in continuing such engagements, highlighting that rural communities want to be more closely connected to digital initiatives and not left behind.

A special acknowledgement is due to Polly Crawford of Tairāwhiti Technology Trust, who played a critical role in outreach, coordination, and community engagement. Her mahi ensured high local participation and strong relationships with hosts.

The roadshow confirmed that community appetite for ongoing dialogue is strong. It also reinforced the importance of maintaining direct engagement with remote communities, ensuring they are part of the regional digital equity movement rather than forgotten in its margins.

Innovation Challenge Projects Summary

Through the Internet NZ funding, the Collective launched an Innovation Challenge that supported eleven diverse projects. Each initiative reflects local priorities and demonstrates how community-led solutions can advance digital equity when provided with seed funding, mentoring, and collective visibility. All projects remain in progress, with early activities showing promising results.

Ani Pahuru-Huriwai – I-Koha Solution Development

Ani's project is focused on designing a simple, easy-to-use digital solution to support manuhiri in giving koha on the marae ātea, particularly during tangihanga at Hinemaurea Marae in

Wharekahika, where access to cash and banking services is limited due to its remote location. The first I-Koha prototypes were developed at Haututu Hacklab and deployed for Hinemaurea Marae, as well as for the Wairoa Business Hub. Work is now underway exploring options for outdoor prototypes and more secure financial transaction systems.

Koka Kuini Tuapawa & Eremoana Hobson – Kai & Tech: Bridging Generations through Digital Storytelling

Koka Kuini and Eremoana are weaving digital storytelling with intergenerational knowledge-sharing through the Kura Kai Cooking School. Their kaupapa focuses on capturing and preserving recipes, stories, and mātauranga Māori using tools like Google Docs, Canva, social media, and video editing software. The goal is to create a digital resource that supports marae catering initiatives while celebrating kai as a connector across generations. This was exemplified at the Tolaga Bay Community Tech Day, where they catered while beginning to document the process. Recipes and stories are being recorded with strong whānau engagement, and the next step is to edit and publish the first batch of resources.

Hayley Waitoa – Financial Literacy & Emerging Technologies

Hayley, with support from Lily Stender of Tolaga Bay Innovation, led a six-part Online Digital Tools Info Series aimed at empowering whānau with everyday digital tools and financial literacy. Each session explored practical tools like Xero, Hnry, Canva, and Google Workspace, alongside scam awareness and an introduction to AI. Sessions were delivered weekly via Google Meet, reaching over 40 participants. All workshops have now been completed, and planning is underway for what an ongoing programme could look like.

Polly Crawford – Strengthening JP Services through Digital Proficiency

Polly, on behalf of the Gisborne Justices of the Peace Association, is leading a project to build digital confidence among local JPs. Through hands-on workshops, members are gaining skills in essential digital tools to support them in their roles and enhance their service to the wider Tairāwhiti community. The project has also involved recruiting new JPs across the region and providing them with digital capability training. In addition, the JPs now have a new computer system to run their information services, further strengthening their infrastructure.

Polly Crawford – Digital Literacy & Emerging Technologies

Polly is partnering with Literacy Aotearoa to support those who experience reading and writing challenges to build confidence using digital devices, particularly smartphones, for everyday communication. The six-week pilot course focuses on digital literacy, device access, and safe online practices. Early participants have demonstrated improved confidence in daily smartphone use, and the next step is to refine the pilot based on feedback, expand promotion to reach more whānau, and broaden delivery to new cohorts.

Puri Hauti – Promoting the Maia the Kaitiaki Series via Digital Platforms

Puri is the author of the Maia the Kaitiaki three-book series, stories deeply rooted in Te Ao Māori, exploring guardianship, resilience, and whakapapa. Through this project, he is working to expand the reach of these stories by developing an interactive digital platform. He continues to deliver the Ngā Ahikāpuni Storytellers in Schools programme, inspiring tamariki and rangatahi. In addition, Puri has produced a podcast series for his children's books and accompanying social media content, which has proven hugely successful in engaging audiences.

Simon White & Steph Temple – E-Waste Refurbishing for Community

Simon and Steph from Tairāwhiti Environment Centre are leading a practical, community-driven initiative to refurbish used devices and redistribute them for free. Their project reduces e-waste while increasing digital access and confidence across the region. While some devices have already been refurbished and distributed, the team is still exploring systems for scaling up the work and has been advocating nationally for stronger “right to repair” policies.

Te Hira Horua & Te Aruhe Fox – Tahi App Development

Te Hira and Te Aruhe are developing Tahi, a 2.5D multiplayer life sim game designed to foster meaningful relationships and deep conversations around real-world issues, offering a creative alternative to traditional social media. Current work has focused on finalising the art style, refining the Unity environment, and building a character creation system. Initial assets are in place, and the next step is to build a playable demo and test it with rangatahi groups.

Brandon Terekia – Rangatahi-Led Design Tank for Digital Literacy and Design Capabilities

Brandon's kaupapa is focused on launching a 20-week Rangatahi-Led Design Tank, combining digital literacy, design thinking, and problem-solving. The programme is co-designed with youth and supported by mentors, with pathways into organisations like Rāngai Studios, Haututu Hacklab, and Tōnui Colab. Planning and recruitment are complete, with cohorts identified. The next step is to deliver the workshops and connect graduates with local industry partners.

Steve Main – HF Email Radio Server

Steve is working on establishing a community Winlink High Frequency (HF) Radio Message Server to support off-grid email and messaging services in Tairāwhiti, especially valuable in disaster situations. Key components have been purchased and build preparations are beginning. Several servers have now been built, with plans to deploy them to sites across the region. Training sessions will also be run to support community use.

Regina de Wolf-Ngarimu – Writing Event & eBook Publication

Regina is leading the development of a collaborative eBook through a Writers Hui happening in October. The kaupapa will build digital publishing skills while supporting local writers to share their stories. She is also preparing a digital resource deck for rural workshops. The hui will now

run over four days, with participants confirmed. The next step is to deliver the hui, collate contributions, and publish the collective eBook.

Key Learnings and Insights

Across all projects and activities, several cross-cutting learnings have emerged:

1. **Digital equity is foundational** – Digital equity is not just a technical issue but a justice issue. It underpins participation in education, healthcare, civic life, and economic opportunity. The work in Tairāwhiti confirmed that without equitable access, communities risk exclusion from the future.
2. **Relational infrastructure is core** – The strongest and most enduring shifts emerged from whanaungatanga. These relationships, built intentionally through wānanga, hui, kai, and ongoing collective action, provided the trust and resilience needed to sustain the kaupapa. This insight reaffirms that investing in connectors and relationship-holders is as vital as funding infrastructure.
3. **Emergence happens in the margins** – Some of the most transformative shifts did not occur in formal workshops but in car rides, shared meals, and spontaneous kōrero. These marginal spaces allowed trust to deepen, ideas to form, and energy to be exchanged. Building flexibility into projects to allow for these moments is essential.
4. **From performance to empowerment** – Rigid, performance-driven models can stifle innovation. Our learning is that when communities are trusted with resources and decision-making, they respond with integrity, care, and accountability. The success of the Innovation Challenge is clear evidence that participatory models work.
5. **Systemic silence and structural responsibility** – A recurring theme has been the retreat of institutional actors, leaving communities to pick up the slack. While grassroots resilience has filled gaps, it must not be romanticised or exploited. Communities are partners, not backup plans, and systemic responsibility must be upheld.
6. **Joy and creativity sustain the kaupapa** – Whether through storytelling, podcasts, rangatahi design, or kaumātua learning new tricks with Alexa, moments of fun and pride have been central. These experiences build confidence and make digital inclusion meaningful.
7. **An evergreen ecosystem view is essential** – The mapping project points to the value of a constantly updated, shared view of digital equity in the region. This will allow the collective to measure progress, identify gaps, and target resources more strategically over time.
8. **Ongoing engagement with rural communities is critical** – The roadshow confirmed the strong appetite among hau kāinga for continued dialogue and practical activity. Sustained engagement ensures remote communities are not left behind.

Together, these insights point toward a model of digital equity that is community-led, culturally grounded, relationally sustained, and strategically aligned with long-term systems change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Collective has demonstrated that community-led, kaupapa Māori approaches can effectively drive digital inclusion when paired with modest but strategic investment. The projects outlined in this report show tangible progress: hubs established, devices distributed, skills enhanced, and innovative prototypes developed. More importantly, they highlight the power of whanaungatanga and local leadership in building confidence, capacity, and resilience.

To build on this foundation, the following recommendations are offered:

- **Sustain and scale proven initiatives** such as digital hubs, kaumātua training, and the Innovation Challenge, ensuring they become permanent features of the regional ecosystem rather than time-limited projects.
- **Invest in long-term capability** by embedding ongoing mentoring, digital literacy programmes, and leadership development alongside infrastructure investments.
- **Support innovation pathways** by resourcing local prototyping, testing, and scaling of tools like I-Koha, Tahi, and digital storytelling platforms.
- **Strengthen systemic connections** by aligning regional efforts with national policy, advocating for structural changes such as right-to-repair, and securing sustainable funding streams.
- **Secure long-term sustainable funding** – Recognising that digital infrastructure and capability are critical to the long-term economic and social success of the region, it is essential to move beyond short-term project funding toward durable investment that underpins continuity, stability, and growth.
- **Maintain deep rural engagement** by continuing roadshow-style activities and ensuring hau kāinga remain integral to decision-making and benefit from new opportunities.
- **Commit to ecosystem-level measurement** by developing the mapping tool into a long-term resource that tracks growth, highlights gaps, and supports strategic planning.

The work to date confirms that digital equity is both a practical and relational endeavour. With continued support, the Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Collective is well placed to grow this kaupapa into a nationally significant model of community-led digital transformation.