Cook Islands
**NATIONAL
DIGITAL
STRATEGY**
2024 – 2030

CONTENTS

William Allan Rowe working on his tablet, undisturbed on Palmerston Island.
(Photo credit: Arthur Neale, Palmerston Island)

FOREWORD

I have the honour to present the Cook Islands' first National Digital Strategy 2024-2030. The strategy was formulated through extensive consultations with, and feedback from, our many stakeholders.

Importantly, it provides our affirmation of support towards Government's commitment in the National ICT Policy 2023-2027 to "leading by example, with digital transformation initiatives being a mainstream priority for Ministries and agencies" and support Government's acknowledgement in the 2023 E-Commerce Acceleration Work Plan "The digital economy provides an opportunity to expand business opportunities."

Equally important, the national digital strategy supports the National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA) 2020+ generational plan Pledge 12 To Tatou Kite Pakari – Our knowledge and innovation "We will strive towards our digital futures and will ensure that the safety and protection of our people and information are paramount".

In that context, I am encouraged that our country, at the highest level and within the various sectors, is already embracing digital developments that are now evident within developmental plans and initiatives for business improvements.

To this end, let us strive to cooperate, collaborate and coordinate our digital efforts by putting into practice the six strategic priorities in this national digital strategy to achieve our shared vision.

I would like to acknowledge the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in particular Calum Handforth and colleagues on the ground for your efforts in producing this National Digital Strategy 2024-2030.

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia.

BEN PONIA
Chief of Staff
Office of the Prime Minister

CONTEXT

The Cook Islands is a small island nation located in the South Pacific Ocean, and like many other countries in the region, it has undergone significant changes due to the emergence of digital technology.

For the people of the Cook Islands, digital technology has brought about many benefits, such as improved communication, increased access to information and services, and new economic opportunities. For example, the Cook Islands government has invested in digital infrastructure to provide better access to high-speed internet and to support the growth of online businesses.

Digital technology has also made it easier for Cook Islanders to stay connected with family and friends who live abroad, through social media platforms and video conferencing tools. Additionally, digital technology has enabled Cook Islanders to access educational resources and training opportunities that were previously unavailable.

However, there are also some challenges associated with the adoption of digital technology in the Cook Islands. For example, there are concerns about the potential impact of digital technology on traditional cultural practices and the environment, as well as the risk of increased social isolation and addiction to technology.

Overall, digital technology has had a significant impact on the people of the Cook Islands, providing both opportunities and challenges as they navigate the rapidly changing digital landscape.

These five paragraphs were generated instantaneously by an online and freely available 'Large Language Model' [1] **(LLM).** An LLM is an approach that leverages Artificial Intelligence: drawing on billions of words and other types of data to produce text, images, and other content that rival outputs that could have been produced by humans.

The rapid development and growing accessibility of these tools highlights the exciting potential of digital for the Cook Islands – but also some of the challenges we will face in ensuring that digital can be most effectively applied for the benefit of our lives and livelihoods.

A recent Digital Readiness Assessment undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlighted that the Cook Islands is 'systematically advancing in key areas of digital transformation'. It noted our exciting progress in the past few years, including the:

- Connection to the Manatua Cable System, which we expect to significantly increase the ways and extent of which Cook Islanders use digital technologies.
- Progress made in digitising key aspects of our public sector, from infrastructure behind-the-scenes to public-facing components such as our Business Registry that are making it easier for enterprises to get financing.
- Development of an exciting and vibrant digital ecosystem, from our digital entrepreneurs and other innovators to our engaged civil society community, and our increasingly tech-savvy population.
- Success of programmes such as the SMART Economy Initiative, which reaffirmed the digital talent on our islands – and the potential for further collaborations with innovators and entrepreneurs, and
- Shaping of our comprehensive and ambitious National ICT Policy, which provides the technical direction and strategic leadership needed to put this National Digital Strategy into practice.

However, although the Cook Islands has enviable assets, we also face a number of challenges.

- We need to close the digital divide between our islands and communities (including the gender digital divide between women and men, and girls and boys – and meeting the needs of our elderly population) and ensure that everyone is able to benefit from the potential that digital offers. We need to build digital skills and digital literacy, as well as increase trust in digital tools and technologies.
- We need to continue our work to build a regulatory and enabling environment that drives and supports inclusive digital innovation (including encouraging overseas innovators to see our country as a destination to explore start-up ventures), whilst also protecting Cook Islanders from the negative consequences of the digital revolution – including threats such as cybercrime.
- We need to ensure that our digital innovators and entrepreneurs are able to develop and grow their enterprises in the Cook Islands, without needing to move elsewhere to succeed. As part of this, we also want to see new and exciting enterprises moving to the Cook Islands to join our flourishing innovation community.
- We also want to ensure that all Cook Islanders play a part in this journey – recognising that digital transformation is a marathon, and not a sprint. That it takes time, and that it takes a whole-of-society approach to ensure the benefits of digital reach all corners – and all communities - of our islands.
- Importantly, and as highlighted by experts elsewhere [2], we are committed to clarity in our discussions around 'digital transformation'. In particular, 'digital transformation' for the Cook Islands is about using digital tools, technologies, channels, products, and services to deliver unprecedented and positive change for our country and communities (both our economy, and our society) – allowing us to accelerate our development journey. This will require changes in technology, but also deeper structural changes – and shifts in how we live, work, think, and play.

The Cook Islands is at an exciting inflection point in this journey.

The progress that we have made, and the challenges that we continue to face, are the foundation for this document: our National Digital Strategy. It sets out how digital can support and improve how we live, work, and play; how digital can protect our heritage, whilst shaping our future; and how digital can be a platform and a tool to ensure that the Cook Islands and Cook Islanders thrive in the 21st century.

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1. Using OpenAI's ChatGPT, with the prompt 'What does digital mean for the people of the Cook Islands?'

2. See, for example, The Principles of Digital Transformation for Development (DX4D): Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda (Heeks et al.): https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/the-principles-of-digital-transformation-for-development-dx4d-sys

Students of Nikao Primary School working on a research project with their teacher, Maara Peters.

(Photo credit: Maxine Kokaua)

VISION FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE COOK ISLANDS

A digitally empowered and inclusive Cook Islands, where technology enhances all lives, fosters innovation, drives economic growth and prosperity, improves social services, and protects our unique culture and environment, while building a shared identity for our island home.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

1. Reliable, affordable, and high-quality digital infrastructure
- Building on current progress
- Leveraging strategic digital infrastructure opportunities
- Shaping a competitive infrastructure ecosystem
- Achieving full & high-quality coverage across the Cook Islands

2. Building digital government capacity
- Building a digital community
- Accelerating digitalisation
- Shaping the digital skills of our public servants
- Embedding digital across the government

3. Shaping an enabling environment
- Making digital work for all Cook Islanders
- Shaping regulation to drive innovation and protection
- Leveraging our unique digital assets

4. Talent development
- Shaping digital mindsets
- Building digital learning and engagement pathways
- Driving lifelong digital learning
- Ensuring that no one is left behind

5. Fostering innovation
- Deepening digital funding and financing
- Increasing our research and development efforts
- Becoming leading regional innovators

6. Building a digital private sector
- Developing a foundational Digital Public Infrastructure
- Digital community building
- Enabling private sector growth
- Exploring regional opportunities

APPROACH

Our National ICT Policy sets out three interrelated policy aims: the need for ICT to engage all citizens, the importance of ICT to enhance our government and private sector, and the opportunity to enable longer term and productive use and trust in technologies. Our new strategy requires new ways of thinking and working by and for the whole of society in the Cook Islands. It will require a commitment to ensuring that digital improves the lives of all Cook Islanders.

DIGITAL PRIORITY 1 - EXPLORE
- Explore technologies that will build new businesses and protect the Cook Islands
- Our creative sectors to use digital to share our unique culture and heritage with the world
- Build digital components in government to support innovation across the Cook Islands
- Create a network of digital champions
- Shape digital governance to drive digital exploration and implementation

DIGITAL PRIORITY 2 - EXPERIMENT
- Build structures and processes that enable experimentation
- Deliver a responsive government – using data to test learn and adapt, and to shape new policies
- Shape a network of innovators – establish incubators and 'sandboxes'
- Ensure that communities can participate in a more dynamic approach to digital development
- Understand how best to measure success

DIGITAL PRIORITY 3 - EMPOWER
- Create new digital products and services to increase incomes
- Build the digital literacy of all Cook Islanders
- Ensure Cook slanders have the tools and resources to engage with digital transformation
- Explore digital leadership opportunities in the region and beyond
- Ensure that digital works for all Cook Islanders and is in their best interest

National ICT Policy

The National Digital Strategy is founded on the extensive National ICT Policy developed by the Office of the Prime Minister. The Policy details the Government's over-arching goals for ICT-based development in the Cook Islands for the next five years. The Policy is a key tool in spearheading a transformation in the way that citizens, business and Government interact and communicate, promoting lasting social inclusion and sustained economic growth. It also commits Government to 'leading by example' in exploring, championing, and implementing digital tools and technologies.

The Policy identifies three interrelated aims in order to leverage ICT for the sustainable development of the Cook Islands:

- **ENGAGE:** all citizens are able to engage, with reliable infrastructure available for communications, reducing inequality and promoting inclusiveness via better access to information and services; and with the ability to use ICT with tools, skills and confidence, meeting the diverse needs of communities and individuals.

- **ENHANCE:** Government leading by example, seizing the opportunities offered by ICTs – driving productivity gains; building a strong and diverse workforce; progressing sustainable digital transformation to support open and transparent governance. Businesses become more aware of the opportunities brought about by ICT, including new channels for boosting productivity and growth, and greater investment is stimulated in innovative digital technologies and applications.

- **ENABLE:** creating a safe and secure digital environment and building trust to enable sustainable ICT use, and encouraging growth, innovation, and investment.

This National Digital Strategy echoes the importance of these three priorities, and its success is similarly interlinked with the progress and achievement of the National ICT Policy.

OUR VISION FOR DIGITAL

Digital is already having an impact in the Cook Islands. Close to 80% of Cook Islanders were using the Internet daily in 2021 – whilst the percentage of Pa Enua residents using the internet has nearly doubled in five years. Almost half of Cook Islands firms buy or sell online, whilst social media and other usage continues to grow.

With this in mind, we need to continue to ensure that digital benefits all Cook Islanders – and to harness its potential to positively transform our lives and livelihoods.

Drawing on consultation, discussion, and collaboration with digital leaders and advocates across our islands, the Government of the Cook Islands has crafted a vision for digital – to be achieved through a whole-of-society collaboration and effort. By 2030, we want to have shaped:

'A digitally empowered and inclusive Cook Islands, where technology enhances all lives, fosters innovation, drives economic growth and prosperity, improves social services, and protects our unique culture and environment – while building a shared identity for our island home.'

This vision focuses on providing all Cook Islanders with the skills, capacities, tools, and opportunities to thrive in the digital economy – and our emerging digital society.

It recognises that we cannot focus just on access to digital products and services, but we need to ensure that all Cook Islanders – especially vulnerable and marginalised populations – are empowered to use and leverage digital, and that digital needs to improve all aspects of their lives and livelihoods.

This vision also recognises the distinctive heritage and digital journey of the Cook Islands - how we can use digital to both preserve and protect our culture and environment, but also how our history and society provides us with an exciting opportunity to leave a unique, indelible, and important mark on the global digital community.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Setting out our vision is the comparatively easy part of this journey. The harder part is ensuring that it is achieved. Recognising this, the digital vision for the Cook Islands is founded on six Strategic Priorities. These frame the actions, activities, and priorities that we need to explore in order to deliver a digitally empowered and inclusive Cook Islands - where technology enhances all lives, fosters innovation, drives economic growth and prosperity, improves social services, and protects our unique culture and environment, and where digital builds a shared identity for our island home.

Importantly, this is not a government Digital Strategy. It is our National Digital Strategy, and the priorities, actions, and activities set out below cannot be achieved by government alone. This strategy has been developed in collaboration with our digital private sector, civil society, and other partners – many of whom will play an important role in putting this into practice.

1. Reliable, affordable, accessible, and high-quality digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure is the literal foundation for our digital economy and digital society, as well as our wireless and wired connectivity. From mobile network coverage to satellite and fibre-optic broadband, and our connection to the Manatua Cable System, we need to ensure that this infrastructure is reliable, affordable, and accessible to all in our communities – whilst delivering the quality of experience that our communities deserve.

The Cook Islands has promising foundations, from emerging digital competition amongst connectivity providers, to legislation accelerating the rollout of full-fibre connectivity, and government-owned infrastructure increasing coverage in key areas. However, continued progress will need to balance innovation and customer choice, with the importance of ensuring that connectivity is available to everyone. We need to enhance our network infrastructure across the Cook Islands to ensure robust connectivity and technological advancement.

We will do this by building on our current progress, advancing tactical and strategic digital infrastructure opportunities to accelerate our transition from copper-based infrastructure to fibre-optic and wireless connectivity (including 4G and 5G), shaping a competitive ecosystem, and driving toward full and high-quality coverage across our islands.

Building on our current progress
We have good connectivity in many parts of our islands, but higher speeds, more resilient and reliable connectivity, and ensuring redundancy in the face of natural hazards and other risks is crucial. In this context, we will:

- Identify a suitable budget for upgrading the network infrastructure across the Cook Islands and shaping a governance process to accelerate this process – all in collaboration with Vodafone and other key partners.
- Undertake a network resilience and redundancy review, which will also explore international and relevant best practices – including in relation to infrastructure sharing.
- Develop a roadmap for ongoing and more proactive maintenance of digital infrastructure and implement this in collaboration with partners.
- Establish and implement a periodic communications plan to keep Cook Islanders informed with regard to digital infrastructure investments, improvements, and explorations of new solutions (including developments in the satellite internet sector).
- Assess, review, and evaluate how digital infrastructure projects, programmes, and investments have aligned with the needs and aspirations of all Cook Islanders – including identifying successes and challenges in meeting the country's needs.

Leveraging strategic digital infrastructure opportunities
Digital infrastructure comprises a wide range of tools, technologies, processes, and policies. Recognising this, the Cook Islands will need to identify and leverage key and strategic opportunities to strengthen our digital infrastructure, wherever possible, and in particular, to accelerate our journey from copper-based infrastructure to fibre optic and wireless connectivity (particularly 5G, and 4G). We will:

- Undertake a landscape analysis of the successes, challenges, and learning from other Small Island Developing States to identify how we can best position our upcoming Universal Access Plan to maximise digital infrastructure outcomes – and digital inclusion across genders (and for other marginalised and vulnerable populations). This will build upon the recent hosting of the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting.

- Accelerate the licensing of new and innovative connectivity providers, when they can provide a useful, accessible, affordable and reliable service for Cook Islanders – including offering sufficient support to ensure that our citizens are not left behind and catalysing our local innovation ecosystem.
- Continue to explore opportunities to reduce internet equipment and connectivity costs, including in combination with broader and deeper digital transformation initiatives.
- Build on the above learning and review, and work with Vodafone Cook Islands to upgrade the telecommunications network across the country – including continuing the Fibre-to-the-Home (FTTH) rollout and increasing 4G (and 5G) coverage.
- Identify opportunities to provide devices to digitally excluded Pa Enua residents and to reduce the broader gender digital divide, in order to support the participation of all Cook Islanders in our digital economy and digital society.

Shaping a competitive digital infrastructure ecosystem.
We are deeply committed to our collaboration with Vodafone Cook Islands, who have delivered continually improving connectivity and coverage across our islands. Building on these efforts, we are constantly engaging with international providers and stakeholders to drive further investment in digital infrastructure. Going forward, we will:

- Identify learning from other Small Island Developing States that have successfully broadened their digital infrastructure market beyond a small number of providers.
- Engage with international digital infrastructure providers, to reaffirm the opportunities relating to digital infrastructure investment in the Cook Islands.
- Explore the potential for reshaping the provision of connectivity in the Cook Islands, including through wholesale provision of digital infrastructure through new government-led initiatives in order to support local network operators.

Achieving full and high-quality coverage across the Cook Islands.
The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the centrality of digital infrastructure – as a foundation for remote work, e-commerce, remote learning, and keeping in touch with family and friends. This centrality demands that we ensure that everyone across our islands has access to high-quality and affordable connectivity. This will entail:

- Setting out and implementing a programme to upgrade connectivity across the Pa Enua, including foundational digital infrastructure such as full fibre.
- Continuing to deliver high-speed connectivity across our islands, with an aim to make high-speed connectivity available to at least 80% of all homes in Rarotonga and 70% of all homes on Aitutaki by 2028.
- Exploring opportunities to increase bandwidth utilisation, and lower data costs – including the scope for additional Internet Exchange Points in order to reduce the distance that data needs to travel, as well as provide a focus on improving retail pricing of connectivity for businesses and residents and innovative approaches to offset infrastructure costs.

2. Building digital government capacity

As set out in our National ICT Policy, Government needs to lead by example. We need to develop the digital architecture and digital skills that catalyse and inspire our private sector and civil society. This includes building civil servant digital literacy, shaping whole-of-government data and digital components, and developing robust monitoring and learning approaches so we can see what is and is not working.

Mapping our skills and competencies, and key gaps and priorities, will be important – to ensure that we have the talent needed to lead the digital transformation of the Cook Islands. This also extends to having the necessary infrastructure to accelerate our progress in this area. These foundations are particularly important. Without shared and high-quality digital components (such as data registries), and the skills to leverage them, our digital transformation will be severely constrained.

We will do this by building a digital community to drive progress, identify opportunities to accelerate digitalisation, shape the digital skills of our public servants, and embed digital across government and the public sector.

Building a digital community.

Government digital transformation is not the responsibility of a single team, department, or even Ministry. If we are to ensure that digital reaches all parts of our islands, we need to drive a collaborative and combined whole-of-government approach. This will require:

- Establishing a focused Digital Working Group, with representation from each government Ministry (including across genders and representing other marginalised and vulnerable groups) with an associated 'workplan'[3] – and with regular dialogue with our digital private sector and civil society.

- Identifying opportunities to drive inter-disciplinary collaboration across government and shaping a shared recognition of digital transformation as crucial for legal, policy, and operations – and not just relevant for 'technology' teams.

- Driving open data policies, processes, and workflows: focusing on improving data sharing within and beyond government – including moving toward automated open data and data sharing efforts, and strengthening internal government systems.

- Ensuring that government digital capacities and capabilities align with the digital needs, realities, and aspirations of all of our people – including through recruiting and retaining digital expertise grounded in the Pa Enua community and engaging with the requirements needed to close the gender digital divide.

Accelerating digitalisation.

The Cook Islands has developed good digital foundations within our public sector, but the pace of change in digital – and the importance of deeper and more impactful digital transformation – requires us to move even faster. Through this, we will:

- Continue the inclusive digitalisation of our public services, driven by the needs of our citizens in delivering high-quality, affordable, accessible, and useful digital services. This could extend to innovative approaches to delivery, such as a dedicated connectivity network drawing on learning from initiatives such as the New Zealand government's 'Telecommunications as a Service' (TaaS).

Explore the scope for a dedicated Ministry of ICT (or Ministry of Digital) to drive a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to digital transformation.

Use the digitalisation of services to shape and embed digital processes, standards, and digital delivery skills within the public sector – leading to accelerated digital service delivery.

Establish a one-stop shop for submitting key documents, registration information, and permits in order to reduce the burden on our citizens.

Explore the scope for broader catalysts across regulation, policy, and technology. We will draft a Cloud Policy to support government digital transformation, and also explore the scope for Once Only legislation to drive internal government data sharing.

Shaping the digital skills of our public servants.

The digital tools, technologies, and policies driving the development of the Cook Islands are shaped and developed by our public servants. We need to ensure that our government talent remains at the cutting-edge of digital and is able to identify and leverage key opportunities to put digital into practice to benefit all Cook Islanders. This will require:

- Building the capacities of public servants relating to digital tools, knowledge, and topic areas – from foundational digital literacy (including in the area of cybersecurity), to shaping a curriculum of continuous digital knowledge building, and supporting our teams to continuously develop their digital skills.

- Focused training and capacity building to drive significant upskilling and keeping pace with new and emerging technologies, and trends. This will particularly be the case for technical experts in areas such as cybersecurity, systems administration, and network engineering.

- Investing in recruitment and retention, in order to attract – and retain – the best digital talent, to support the digital transformation of the Cook Islands.

- Ensuring that digital is a key attribute in the work and working life of all our public servants – through defining digital skills performance indicators and supporting our teams to develop digital skills.

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3 Building on learning from the Government of the Cook Island's E-Commerce Acceleration Plan, and providing an opportunity to prioritise and drive key activities – with associated action 'owners' and timelines for accountability.

Embedding digital across the government.

Many governments get stuck in cycles of 'doing' digital – pilots, shorter-term explorations, and gaps in deeper and more impactful digital transformation. We want to change this, and embed digital ways of working, thinking, and delivering across government – for the benefit of all Cook Islanders. This will require:

- Establishing a Government Innovation Unit to drive a whole-of-government approach to digital, and to shape a longer-term vision building on our National Digital Strategy and National ICT Policy.
- Shaping a coordinated approach to research and development, including in collaboration with partners across the region, to ensure digital has the greatest positive impact for the Cook Islands.
- Identifying opportunities for longer-term funding for digital development within the public sector.
- Shaping an 'ecosystem' approach through positioning 'government-as-a-customer' to local digital innovators – and leveraging Cook Islanders and their expertise in tackling key digital challenges and priorities, including ensuring that gender is mainstreamed in this approach.

3. Shaping an enabling environment

Achieving our vision for digital will require building the policies, incentives, and structures needed to ensure that digital can have the greatest possible impact for Cook Islanders. This will include drafting and implementing legislation to support digital enterprises, whilst also ensuring the protection and privacy of digital consumers (and tackling priorities such as gender inclusion). It will also include exploring how we can drive improvements within and beyond government to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of digital.

Building this environment will require a whole-of-society effort, from expert input on areas such as cybersecurity protections to collaboration with and across all sectors, and with political will and leadership at the highest levels. This will include leveraging the ICT Governance Structure set out in the National ICT Policy, and exploring new approaches such as open source that could lower the barriers to accessing digital tools and solutions. We need to build an environment that not only supports our citizens to learn and embrace digital, but also protects them from online and digital harms.

We will do this by founding digital on the needs of Cook Islanders both on-island as well as within the diaspora, shaping regulation to drive innovation (while also protecting our people's rights and their heritage), engaging all parts of our islands, and leveraging our unique assets to position digital as a key driver of our development.

Making digital work for Cook Islanders.

Digital has enormous potential for our people, and for our development, but we need to ensure digital meets the needs of our communities, as well as aligns with our expectations and the unique realities of our islands. We will ensure this through:

- Shaping an end-to-end process to ensure digital works for all Cook Islanders (and for our country), from improving access to data and devices through to providing a sustainable approach to managing e-Waste and investing in the education and professional development of local digital professionals and businesses.
- Keeping Cook Islanders safe in the digital and online worlds, particularly marginalised and vulnerable populations (including women and girls), who face specific digital risks and harms. We will improve cybersecurity awareness across the population, monitor and tackle any increases in digital harms and risks, build robust digital and cyber protections to safeguard systems and data, and proactively engage with regional and international efforts regarding internet and digital governance.
- Exploring opportunities to bring new, unheard, and under-heard voices into digital decision-making, including engaging with the private sector and civil society – across our islands, and particularly in the Pa Enua and amongst other marginalised and vulnerable communities – to broaden ICT and digital governance in the Cook Islands.
- Ensuring that all other aspects of our Digital Strategy are driven by our national development priorities (including ensuring inclusion in our digital approach).

Shaping regulation to drive innovation and protection.

Regulation – from legislation to policies and guidelines – is a crucial tool of national digital transformation. It 'sets the rules of the game' and can be an important catalyst for inclusion and innovation – whilst also providing essential protection from the potential harms and risks of digital (including cyber threats and other digital harms). In shaping useful and relevant regulation, we will:

- Undertake a systematic legal and regulatory gap analysis, building on efforts undertaken during development of the National ICT Policy, to identify key regulatory priorities. And committing to regular reviews of legislation to ensure continued relevance and usefulness.
- Develop robust cybersecurity measures, policies, regulations, and human capital (from skilled, technical expertise, to wider understanding of staying safe in our digital world in the context of digital scams and harms) to protect our communities and country.
- Shape a comprehensive legal, regulatory, and policy framework that enables our local digital private sector to flourish – providing an important opportunity to diversify our economy.
- Identify priority existing legislation that requires updating in order to advance our digital development – for example, updating our transport legislation to enable 'ride-sharing'.
- Explore the potential of shaping a comprehensive approach to Open Data in the Cook Islands – from systematic publication of government information and data, to collaborating with the private sector to make data useful for product and service development.

Leveraging our unique digital assets.

The Cook Islands has enviable digital – and broader – assets, from our rapidly improving connectivity, to our extensive and growing digital talent as well as the beauty of our natural environment, and our unique culture and heritage. We have enormous opportunity to focus all of this toward accelerating our digital journey. In doing so, we will:

- Shape a 'Digital Nomad' offer to attract international digital talent to the Cook Islands – but ensuring that this talent also contributes to our exciting and evolving digital ecosystem.
- Develop a strategic approach to leveraging our Digital Diaspora: from opportunities for mentoring and Angel investment, to exploring international business and collaboration partnerships, and focused support to our marginalised and vulnerable communities.
- Develop an Innovation Hub, bringing together public, private, and civil society digital stakeholders to identify new and deeper opportunities for digital progress.
- Lead global thinking regarding the role of digital and technology in protecting, sharing, and amplifying the unique culture and heritage of Small Island Developing States.

4. Talent development

Our greatest asset is our population. We need to provide Cook Islanders with the skills and opportunities to thrive in the digital economy. We also need to take a lifelong approach: from continuing to embed digital skills in our curriculum, to providing opportunities for upskilling and reskilling at all stages of life – including supporting digital career development as well as supporting our elderly population. All Cook Islanders should have the skills to explore digital tools and technologies safely, and successfully. We also need to build broader skills: start-up and business knowledge and financial literacy; and, where useful, leverage international talent.

All sectors have a role to play in developing talent - from the role of government in future-proofing our curricula and keeping the cost-of-living sustainable, to the private sector who are shaping the opportunities and career pathways of the future, as well as supporting our digital businesses. Secondments between both sectors could also provide a vital opportunity to build expertise and experience. The growing increase in micro-credentials and professional certifications, driven by private sector organisations, also provides a new platform to develop skills and abilities for the digital economy. Where we leverage international talent and collaborations, we need to ensure that we learn from these partnerships and embed this knowledge and expertise locally.

We will do this by shaping digital mindsets across our islands, building digital learning and engagement pathways, driving life-long digital learning, and ensuring that no one is left behind – or excluded – from the potential of digital.

Shaping digital mindsets.

Digital is more than just data and devices. It's about how we engage with these new tools and technologies, and how we use them to improve our lives and livelihoods. In fact, the technology is often the comparatively easy bit! We need to focus particular attention in supporting Cook Islanders to recognise the potential of digital. This will entail:

- Organising events and workshops to increase all Cook Islanders' engagement with digital – including an inaugural Cook Islands Digital Festival in 2025, showcasing our local talent, innovation, and digital opportunities. Outreach to women, girls, boys, and persons with disabilities will be particularly important.

- Identifying digital 'champions' within each of our districts and communities, to demonstrate the value-add of digital and to signpost local residents to key digital resources and opportunities.

- Encouraging 'play' and exploration of digital through our focus on exploration, empowerment, and experimentation – reaffirming that digital success is founded on learning and iteration.

- Identifying and implementing immediate digital learning and talent development strategies for our young people, recognising the accelerating pace of digital and innovation progress and developments.

Building digital learning and engagement pathways.

We have shaped strong digital literacy across the Cook Islands and among our communities, with ICT as a core part of our educational curriculum. However, the pace of digital development means we need to invest further effort in futureproofing our learning approaches – including ensuring continuous improvement and iteration for digital education to remain relevant. We will:

- Invest in ICT and digital education at all levels to improve digital literacy of our entire population. From early childhood education, through to primary, secondary, and tertiary education – and our below focus on lifelong digital learning. This will include developing a rigorous and applied digital and ICT curriculum, ensuring our future generations are able to become local, regional, and global digital leaders.

- Support the digital development of our teachers and educators, enabling them to build the applied digital knowledge and experience to deliver high-quality and relevant digital and ICT learning.

- Develop and empower focused digital and technology expertise, including specialised development and learning pathways in priority and emerging areas of digital and innovation – such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and network and system administration.

- Shape a collaborative approach to digital learning and development, bringing together the private sector and civil society to support young people from all our island communities on Rarotonga and the Pa Enua, to develop relevant and deep digital skills – including more targeted digital skills offers through education service providers.

- Develop digital internships and early-career opportunities across our public sector for all young people, highlighting the benefits, excitement, and importance of bringing their digital skills to serve Cook Islanders.

Driving lifelong digital learning.

Digital is not static. Technologies are continually changing, and new innovations and approaches are constantly emerging. This requires us to ensure that Cook Islanders are always able to engage with the potential of digital – not only through formal education, but also throughout their entire lives (and with a particular focus on our elderly population). Achieving this will require us to:

- Develop a Digital Skills Strategy that shapes an inclusive, holistic and extensive approach to lifelong learning – from building on our existing curricula, to exploring opportunities such as online learning and micro-credentials.

- Introduce broader digital learning opportunities (particularly for marginalised and vulnerable communities, such as our elderly population), including extra-curricular digital classes, digital learning alongside aged-care services, and the potential to revisit fee-free learning through local and regional tertiary and other learning institutions.

- Focus on developing key digital skills across all of our island communities, including supporting Cook Islanders to engage with emerging digital and technology – particularly Artificial Intelligence.

Code Avenger student building a robot.
(Photo credit: Mii Nimerota)

Cybersecurity experts from Australia, NZ, Tonga and the Cook Islands who participated in a panel discussion about "Pacific Coordination and Collaboration for Cyber-Capacity" at the PIFS Expo at Punanga Nui Market (August 2023). *(Photo Credit - Saia Vaipuna)*

Ensuring that no one is left behind.

Although digital tools and technologies provide enormous opportunity, we are also working hard to ensure that every Cook Islander is able to benefit from these developments. We will be particularly accelerating our efforts to tackle our digital divides – including making sure that the benefits and inclusion of digital extend to the Pa Enua. We will:

- Undertake a digital inclusion survey every two years to provide our government – and our digital innovators across the private sector and civil society – with the insights needed to ensure digital products and services are useful to everyone.

- Increase digital outreach and engagement across the Pa Enua, to support our island communities with driving the digital development of the Cook Islands.

- Ensure that our indigenous knowledge and perspectives – including Maori voices and regional expertise – are embedded throughout our digital efforts.

5. Fostering innovation

Digital doesn't happen in a vacuum. It needs to be accompanied by a culture that recognises its potential, and is accompanied by bravery and commitment to make it happen. This includes shaping an approach to prototyping and experimentation, building physical and virtual hubs and communities, providing a sustainable funding landscape; and developing digital products and services founded on the needs, realities, and requirements of Cook Islanders.

Through this National Digital Strategy, we will be supporting a culture shift in the Cook Islands. From encouraging our young people to trial new technologies and experiment with new ideas, to building trust in digital across the population, and supporting our private sector to innovate and to tackle our local challenges and priorities. We will build a community of innovation – with funding, support, mentorship, and collaboration to drive a unique Cook Islands approach to digital. This also includes supporting women and girls, often engaged in offline and analogue 'necessity-driven entrepreneurship', to explore digital enterprise and entrepreneurship.

We will do this by deepening our digital funding and financing, increasing our research and development efforts, and becoming leading digital innovators of the Pacific. Our public and private sectors, and civil society, all have a role to play in making each of these priorities happen.

Deepening digital funding and financing.

Digital transformation is a marathon and not a sprint. It requires considerable, and diverse, funding and financing. From new business models being explored by our digital innovators, to the importance of crowding-in new and additional capital to deliver our digital aspirations. To deliver this, we will:

- Assess the digital funding and financing landscape across the Cook Islands, and the broader region. Identifying opportunities for funding from government, the private sector, and our international development partners.

- Shape a digital Angel investment or funding programme to attract international investment, from across our Digital Diaspora – and beyond.

- Identify opportunities for additional government catalytic funding, building on our successes with the SMART grants programme, to support local digital innovators.

Increasing our research and development efforts.

We have truly leading digital innovators within our community, and our digital learning and development opportunities are increasing every day. We have an important opportunity to build on this talent, and shape regional digital innovation. We will:

- Invest in digital research and development of relevance to the Cook Islands, including identifying opportunities for digital comparative advantage (for example, leading regional explorations of digital tourism, digital service delivery, and applications of digital in our maritime environment – from shipping to fisheries and research).

- Establish a hybrid Digital Technology Expo to showcase our innovation and progress to the region – including to attract new types of funding and financing, and new partnerships and collaborations.

- Explore the potential of Artificial Intelligence for our islands and islanders – including the potential to apply emerging technology to the above areas.

- Establish a 'foresight' function, recognising that innovation does not need to be about 'new' technologies or concepts. Often innovation can come from applying existing ideas or technologies that are working well elsewhere but require adapting or customising for our purposes. [4]

Becoming leading regional innovators.

Digital is no longer constrained by borders. And, as an island state, we need to be looking well beyond our shores to ensure that digital works for the Cook Islands. This includes playing a role in shaping digital innovation and contributing to regional and global digital discussions and explorations. This will require us to:

- Support and drive regional digital collaborations, building on and deepening our existing partnerships with regional entities – including regional academia, research and development, and private sector partners.

- Invest in digital opportunities that can strengthen our regional relevance and providing further opportunities to attract talent and investment. This includes shaping the above comparative advantage and developing our local Innovation Hub to include a regional focus.

- Share our learning and strengthen our credibility. We want the Cook Islands to be seen as a digital leader in the Pacific and will achieve this, in part, through sharing our learning and successes – from explorations of connectivity innovation to our SMART grants programme.

6. Building a digital private sector

The private sector has been a crucial component of the digital and broader development of the Cook Islands. From our public-private partnership with Vodafone Cook Islands, to our collaborations with digital vendors to keep our country safe online, our exciting and emerging e-commerce sector – and the innovative start-ups and enterprises participating in our 2022 SMART Economy Initiative. The private sector is developing, funding, and scaling the digital products and services of our future.

The private sector also plays an essential role in embedding digital in our key sectors, from payment systems in our hotels to data-driven innovation in our farms, fisheries, and energy infrastructure and the use of digital tools in our local and dynamic creative sector. This exploration and adoption of digital technologies will be crucial in building consumer confidence in the digital economy, and in encouraging the next generation of Cook Islanders to shape new and exciting careers in our essential sectors.

We will do this by developing foundational Digital Public Infrastructure to catalyse the private sector, focusing on community building, focusing on enabling private sector digital growth, and exploring regional opportunities. In addition, government will play a key role in enabling the digital acceleration of the private sector (including as a customer, catalyst, and convenor – explored in more detail later in this strategy).

Developing a foundational Digital Public Infrastructure.

In the same way that we drew on international standards in developing our roads, airports, and other infrastructure, we also need to shape our digital infrastructure to support future generations. This is the concept of 'Digital Public Infrastructure'. The digital components, foundations, and other aspects to drive our digital development. We will focus on:

- Developing a national digital identity for all Cook Islanders, to improve the delivery of public and private services.

- Improving how government shares data between departments, and also with the private sector and civil society, through developing data exchange layers and other components.

- Shaping digital payment mechanisms to support the private sector to develop digital products and services, and to ensure all Cook Islanders can benefit from e-commerce opportunities – including using these digital components to support the realisation of our National e-Commerce Strategy.

Digital community building.

Our digital progress is driven by the talent and ingenuity of our local digital innovators. We need to support and amplify this human capital, including through bringing them together to learn from each other – and to find ways to collaborate. We will:

- Provide opportunities for local digital innovators to present to government agencies and departments, to share their learning, achievements, and products.

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4 This could also extend to Cook Islands sharing what is working in our unique context for others to benefit. And, exploring approaches such as 'positive deviance' – the exceptional progress made by a few, and scaling these practices up for wider benefit.

- Identify funding to support key community development priorities, such as developing a podcasting studio or similar initiative to accelerate learning and community growth.
- Support hackathons and other community engagement platforms that can generate new ideas, innovations, and collaborations.

Enabling private sector growth.

This National Digital Strategy has a strong focus on driving the growth and development of our local digital private sector. We have made good progress, and we are committed to even more extensive efforts. In particular:

- Undertaking an engagement exercise with our digital private sector to identify digital skills – and other – gaps, including where more focused efforts are required.
- Exploring further opportunities for public-private partnerships, building on the above importance of government being an effective customer to our local digital innovators.
- Streamlining backend government processes and workflows to increase the potential for government to purchase digital products and services locally.
- Improving digital public service delivery, particularly services of interest and relevance to local businesses.

Exploring regional opportunities.

Although there is exciting opportunity for our local digital private sector to serve the needs of Cook Islanders, we also know that the sustainability and success of these innovators is founded on bigger market opportunities. Recognising this, we will:

- Identify opportunities for greater regional integration, from the above Digital Public Infrastructure enabling international payment connections, to working to identify new markets and opportunities.
- Develop local case studies on our digital efforts – from pilots, to projects, and business successes – to demonstrate our lessons learned, and to showcase our digital talent.
- Work to attract regional private investment in key private sector priorities. In particular, digital skills building in science, engineering, and technology; ICT (including cybersecurity), e-commerce, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Community Stakeholders who participated in consultations regarding the development of this strategy document.
Photo credit: ICT unit, OPM

OUR APPROACH

Achieving our vision will require new ways of thinking and new ways of working. It will require a whole-of-society effort. And it will require a commitment to ensuring that digital improves the lives of all Cook Islanders – and that no one is left behind.

Our National ICT Policy sets out three interrelated policy aims. The need for ICT to engage all citizens (especially our most marginalised and vulnerable populations), the importance of ICT to enhance our government and private sector, and the opportunity to enable longer-term and productive use and trust in technologies.

Building on this framework, and to support the National ICT Policy in achieving these essential objectives, the National Digital Strategy is similarly founded on three aligned priorities: to explore, experiment, and empower. It focuses on making digital tangible, accessible, relevant, and useful for Cook Islanders. Moving away from abstract discussions of technologies, to grounding it in the realities and requirements of our islands. And it positions digital as a key tool in shaping our national development priorities – and in responding to our challenges, such as the impact of climate change.

1. EXPLORE

Digital technologies are evolving at an incredible pace – and innovative tools and technologies are becoming increasingly accessible. We need to unpack and explore how digital can best transform the Cook Islands and lead to new opportunities and fresh ways of thinking. This will include how:

- We can continue to explore technologies like the Internet-of-Things to build new businesses, and to protect the Cook Islands – inspired by the work of innovators such as ICTNexus and their nation-wide LoRaWAN network.
- Our creative sectors can leverage the lowered barriers to the global market enabled by digital, to share our unique culture and heritage with the world – and how we can use digital to protect and safeguard this heritage for future generations.
- We can build the inclusive digital components within and beyond government to support innovation across the Cook Islands – including foundational digital and data components, and further collaborations between the public and private sectors.
- We can create a network of digital champions (including women and young people) to support their local communities in exploring digital technologies – and increasing the relevance of them for local lives and livelihoods.
- We can shape digital governance to drive digital exploration and implementation – from building monitoring and learning approaches, to recognising our digital strengths, and identifying opportunities to accelerate our efforts.

We are making strong progress here. Our local digital innovators are developing everything from digital tourism portals to online ticketing hubs, and even 'Super Apps'. We are deepening our local digital skills and developing digital consumers. There is also exciting opportunity to share this learning with communities across the Pacific, and beyond.

However, we do need to strengthen our digital community. From improving communication and networking opportunities, through to showcasing and celebrating our process through events, workshops, and collaborations – and our potential Innovation Hub (and other approaches to cataloguing digital efforts). As recognised in our six digital priorities, we also need to build core digital foundations. This includes strengthening our connectivity, tackling our digital divides, and engaging with the ethical and other challenges of digital development.

2. EXPERIMENT

As highlighted earlier, digital transformation is a marathon and not a sprint – and it is a journey that is underway in all countries around the world. However, its direction and potential are still developing. No country has 'figured out' digital. It demands testing and iterating to identify how digital can be most relevant and useful, and a shift in mindset. In particular, we need to:

Build structures and processes that enable experimentation. This could include sandboxes and testbeds to trial new innovations and technologies – in a safe and secure way; programmes for innovators to test their ideas and business models, and governance and other approaches to share learning.

Deliver a responsive government – including using data from across the public and private sectors to test, learn, and adapt and to shape new policies and interventions. We need to ensure that digital continues to meet the expectations and needs of Cook Islanders, and 'course-correcting' or stopping efforts when necessary.

Shape a network of innovators - from supporting young people in becoming comfortable with trialling ideas and failing – to providing mentorship from across the digital and innovation community, exploring innovations such as incubators and 'sandboxes' to enable experimentation, and building protections for intellectual property.

Ensure that all members of our community are able to drive this more dynamic approach to digital development – including members of the Pa Enua, and the role that their community engagement approaches and values could play in framing our broader experimentation efforts.

Understand how best to measure success, including shaping a relevant evidence base, exploring the difference in experimentation between the public and private sectors, and identifying and prioritising where to focus our experimentation efforts.

This is a newer way of thinking, and working, in the Cook Islands. Moving away from a 'top-down' culture toward one of experimentation and stronger community ownership. And it won't happen overnight. We want Cook Islanders to become more comfortable with testing, learning, and iterating – recognising that digital is ever-changing, and also, quickly-changing.

We have started to build this culture, including through initiatives such as our SMART Economy programme and the digital agility that our islands demonstrated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can also draw on learning from our academic and policy communities, who have made the Cook Islands an important destination for research. But we need to increase our efforts if we are to drive this innovative approach to digital. We need to take a longer-term perspective. We must ensure that our foundational digital (and other) needs are met, and that we are encouraging more collaborations with our digital private sector.

Recognising the significance of this change, a focus on 'experimentation' requires more than a handful of start-ups, innovators, or policymakers. It is a fundamental mindset shift, requiring us to explore how we shape this way of thinking in early education and throughout life. It will require us to think longer-term, providing the resources and support for this shift, and, importantly, supporting Cook Islanders to dream, experiment, fail, and succeed.

3. EMPOWER

Digital cannot be the preserve or domain of a few Cook Islanders. It needs to be a tool that supports all individuals and communities in reaching their potential – and allows them to discover new opportunities, and new livelihoods. Only through this diversity and inclusion can digital be an empowering force for our islands. This work will include:

Using digital products and services to increase incomes – for example, through enabling the introduction and embedding of e-commerce technologies and approaches (including leveraging our National e-Commerce Strategy).

Building the digital literacy of all Cook Islanders through online and offline approaches – from online training to train-the-trainer approaches, in-person knowledge sessions, and mentoring. We need to build day-to-day digital skills to stay safe and secure online and to shape a cohort of digital advocates and experts exploring emerging technologies for business and our national development.

Ensuring that Cook Islanders have the tools and resources to engage with digital transformation, including improving the affordability of data and devices and supporting longer-term usage through technical support and other initiatives.

Exploring how the Cook Islands can play a digital leadership role in the region and beyond, including sharing learning and insights from our digital journey with other countries – and developing international collaborations and partnerships.

Ensuring that digital works for all Cook Islanders and is in their best interests. This includes priorities such as digital wellbeing and using digital to improve lives and livelihoods. It's also about the role of digital in supporting individuals and communities across our islands, and our Digital Diaspora. And we will leverage current and emerging better practice in putting this all into action – including in measuring our success.[5]

This National Digital Strategy is an important first step. It provides us with a clear vision and direction for digital in the Cook Islands, including how we can use it to best empower our people. From shaping an enabling environment, to identifying the digital needs – and challenges – of Cook Islanders, the importance of broadening our digital community, and the need to shape digital partnerships and collaborations. This also includes the role of digital in achieving our National Sustainable Development Agenda.

Empowerment is also about making digital relevant to individuals and communities – particularly our most marginalised and vulnerable populations. It needs to be founded on their interests and priorities. We need to make digital fun and interesting for young people. We need to make it relevant for our business owners, and for our citizens through improving access to public services. We need to keep people safe and secure online. We also need to use digital to protect our culture – through enshrining tradition and knowledge, and using digital to share and amplify our stories, art, and creative talents.

Additionally, we need to think longer-term. We need to build on what we've learned so far – and embrace the learning, failure, and iteration that will result from our experimentation and exploration of digital. We need to shape broader collaborations, including regionally and internationally – and develop clearer pathways of digital engagement. We need to share, and celebrate, our successes. And we need to identify the resources required to support the digital empowerment of Cook Islanders well into the future.

The importance of partnership

By definition, our national digital transformation requires a whole-of-society effort. It is not the role or responsibility of one sector or institution. And Cook Islanders need to be leading every aspect of our digital journey. However, each sector – our government, the private sector, and civil society – brings particular strengths to this digital effort and will require us all to work together especially to ensure our safety and security. We need to support and empower each sector, to define clear roles and responsibilities, and also to shape collaboration.

Private sector: leading implementation, innovation, and inspiration

Our local digital private sector is dynamic – ranging from major companies to growing start-ups as well as a wider community of digital advocates and enablers, including connectivity providers, local media, and financial institutions. Our digital private sector delivers digital infrastructure to connect us to each other and the world, drives trade and e-commerce, provides entertainment, and improves how we run our businesses and live our lives.

In the context of our national digital transformation, we need the private sector to continue to drive our economy. We need them to shape e-commerce, digital employment, and diversification opportunities (including through female-led private sector growth). We need them to not only take risks and advance innovation, but also to focus on the priorities and interests of Cook Islanders – including collaborating with our communities, and the public sector. We also need the private sector to keep us safe online and to support our country in achieving broader priorities. Including demonstrating leadership in leveraging digital to tackle climate change.

As part of this role, our digital private sector needs to hold itself to the highest standards. We want them to succeed, and to be our digital ambassadors for the region – and beyond. We want them to grow, re-invest, and showcase what digital means for the Cook Islands. The private sector needs to be a true partner to Cook Islanders on this journey: leading innovation, collaborating with government (while avoiding over-reaching), delivering digital products and services, and protecting the rights of our citizens.

Civil society: ensuring that no one is left behind

The Cook Islands benefits from an exciting and important civil society. We have our traditional leaders, grounded in the culture and history of our islands. Our non-profit groups working with under-represented communities – including the Cook Islands National Disability Council, women-led civil society organisations, and our youth groups, our faith groups, and village communities, our academic community, and those individuals and organisations working on key topics and issues – from sports groups, to workers unions, and the Cook Islands Internet Action Group.

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5 For example, using approaches such as the UNESCO 'ROAM-X' indicators of Rights, Openness, Access-to-all, Multi-stakeholder participation; and cross-cutting ('X') issues and priorities such as gender, young people, and the legal and ethical aspects of the Internet.

MAUREEN HILYARD (CIIAG) and JOE FULWOOD
(OCSC, Australia) discussing an online safety issue with a
with a visitor to the Cyber-security booth at the PIFS Expo.
Photo credit: Saia Vaipuna

Civil society will continue to play a key role in our national digital transformation. They are important partners in improving digital inclusion and literacy across our islands – due to their trusted and important connection to our communities. They can raise awareness of the potential – and potential risks – of digital and can provide some digital services more effectively than others. They can also highlight where digital is having the greatest impact, and where more work needs to be done.

This function requires our civil society organisations to have the digital knowledge, tools, and expertise to share this with their groups and communities. They can inform policy, strategy, and service design and delivery – collaborating with the public and private sectors. As part of this, they are an important conduit to delivering the benefits of digital to everyone in the Cook Islands – and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Government: being a catalyst of our digital transformation.

Our public sector has long been a champion of digital, from early explorations of ICT curricula to more recent efforts to drive innovation through the SMART Economy initiative. We are continuously working to meet the ever-evolving digital needs of Cook Islanders, and to shape an enabling environment to drive innovation, advance digital, and build and strengthen key protections.

Government will continue to lead in these areas. We will shape future-proofed policies and regulations to accelerate our digital development. We will continue to digitise and digitalise key services, resources, and processes to support people's livelihoods. We will collaborate with all sectors, particularly the private sector, in strengthening digital infrastructure and other key components. Through this, we will also identify opportunities for further funding and financing of digital innovation, and improve how we communicate our digital successes, and our challenges. Also, we are committed to keeping Cook Islanders safe online, and in the digital world.

In this context, we will be accelerating our digital efforts, from breaking down silos between departments, to updating key legislation and other drivers of digital transformation. We will remain humble: listening and learning from the digital journeys and experiences of Cook Islanders, and our local digital innovators. This includes avoiding competing with the private sector, who are often the best-placed to deliver key digital products and services. We will look beyond government through advancing open data and other efforts to catalyse the private sector. And we will look beyond our borders in driving regional and global collaborations with other islands, countries, and partners – including international development and funding organisations.

Government-as-a-Customer (and Catalyst, and Convenor).

We have seen governments in many other countries lead the way in digital transformation – from setting 'the rules of the game' though policies and regulation, to engaging and driving local digital ecosystems. We are committed to government playing a similarly central role in the Cook Islands, through our 'three-Cs' approach: Government as a Customer, Catalyst, and Convenor.

As a customer, we will prioritise local innovators to drive our national digital transformation – engaging and supporting our local digital talent to deliver the digital products and service that Cook Islanders need and want. And, at the same time, supporting our local talent to build sustainable digital businesses and enterprises. This will also extend to how we work with our local private sector through improving our procurement processes and ensuring that projects are scoped appropriately to ensure that Cook Islanders can bid for this work.[6]

Through our work as a catalyst, we will explore ways in which government can accelerate the development of our local digital ecosystem. This could include funding opportunities and other incentives to encourage local firms to participate in our important digital transformation work. Capacity building will also be an important component of this work, and we will look to invest in building the skills and experience of public and private sector innovators to work more effectively together – and in collaboration. And we will be exploring the frameworks, policies, and other tools needed to drive innovation and partnership.

Finally, as a convenor, we will bring the public and private sectors together to learn from each other and to share what is and is not working. Through this we hope to drive improved collaborations, and to shape processes and understanding on both sides – from how intellectual property is managed, to exploring the benefits of approaches such as software-as-a-service. This convening will also extend to broader priorities identified in our National Digital Strategy, including secondment opportunities and other initiatives.

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6 As we have seen in other settings, Digital Marketplaces, improved problem definition skills, familiarity with digital ways of working and thinking (such as Wardley Maps), and innovations such as outcomes-based procurement, could all be valuable approaches.

ROADMAP (and Strategic Priority Activities)

The above direction – from our Strategic Priorities to our whole-of-society effort to enable exploration, experimentation, and empowerment with all things digital – will require implementing a wide range of policies, activities, and other programmes and initiatives. The below Roadmap does not aim to be comprehensive but draws on local consultation and engagement – as well as national digital readiness assessments conducted by partners such as UNDP and PwC – to set out key actions and priorities for the coming years.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY	EXPLORE	EXPERIMENT	EMPOWER
Reliable, affordable, accessible, and high-quality digital infrastructure	• Undertake network resilience and redundancy review. • Complete scoping of international digital infrastructure efforts (including in diversifying connectivity markets). • Evaluate successes of current digital infrastructure rollout. • Undertake international research to identify opportunities to reduce equipment and connectivity costs. • Develop communications and engagement strategy to increase bandwidth utilization as retail costs reduce.	• Develop Universal Access Plan and accompanying Universal Service Fund to trial new approaches to digital infrastructure inclusion. • Streamline licensing processes for new connectivity providers with value-add to the country. • Undertake international research to identify potential role of government as a wholesale connectivity provider to the private market. • Trial public-private governance process to accelerate network rollout.	• Allocate annual budget to upgrade network infrastructure. • Develop and implement Proactive Infrastructure Maintenance checklist. • Develop in collaboration with Vodafone a communications strategy to update residents on connectivity progress. • Continue FTTH and 4G (and 5G) rollout. • Establish Device Fund, leveraging Universal Service Fund income, to subsidize devices for marginalized communities. • Pilot Community Data Bank to share data with other users.
Building digital government capacity	• Explore international models for digital career development within the civil service (including digital cadres, Digital Academies, standardized job descriptions, digital KPIs, etc.). • Establish 'Exemplar Service' approach to embed digital service, development, and delivery standards. • Scope the structure and responsibilities of a Ministry of Digital. • Undertake feasibility study of Government Connectivity Network. • Draft and implement Cloud First policy.	• Develop Open Data strategy and introduce APIs and trial collaborations with selected private sector entities. • Draft Once Only legislation to improve data sharing within and beyond government. • Establish focal point to explore Anticipatory, Adaptive, and Agile governance ('Triple-A governance'). • Explore international learning relating to Government Innovation Units and similar entities.	• Setup Digital Working Group with members from across government. • Establish Digital Academy to provide digital learning curriculum – basic and emerging technologies – for civil servants. • Empower individual or team to maintain and standardize online government presence across departments. • Make all online public services accessible to persons with disabilities (in accordance with Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy and W3C policies). • Establish dedicated annual funding for digital government transformation. • Setup 'Government-as-a-Customer' approach.

AIRPORT AUTHORITY STAFF demonstrating their use of security technology to monitor passenger safety before flights. *(Photo credit: Maxine Kokaua)*

STRATEGIC PRIORITY	EXPLORE	EXPERIMENT	EMPOWER
Shaping an enabling environment	• Explore approaches to increase citizen engagement using digital tools and platforms. • Undertake legislative gap analysis. • Undertake research and engagement exercise with private sector to identify regulatory pain-points. • • Establish and measure core digital transformation indicators.	• Establish Open Innovation Challenge to identify technological and non-technological solutions to tackle e-waste. • Undertake research to explore potential for Digital Nomad offer. • Establish platform or channels to engage Digital Diaspora.	• Develop Digital Skills Strategy. • Pass Cybersecurity Bill. • Develop cyber-skills and cyber hygiene programme for citizens. • Draft and enact Data Protection legislation. • Update Consumer Protection Act to shape digital protections.
Talent development	• Identify entry-points for introducing experimental thinking and 'play' approaches within formal curricula and across public and private sectors. • Identify priority and specialized skills (and skills gaps) to be prioritized for formal and broader education. • Identify feasibility to re-introduce fee-free training and learning.	• Pilot 'Digital Champions' network across villages and communities. • Pilot early-career Digital Internship Programme for young people in public and private sectors. • Explore collaboration with 'MOOC' provider for citizen upskilling. • Draft Digital Wellbeing strategy to address current and emerging digital harms.	• Setup Digital Roadshows across the islands. • Overhaul digital and ICT curriculum. • Develop programme of training for teachers and educators. • Implement citizen capacity building on artificial intelligence. • Develop and implement biennial Digital Inclusion Survey.
Fostering innovation	• Assess national and regional digital funding and financing opportunities. • Identify opportunities to shape digital thinking in the region, building on progress in the Pacific Islands Forum – including shaping regional digital standards and harmonization. • Explore potential to fund a 'foresight' function within government to drive Triple-A governance and engagement with digital developments	• Undertake research to identify comparative advantages of Cook Islands in the context of digital (e.g., digital tourism, digital supply chain management, maritime economy, etc.). • Establish digital and innovation testbeds based on unique factors of Cook Islands (e.g., geography, demography) to support national and international innovators. • Share successes and failures through public platforms.	• Launch 'SMARTer' Programme to fund local digital innovators. • Ensure legal equivalence between digital and analogue signatures and processes is codified in legislation. • Establish annual Digital Technology Expo to showcase national digital expertise. • Develop Orange Economy strategy to support creative sector to leverage digital.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY	EXPLORE	EXPERIMENT	EMPOWER
Building a digital private sector	• Undertake consultation exercise to identify priority skills gaps within the digital private sector – and how government and others can address these. • Develop international funding pitch to attract digital financing and programme partners. • Identify international learning relating to digital community building (e.g., freelance and ICT associations, podcasting and community building, etc.). • Develop Public-Private Partnership strategy to improve local ecosystem collaboration. .	• Setup safe-and-secure data exchange layer between government departments and the private sector. • Establish annual 'hackathon' to support private sector digital talent building. • Establish e-commerce sandbox to support local e-commerce innovators in building products and services. • Pilot 'problem definition' skills training to support public sector innovators to collaborate with the private sector.	• Implement Open Contracting Data Standards and streamline procurement to increase local vendor trust and engagement. • Develop case studies of local digital successes to increase Cook Islands' global digital credibility. • Establish Digital Marketplace to improve government contracting of local innovators.

IDENTIFYING SUCCESS

The complexity of digital transformation – from the many different technologies involved, to the whole-of-society effort it demands – can make attribution and identifying success, difficult. However, measurement is a crucial aspect of ensuring that our efforts are having the intended impact – and providing an opportunity to course correct if things are not proceeding as planned. Similarly, it also allows us to accelerate our double-down on successful efforts and activities.

The below framework is a high-level summary of headline outcomes and indicators that will support us in confirming that our digital efforts are heading in the right direction. This framework is only a starting point. Many of the actions, activities, projects, programmes, and priorities set out in the earlier Roadmap will be accompanied by more detailed monitoring, learning, and evaluation strategies and frameworks.

Strategic priority	Indicator	Target date	Data source
Reliable, accessible, and high-quality digital infrastructure	Launch of 5G pilots with local innovators	2025	Government reporting
	Launch of Universal Service Fund	2025	Government reporting
	High--speed connectivity available to 80% of all homes in Rarotonga and 70% of all homes for Aitutaki	2028	Government reporting
	New provider(s) enter market	2028	Government reporting
	High--speed connectivity available to all	2030	Government reporting
Building digital government capacity	Launch of digital service standards	2025	Government reporting
	Ministry of Digital established	2025	Government reporting
	First inclusion in UN DESA E-Government survey	2028	UN DESA

Strategic priority	Indicator	Target date	Data source
	Public Sector Digital Academy launched	2028	Government reporting
	All public services 'digital by default'	2030	Government reporting
Shaping an enabling environment	Cyber Bill enacted	2025	Government reporting
	Digital Nomad pilot launched	2025	Government reporting
	100% of e-waste disposed annually	2028	Government reporting
	First inclusion in ITU Global Cybersecurity Index	2028	ITU
	Policy, legal and regulatory environment meets all ROAM-X (or equivalent) standards	2030	UNESCO
Talent development	Digital Champions recruited in all villages	2025	Government reporting
	Launch of first edition of biennial national Digital Inclusion Survey	2025	Government reporting
	New digital and ICT curriculum launched for years 1-13	2028	Government reporting
	Specialized digital and ICT learning pathways launched	2028	Government reporting
	100% national digital literacy achieved	2030	Government reporting
Fostering innovation	Launch of testbed programme	2025	Government reporting
	Launch of 'SMARTer' Programme	2025	Government reporting
	US$5m in global funding and financing raised by Cook Islands digital innovators	2028	Government reporting
	Launch of National Innovation Hub	2028	Government reporting
	Fifth edition of hybrid National Digital Technology Expo	2030	Government reporting
Building a digital private sector	Launch of government 'Digital Marketplace'	2025	Government reporting
	Reporting against Open Contracting Data Standards established	2025	Government reporting
	Launch of National Data Exchange	2028	Government reporting
	First graduating cohort of digital public-private secondee programme	2028	Government reporting
	US$10m in annual turnover by Cook Islands digital businesses	2030	Government reporting

GETTING STARTED

This title is not the most accurate! We are far beyond 'getting started'. The Cook Islands has a long and successful history of exploring and engaging with digital tools and technologies. From foundational connectivity to our innovators building products and services enabled by cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain.

However, this National Digital Strategy has set out a very definite step in our digital journey: a commitment to deep and meaningful transformation, and moving beyond the pilots, explorations, and shorter time-horizons that have characterised much of our digital journey so far. With the opportunities enabled by digital – and the shared challenges that we face as an island community – we cannot expect anything less. With this in mind, we are positioning digital as the driver of our national development – and, returning to our vision, we will shape:

'A digitally empowered and inclusive Cook Islands, where technology enhances all lives, fosters innovation, drives economic growth and prosperity, improves social services, and protects our unique culture and environment – whilst building a shared identity for our island home.'

This vision is for the benefit of all Cook Islanders. But it can only be achieved with the leadership, collaboration, expertise, and commitment of all Cook Islanders. From the technical skills of our digital innovators within the public and private sectors, to the growing digital engagement and aspirations of our population, and the deep relationships and credibility of our local civil society organisations. Our digital transformation is not the domain of a single organisation, sector, or individual. It is a shared journey and direction, and one that will be strengthened and shaped by our unique culture and history. And our successes will be amplified through our combined efforts. Although a small nation, digital is making geographic size irrelevant – and digital will extend our aspirations, hopes, talents, and voices well beyond our shores.

Digital photo file – Digital Transformation Strategy Project – Launch of the ICT Policy & workshop

Maureen Hilyard (DTS Coordinator), Calum Handforth (UNDP) and Sally Wyatt (MFEM) giving presentations about their work on the Digital Strategy, 23 August 2023. (*Photo Credit: Pua Hunter*)

Prime Minister, Mark Brown, launching the National ICT Policy in front of in-person and remote participants, 23 August 2023. (*Photo Credit: Maureen Hilyard*)

Active multistakeholder group participation in information gathering for the creation of strategies and indicators for the digital strategy. 23 August 2023. (*Photo credit – Maureen Hilyard*)

Digital photo file – DTS Project – High Level presentation to Community & Government Leaders

High level presentations by Ben Ponia (Chief of Staff) and Calum Handforth (UNDP) to government officials and leaders of banking institutions on Rarotonga, 24 August 2023. (*Photo credits: CINews*)

Maureen Hilyard (Cook Is), Calum Handforth (UNDP), Jeff Montgomery (SPC), Nicole Chan (Digital Transformation Expert) at APRIGF Brisbane, 31 August 2023. (*Photo credit: Nicole Chan*)

PALMERSTON ISLAND'S TELECOM CENTRE
(Aerial photo courtesy of Rob Dunbar 2017.
RV 'Robert Seaman')