

Why Strategic Foresight Matters for New Zealand's Play, Active Recreation and Sport Sector



Most organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand's play, active recreation and sport system say they want to think long term, prepare for disruption, and make better decisions for future participants and communities. Yet even where people invest in trend reports, horizon scans and scenarios, many leaders still feel that "strategic foresight" sits on the fringes of real decisions – especially when funding is tight, planning cycles are short, and operational pressures dominate.

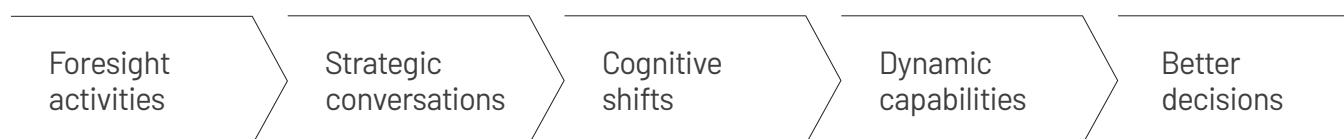
For regional sports trusts, national bodies, councils and community providers, the challenge is not a lack of information about the future. The challenge is turning that information into better questions, better conversations and better choices about facilities, workforce, competitions, partnerships and investment. Strategic foresight helps do this – not by predicting exactly what will happen, but by changing how people in the system talk, think and act together over time.

This paper explores how strategic foresight creates value within organisations and across the sport and recreation sector – and why it is often misunderstood or underused. It shows what foresight looks like in practice, shares real-world examples, and provides practical tools to help build foresight as an ongoing organisational capability. It is written for leaders, boards, and practitioners who want to move beyond one off "future" presentations to develop enduring capability to navigate uncertainty, protect long term value, and keep play, active recreation, and sport relevant for future generations.

The strategic foresight value chain: How change really happens

Strategic foresight doesn't work because it predicts the future. It works because it changes how people talk, think and act. Inside play, active recreation and sport organisations, and across the wider system, it tends to follow a repeatable value chain:

Strategic foresight value-chain



1. It sparks strategic conversations

Leaders widen their focus and raise questions they normally wouldn't. New futures, signals and scenarios create "permission" to ask what if questions about participation, funding, technology, climate and community expectations.

2. Those conversations shift mental models

Strategic foresight strengthens peripheral vision, improves judgement under uncertainty, and helps leaders question deeply held assumptions – for example, about what young people will value, how facilities should be used, or where funding will come from.

3. New thinking strengthens capabilities

Organisations become more adaptive and alert to signals, and more willing to reconfigure strategy, business models and partnerships as conditions change.

4. Capabilities shape an innovation culture

Scenario driven foresight boosts openness, risk taking and psychological safety. It makes it more acceptable to surface uncomfortable futures and to test new ideas early.

5. Better innovation cultures lead to better decisions

Not because strategic foresight provides the "right answers", but because the organisation becomes better at collective sensemaking and at navigating uncertainty over time.

In this way, strategic foresight functions as a capability platform, not a prediction tool. It upgrades how the organisation – and the wider sector – notices change, interprets it and responds.

Why the value of foresight is hard to see (and easy to undervalue)

Because this value chain is indirect, leaders often struggle to see the contribution of foresight work. The most common question becomes: "Did this report change our strategy?" If the answer is not an obvious "yes", foresight can appear marginal or low value.

Strategic foresight's impact shows up in things that don't fit neatly into dashboards or board packs:

- Better questions being asked in governance and leadership forums
- Better conversations about uncertainty, trade-offs and long-term risk
- Better adaptability when conditions shift or shocks arrive.

These outcomes accumulate quietly, so the value chain remains under the surface. This makes it easy to cut or deprioritise foresight efforts – especially when budgets or planning cycles are under pressure.

When conversations don't change decisions: The missing infrastructure

Many leaders in the sector share a similar frustration: "We invest in strategic foresight, but our decisions don't change." Foresight work reliably increases conversations about the future – but conversations alone rarely shift decisions.

Strategic foresight introduces new nodes into the strategic conversation network: more scenarios, more interpretations, more reflection. However, more talk about the future does not guarantee:

- Deeper perspectives
- Challenged assumptions
- Willingness to disrupt the status quo.

Most discussions can remain polite, linear and contained within the existing worldview – especially in governance environments that reward certainty and speed.

A key structural problem is that strategic foresight is often treated as a content delivery function pushed into decision processes designed for efficiency, not deep sensemaking. New insights simply get absorbed into familiar logic, without changing the underlying frames that guide choices.

The missing piece is infrastructure: the processes, rituals and decision pathways that connect foresight activity to strategy, budgeting and prioritisation. Many organisations now have a steady flow of future insights – but no pipelines that carry them into real strategy, budgeting and governance choices. To meaningfully influence strategy, conversations need to be intentionally designed – with space for tension, competing narratives, explicit assumptions and slower convergence on decisions.

Common pitfalls to avoid

Pitfall	What it looks like	Why it's a problem
Treating foresight as prediction	Expecting "the right answer" about the future instead of exploring multiple plausible paths and testing assumptions.	Sets foresight up to fail and discourages honest conversations about uncertainty.
Commissioning one-off reports	Buying a scan or scenario deck, then filing it away after a single presentation.	No impact on decisions or behaviours; foresight remains a tick-box exercise.
Separating foresight from budgeting and strategy	Running futures workshops that never touch capital plans, funding bids or programme decisions.	Keeps foresight marginal and disconnected from real trade-offs.
Focusing on tools, not thinking	Emphasising methods and jargon over leaders' cognitive skills (bias awareness, working with ambiguity, holding multiple views).	Leaders "do" foresight activities without changing how they think or decide.
Treating foresight as a specialist side project	Parking it with one person or team, away from boards, leadership groups and key partners.	Limits ownership and makes the practice fragile when roles or funding change.
Rushing back to certainty	Using scenarios as slide decoration, then defaulting quickly to business-as-usual decisions.	Avoids the productive discomfort where new options and capabilities emerge.

How strategic foresight rewires mental models

The most powerful impact of strategic foresight happens quietly, in the cognitive zone. It transforms how leaders think about the future – individually and collectively.

Effective foresight helps leaders:

- Broaden their field of vision
- Pay attention to weak and early signals
- Hold multiple plausible futures in mind at once
- Make decisions with incomplete and imperfect data
- Notice and question their own assumptions.

This is deep rewiring, and it is often unnoticed by leaders themselves. They may not connect a later strategic shift or a different investment choice back to the earlier scenario work that made it thinkable.

Leadership cultures, in play, active recreation and sport as elsewhere, tend to reward certainty over imagination. Under pressure, cognitive biases tighten and people fall back to familiar stories and “default” futures. Only deep engagement – not just reports or briefings – tends to create real cognitive shifts. Training and tools can help, but lasting change comes from repeated exposure to futures work and active participation in scenarios and implications discussions.

From information to immersion: Why scenarios outperform scanning

Many organisations are good at scanning: collecting information about trends, technologies and demographic shifts. Scanning, however, mainly provides more data. It does not automatically change how people interpret that data or what they choose to do about it.

Scenarios and implications go further because they provide new interpretations and immersive experiences of the future:

Scanning = information **Scenarios = experience**

Scenario immersion challenges the core logic of the organisation, rehearses unfamiliar futures and builds cognitive flexibility. When leaders step into a future where, for example, mobility patterns, funding sources or community expectations are radically different, they feel the implications rather than just reading about them.

In the play, active recreation and sport context, scenarios can make tangible what it might mean if traditional club structures weaken, if climate impacts reshape seasonal calendars, or if new technologies change how people engage with physical activity. This embodied sense of possibility is what helps shift mental models and opens space for different choices.

Building an innovation culture, not just innovations

Organisations often focus on innovation outputs – new programmes, products, formats or technologies. Yet practice suggests that having an innovation culture is a far more reliable predictor of innovation performance than any single initiative.

Strategic foresight contributes to innovation culture in several ways:

1. It broadens acceptable conversations

“What if?” becomes a legitimate question in governance and operational discussions, not a distraction.

2. It normalises uncertainty

Ambiguity becomes discussable rather than shameful. Leaders and staff can acknowledge what they do not know and still move forward.

3. It provides psychological safety

Scenario work makes being wrong expected, not risky. People can explore options and unintended consequences without being punished for “incorrect” predictions.

As a result, people feel freer, bolder and more imaginative. Scenario work creates shared narratives that become cultural reference points – a collective way of making sense of change. This reduces the emotional cost of thinking forward. Innovation struggles less because of a lack of ideas and more because of environments that suppress or sideline them. Strategic foresight helps change that environment. It does not dictate specific innovations; it enables them.



Strategic foresight as ongoing practice, not one-off programme

A common misunderstanding is to treat strategic foresight as a timebound project or a one-off programme: a single workshop, a one-year initiative, or a report delivered to a board. Framed this way, it can appear as an optional extra and is easily dropped when circumstances change.

Strategic foresight is a practice – a set of habits, routines and capabilities embedded into how organisations and systems work. For the New Zealand play, active recreation and sport sector, this might include:

- Regular futures-oriented sessions in strategy and planning cycles
- Board and leadership agendas that explicitly revisit signals, scenarios and assumptions
- Cross agency forums that explore emerging issues before they appear in KPIs
- Commissioning methods that emphasise engagement and learning, not just deliverables

Over time, these practices make it easier for the sector to notice weak signals, challenge legacy assumptions and reprioritise when the environment shifts.

What this means for sector leaders and boards in Aotearoa New Zealand

For New Zealand's play, active recreation and sport sector, strategic foresight is no longer a "nice to have" that sits beside strategy – it is a core capability for staying relevant, equitable and resilient in a decade of rapid change. Used well, strategic foresight work widens the questions we ask about participation, funding, infrastructure and technology, reshapes the mental models that sit behind our big decisions, and gradually builds cultures where it is safe to explore uncomfortable futures before they arrive.

Misunderstandings arise when strategic foresight is treated as prediction, as a glossy report, or as a one-off workshop that should immediately "change the strategy." Its impact is cumulative and systemic: it strengthens the pipes that connect weak signals and scenarios to governance conversations, trade-offs and investment choices.

For the play, active recreation and sport sector, the opportunity is to commission and use foresight as an ongoing practice – embedded in planning cycles, board agendas and sector conversations – so the system can anticipate shocks, seize emerging opportunities and deliberately shape better futures for all those who live, move and play in Aotearoa.

Applying foresight in practice: examples and processes

Example 1: Regional facilities and changing mobility

**// We realised we'd been planning facilities for
yesterday's travel habits, not tomorrow's. //**

Imagine a regional sports trust in Aotearoa working with councils to plan facility investments over the next 15–20 years. Traditional planning assumes most people will keep driving by car to large hub facilities on the outskirts of town. Environmental scans highlight higher fuel prices, new public transport links and rising concern about emissions, but the car-based model still quietly sits at the centre of capital planning.

A scenario exercise immerses leaders in a future where car ownership drops sharply for younger people, low carbon transport is prioritised, and local, walkable activity becomes the norm. In that future, the big box facility model looks fragile, while smaller, distributed spaces and partnerships with schools, marae and community hubs become more attractive. As leaders sit in that scenario, they begin to ask different questions: "What if the next generation can't or won't drive 30 minutes to play?" "How do we design for local play and active transport?"

Those questions, in turn, shift mental models about what "good access" looks like and lead to different capability and investment decisions, even though the future is still uncertain. The organisation starts to explore mixed portfolios (fewer mega projects, more local renewals and partnerships) that are more resilient to climate, demographic and funding shocks.



Use this as a quick exercise:

At your next board or leadership session, give people 10–15 minutes with this example and ask:

- What if private car use in our region dropped by 30 percent within 10 years?
- Which of our current facility assumptions would stop holding true?
- What is one decision or project we would design differently if we took that future seriously?

Additional reading

[The future of mobility](#)

Example 2: Youth participation, digital play and funding

**// Doing more of the same, but better, suddenly
looked like the riskiest option on the table. //**

Consider a national sport organisation worried about declining youth participation and increasing competition from digital entertainment. Scanning shows rising screen time, growth in esports, mental health pressures and changing social norms around organised sport. Leaders acknowledge the data, but strategy discussions still gravitate back to traditional competitions and membership models.

A scenario workshop explores a future 10 years ahead where most rangatahi engage in hybrid physical digital experiences, formal club membership has halved, and public funding is tightly linked to wellbeing and equity outcomes rather than registrations. In this future, the organisation's current programmes and revenue model are under severe strain, but new opportunities emerge in partnering with schools, health providers, iwi and youth led initiatives that blend online communities with local movement.

Experiencing this future together helps the board and leaders see that "doing more of the same, but better" is unlikely to be enough. They start to reframe their core purpose around enabling movement and connection in multiple formats, not just preserving existing competitions. Over time, this reframing supports shifts in capability (for example, data and partnerships), culture (more experimentation and co-design with young people), and ultimately different funding proposals and programme design.



Use this as a quick exercise:

- What if half of our under 18 "members" stopped joining formal competitions but stayed highly active in informal or digital hybrid ways – would we still see them as our participants?
- What if our main public funder stopped counting registrations and asked us to evidence wellbeing and equity outcomes instead?
- What is one small experiment we could run in the next 12 months that reflects this future, rather than our past?

Additional reading

[Wearable fitness technology](#)

[Navigating funding uncertainty](#)

Example 3: Māori/iwi partnerships and climate resilient events

// Climate change forced us to ask not just where we play, but how we honour our roles as kaitiaki. //

In a coastal region, local clubs and organisations regularly host waka ama, surf lifesaving and other ocean-based events. Increasing storm intensity, coastal inundation and sea level rise start to disrupt calendars, damage facilities and make some traditional venues unsafe. Local iwi and hapū, as kaitiaki and event partners, face both cultural and practical impacts as access to ancestral waters and marae adjacent spaces becomes less predictable.

A regional sport body partners with iwi, councils and emergency management agencies to run a series of foresight hui focused on climate resilient play, active recreation and sport. Together, they map the key climate and hazard drivers affecting coasts, marae and playing fields. They explore scenarios over a 15–20-year horizon, including futures where some coastal venues are protected, others are adapted, and some are gradually retired. Mātauranga Māori, local hazard histories and community aspirations are woven into each scenario, alongside sector level futures work.

In one scenario, repeated cyclone level events disrupt summer calendars, forcing shifts in seasons, locations and event formats, and elevating clubs and marae as critical resilience hubs for their communities. Governance conversations shift from “How do we save this one event in this one place?” to “How do we design a climate resilient events pathway that upholds mana whenua, equity and kaitiakitanga?” Over time, this leads to joint decisions on diversified event locations, targeted investments in resilient community and marae-based facilities and agreed protocols for using sport and recreation spaces as part of local response and recovery.



Use this example in a joint session with iwi partners, councils and sector leaders:

- What if we could no longer safely run our flagship coastal event at its traditional venue within 10 years – what would be at risk culturally, financially and socially?
- What if our clubs and marae became formal resilience hubs during major weather events – what relationships, protocols and investments would we need to put in place now?
- What is one step we can take in the next planning cycle to treat climate resilience and Te Tiriti partnership as core design questions, not add ons?

Additional reading

[The heat is on](#)

[Papa noho report](#)

Processes for building foresight into the organisation

Understanding that strategic foresight creates value not because it predicts the future, but because it changes how people talk, think and act is only half the work. The real question for leaders is how to build strategic foresight into their organisation in ways that strengthen conversations, cognitive shifts and climate.

1. Start with perceiving and prospecting

Every strategic foresight system needs both perceiving (scanning signals, trends and shifts) and prospecting (turning them into possible futures, narratives and implications). Most organisations over invest in scanning because it feels concrete, but without prospecting it rarely changes thinking or choices. Prospecting is harder because it demands participation, reflection and time, yet it is the more powerful lever for shifting climate and innovation behaviour. Boards and leadership teams need a regular rhythm of scenario work, future dialogues and implication workshops; these are not “nice-to-haves”, they are the core of the work.

2. Invest in leadership cognition

Strategic foresight adds most value when it strengthens leaders' ability to sense change, make decisions under uncertainty, challenge the status quo and reconfigure resources. These capabilities come from deep engagement, not from reading reports. Training should focus on how leaders notice bias, work with ambiguity and make sense of multiple futures, not just on tools and frameworks. One-off workshops can introduce methods, but new mental habits only embed through repetition, reflection and social reinforcement.

3. Design conversations that can carry uncertainty

Strategic foresight reliably generates strategy conversations, but those conversations rarely change decisions unless they are explicitly designed to. Most strategic dialogue is set up as argument and advocacy. Strategic foresight requires conversations that surface assumptions, allow contradictions and create

constructive friction. This means slowing the rush to agreement, treating scenarios as live prompts rather than background slides, and giving permission to question existing narratives. Over time, these conversations grow collective sensemaking capacity – the bedrock of organisational resilience.

4. Use strategic foresight to strengthen innovation climate

Innovation depends more on climate than on process, and prospecting work is a strong predictor of a healthier, more innovative climate. Strategic foresight creates shared permission to imagine, challenge and sit with uncertainty, making exploration legitimate and risk-taking more supported. You cannot force people to be innovative, but you can create conditions in which innovation becomes a natural response to how they understand change. In organisations that build strategic foresight capability, climate shifts first – people share ideas more freely and revisit assumptions more often – and innovation follows.

5. Connect foresight to strategy cycles and dynamic capabilities

Strategic foresight is most powerful when it feeds into the organisation's adaptive routines: how it senses, interprets, decides and reallocates resources. It widens the range of signals leaders consider, deepens interpretive frames, increases tolerance for ambiguity and encourages earlier strategic shifts. These only matter if it is hard-wired into portfolio reviews, risk processes, annual planning, innovation pipelines and governance forums. When implications from scenarios show up in resource choices and trade-offs, strategic foresight becomes part of organisational memory and reflexes – a capability, not a deliverable.

Future ready organisations

When these elements come together, a future-ready organisation is less about prediction and more about adaptation. It notices change earlier, interprets it more broadly, experiments more willingly and reconfigures faster. Leaders think in possibilities rather than single-point forecasts, people feel safe to challenge assumptions, and uncertainty becomes something to work with rather than to avoid. Strategic foresight becomes a practice, a capability and a cultural force.

A question for leaders

Every organisation has foresight moments: signals noticed, conversations opened, intuitions sharpened. The issue is whether those moments accumulate into capability or evaporate in the rush of business-as-usual. Strategic Foresight creates the most value when it shapes not just what an organisation knows, but how it pays attention, what it imagines and how it responds to uncertainty.

For organisations across Aotearoa's play, active recreation and sport system, this is ultimately a question about whether we will shape the future of movement and play, or be shaped by it.



Starter checklist: Building future ready organisations (next 90 days)

Questions for boards

Use 10–15 minutes at a board hui to test whether strategic foresight is becoming a capability, not just a product.

- When was the last time we changed a significant decision because we looked at multiple possible futures, not just a single forecast?
- What “default future” do we implicitly assume for our participants, facilities and funding – and what if that future does not arrive?
- Which 2–3 long term uncertainties (e.g. funding, climate, participation patterns, technology) most worry us – and where do they show up in our current strategy?
- Where, in our governance calendar, do we deliberately revisit signals, scenarios and assumptions – not just metrics and compliance?
- How do we make it safe for people (staff, partners, rangatahi, communities) to bring uncomfortable futures into the boardroom?
- Are we commissioning strategic foresight as a glossy deliverable, or as a process that involves us in sensemaking and implications?
- What is one concrete decision this year (capital, competitions, partnerships, workforce) where we will explicitly use scenarios before we commit?

Prompts for leadership teams

Use these questions in leadership meetings or planning days to strengthen perception, prospecting and innovation climate.

Perceiving

- What weak signals or “strange but interesting” stories have we noticed about play, active recreation and sport in the last three months?
- Whose future are we not hearing enough about (e.g. rangatahi, disabled people, rural communities, Māori, Pacific, new migrants)?

Prospecting

- If we fast forward 10–15 years, what are three very different, but plausible futures for how people move and play in our communities?
- In each of those futures, what looks fragile in our current strategy, and what new opportunities appear?

Conversation design

- Where do our strategic conversations rush to agreement too quickly?
- How can we create one regular forum where the purpose is exploration and learning, not decisions and signoff?

Innovation climate

- When did someone last feel comfortable saying “I might be wrong, but what if...?” in this team?
- What is one small experiment we could run this year that reflects a future scenario, rather than our current default?

Practical actions for the next 90 days

Choose 3–5 items that fit your context and commit to them.

Schedule a 60–90 minute “future questions” session with your board focused on one critical uncertainty (e.g. funding model, youth participation, facilities and climate).

Run a short scenario exercise at a leadership meeting: sketch two contrasting futures for your organisation and identify one decision you would change in each.

Add a standing “signals and assumptions” item to monthly leadership agendas (5–10 minutes: one new signal, one assumption to test).

Identify one major project (facility, digital, competition, partnership) and explicitly ask: what happens to this if our preferred future does not eventuate?

Invite a small group of staff or partners (including Māori and community voices) to a one-off futures hui to explore emerging issues you may be missing.

Map where strategic foresight could plug into existing cycles (e.g. annual plans, funding rounds, risk reviews) and mark one concrete point to pilot in the next planning cycle.

Capture strategic foresight moments: after any futures activity, write down what assumptions shifted, what new questions emerged, and where they should show up in upcoming decisions.

You do not need to do all of these to start; the goal is to build a visible rhythm so that thinking in futures becomes part of how the organisation pays attention and chooses, not an occasional add on.



Level 1, Harbour City Centre
29 Brandon Street
Wellington 6011, New Zealand
PO Box 2251 Wellington 6140
Phone: +64 4 472 8058
sportnz.org.nz

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government