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# **The future of sport and recreation for disabled New Zealanders (2025)**

## **Summary**

Adapted in 2025 by Accessible Formats Service,  
Blind Low Vision NZ, Auckland.

**Transcriber's Note:** The logo at the top of the page is Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa.



# **Notes for the Large Print Reader**

Main text is in Arial typeface, 18 point.

Headings are indicated as:

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# **The future of sport and recreation for disabled New Zealanders (2025)—Summary**

The full report (PDF) is published here on the Sport NZ website: <https://sportnz.org.nz/futures/disability-report>

## **Overview**

One in six New Zealanders experience disability. Recognising the need for improved outcomes for disabled people, Sport NZ, in partnership with the Halberg Foundation, Paralympics New Zealand (PNZ), and Special Olympics New Zealand (SONZ), undertook a strategic foresight process. This initiative aimed to understand current and future challenges in sport and active recreation for disabled people and to develop strategies for more inclusive and effective opportunities over the next five to ten years.

The process involved surveys, workshops, and expert consultations, focusing on building resilience in organisations providing disability sport and recreation. The findings are intended to guide action across the sector, addressing disparities in health, wellbeing, and quality of life for disabled New Zealanders.

# **Key findings**

The disability sport and recreation sector must adapt to future uncertainties to remain resilient. Persistent challenges include attitudinal and behavioural barriers, need for new approaches, and the importance of coordinated, collaborative delivery. The 2019 Sport NZ Disability Plan's focus areas—partnership, system-wide capability, and inclusivity—remain central. The sector's future success depends on adaptability, proactive collaboration, and systemic improvements.

## **Six key opportunities for disability sport and recreation**

### **1. Leadership (mindset shift)**

- Challenge entrenched attitudes and mental models about disability.
- Engage with diverse voices and implement innovative solutions, especially in areas like neurodiversity.
- Increase awareness, co-develop inclusive strategies and ensure disabled people's participation in policy-making.
- Opportunities:
  - Inclusion training for all stakeholders.
  - Grow participation and leadership by disabled young people.

- Advocate for greater workforce representation.
- Gather regular feedback from disabled participants and families.

## **2. Partnering (system leadership)**

- Expand investment partnerships to include a broader range of disability-focused organisations.
- Address a wider spectrum of disabilities, including non-physical and invisible impairments.
- Collaborate with local government and community providers to create inclusive systems.
- Opportunities:
  - Collaborate with healthcare, education and community organisations.
  - Co-design initiatives with disabled people.
  - Implement flexible funding models for tailored solutions.

## **3. System capability (system leadership)**

- Align stakeholders to build shared purpose and supportive policies.
- Facilitate information sharing, innovation and knowledge exchange.
- Empower regional organisations and advocate for inclusive policies.

- Opportunities:
  - Establish knowledge-sharing platforms.
  - Implement public education campaigns.
  - Develop funding models prioritising inclusion.

#### **4. Technological and digital access (organisational focus)**

- Develop expertise in assistive technologies, virtual/augmented reality, and AI-powered systems.
- Ensure accessible digital platforms and address the digital divide.
- Opportunities:
  - Partner with technology companies for adaptive devices.
  - Use digital tools for engagement and efficiency.
  - Offer training on digital accessibility best practices.

#### **5. Agility (organisational focus)**

- Integrate new technologies and adapt to changing social and economic conditions.
- Form partnerships with diverse stakeholders and offer hybrid participation models.
- Opportunities:
  - Create modular, adaptable programmes.



- Regular training on inclusive practices and emerging technologies.
- Promote a culture of innovation and continuous learning.

## **6. Individual and collective focus (organisational focus)**

- Improve efficiency and collaboration within and across organisations.
- Clarify roles, reduce duplication and align strategic planning.
- Strengthen regional networks and develop unified messaging.
- Opportunities:
  - Joint strategic planning and regular inter-organisational meetings.
  - Share resources and best practices.
  - Develop strategies for consistent approaches at regional and local levels.

## **Sector overview: historical context**

- 1937: Government involvement began with a focus on a medical model of disability.

- 1960s—1980s: Community-led organisations emerged. Awareness of disability increased, but sustainable change lagged.
- 1998–2005: National strategies aimed at inclusion were introduced, but progress was hindered by lack of resources and unclear roles.
- 2016–2019: Renewed focus on inclusive physical activity, system capability and leadership.
- 2020–2024: COVID-19 prompted new funding and adaptation. Progress continues, but participation and experience gaps persist.

## **Current trends and challenges**

- Increased visibility and value of Paralympic sport.
- Global efforts to improve equity, diversity and inclusion.
- Technological advances in assistive devices and digital access.
- Growing awareness of neurodiversity, but support is lagging.
- Disabled youth have lower physical activity and face barriers in schools and communities.
- Government funding has increased, but challenges remain: limited resources, persistent ableism and fragmented sector efforts.

# Sector assumptions and barriers

Assumptions about positive change include:

- mainstream integration and clear pathways for participation
- improved infrastructure and resources
- enhanced collaboration and leadership.

Barriers include:

- funding and resource shortages
- accessibility challenges
- fragmented collaboration and unclear roles
- societal attitudes and awareness gaps
- shortage of trained volunteers and staff.

Most impactful disruptors (issues and events that might disrupt business as usual):

- workforce changes and volunteer shortages
- social wellbeing policies and individual health trends
- social resilience and changing societal values
- status of public funding and economic inequality
- governance reforms and changing nature of work
- athlete and participant wellbeing.

# Alternative futures: four scenarios

The future is unlikely to play out as we think. To be resilient, we need to think about possible alternative futures in addition to the future we assume will occur. Participants in the strategic foresight process explored four alternative scenarios:

1. **Growth:** Embracing technology, promoting active lifestyles, and global collaboration. Risks include digital divide and funding challenges.
2. **Discipline:** Focus on sustainability, regional engagement, and eco-friendly practices. Emphasises local solutions and responsible resource use.
3. **Collapse:** Shift to low-cost, community-supported activities due to resource scarcity. Reliance on local networks and informal education.
4. **Transformation:** Rapid technological advances, biohacking, and AI-driven personalisation. Universal accessibility and redefined human potential, but ethical and cultural challenges arise.

## Key capabilities needed

Common capabilities across most or all of the scenarios included:

- adaptability and flexibility in programming and operations

- collaboration and partnership building across sectors
- technological and digital accessibility expertise
- inclusive leadership and empowerment of disabled people
- community engagement and knowledge sharing.

## **Conclusion**

The future of sport and recreation for disabled New Zealanders depends on proactive leadership, cross-sector collaboration, technological innovation and a commitment to inclusive, adaptable systems. By recognising persistent challenges and preparing for a range of possible futures, the sector can create more equitable opportunities and improved outcomes for all disabled people.

## **Contact**

If you have any questions about this document, please contact: [accessible@sportnz.org.nz](mailto:accessible@sportnz.org.nz)

**End of The future of sport and recreation for disabled New Zealanders (2025)—Summary**