

# Disruptor Scan

June 2026



# Political



## Social wellbeing policy

Budget 2026 tightens targeted support, social housing and benefit settings, while the draft Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy signals stronger focus on determinants and youth distress, together reinforcing a more conditional, fiscally constrained social wellbeing model that risks deepening inequities without bolder, systems-level policy shifts.

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## Evolution of Treaty Partnership

Moves to weaken or remove Treaty clauses across multiple statutes are intensifying contest over rights, legitimacy and partnership, heightening uncertainty for kaupapa Māori services and co-governance expectations. This risks chilling Māori-led facility development and programming, and could erode trust, participation and partnership-based investment.

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## Governance and regulation

Central restructuring and post-review reforms are accelerating consolidation, asset rationalisation and role clarification, tightening scrutiny on stewardship and community value, and forcing play, active recreation and sport providers to renegotiate access, collaborate more and adapt delivery models as control of local facilities shifts.

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Strengthening



Weakening



No change



## Status of public funding

Budget 2026 largely freezes core baselines, with inflation and public-service cuts eroding real funding and signalling a prolonged squeeze on community, sport and social services, even as new gambling-linked revenue streams emerge (online casino) with uncertain distribution, stability and equity impacts.

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## Other policy issues

Absence of a long-term population strategy alongside rapid, migration-led growth is amplifying planning gaps across housing, services and infrastructure, pushing more ad hoc, reactive policy responses. For the sector, this makes it harder to anticipate where demand will surge, align facilities with new communities, and resource culturally capable participation offers.

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## Geopolitical events

Middle East conflict and an Indo-Pacific pivot are raising fuel and freight costs, squeezing fiscal headroom and increasing security risk, undermining international tours and events, and nudging play, active recreation and sport toward more local, lower-cost, lower-travel participation formats.

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# Social



## Increasing diversity

Sharpening political and legal contest over sex and gender is fuelling polarisation, lifting the risk of flash-points around eligibility, safeguarding and inclusion and forcing sport and recreation bodies to strengthen policy, staff capability and engagement with affected communities.

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## Social and community resilience

Compounding shocks in poorer districts - closures, transport cuts, weather events - are deepening place-based resilience gaps and raising reliance on local, low-cost, trusted providers of play, active recreation and sport.

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## Wellbeing

Escalating concern over youth distress, deepfake abuse and harmful online content is hardening the wellbeing agenda and pushing sport and recreation organisations to treat belonging, psychological safety and digital safeguarding as core participation duties, not optional extras.

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## Changing nature of work

Economic headwinds and contested narratives about AI-driven job loss are amplifying insecurity, time-poverty and care burdens, especially for women, making it harder to sustain paid and volunteer roles in clubs and shifting demand toward flexible, low-commitment participation offers.

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## Changing leisure patterns

Persistent high screen time, rapid growth in gambling-adjacent prediction markets and tightening online-safety regulation are intensifying competition with traditional activity while also opening space for digitally mediated, safer and more ethical play, active recreation and sport

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Strengthening



Weakening



No change

# Economic



## National outlook

Early-stage recovery is colliding with Iran-linked fuel shocks, stubborn inflation expectations and rising unemployment, deepening pressure on discretionary spend, sponsorship and travel while pushing sport and recreation toward leaner delivery, stronger value-for-money narratives and more localised models.

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## Māori economy

Export volatility and higher input costs are squeezing parts of the Māori economy, increasing pressures on whānau and local investment, and potentially reducing sponsorship, hosting capacity and resourcing for kaupapa Māori play, active recreation and sport initiatives.

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## Changing business patterns

Digitally native and AI-first business models are scaling emotional engagement and hyper-personalisation, raising expectations that sport and recreation experiences feel more tailored, community-rich and on-demand, and challenging traditional providers to rethink products, pricing and partnerships.

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## Socio-economic inequality

Persistent low incomes, housing stress and the high cost of disability exclusion are entrenching participation divides, making equity-focused investment, targeted subsidies and inclusive design central to sustaining play, active recreation and sport for disadvantaged groups.

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## Disposable income

Rising winter energy and food costs, alongside higher debt servicing, are eroding household spending power, pushing families to cut club fees, equipment and travel, and increasing demand for local, low-cost, equipment-light opportunities to be active.

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Strengthening



Weakening



No change

# Technological



## Gaming and interactive

Rapid growth in prediction markets alongside bans on key platforms signal fast-evolving digital gambling, nudging regulators to tighten consumer protection and forcing sport and recreation bodies to reassess sponsorship, integrity risks and how they engage fans without normalising speculative, gambling-adjacent behaviour.



## Human augmentation

The Enhanced Games and rising concern about enhancement drugs are normalising optimisation culture while alarming regulators and anti-doping bodies, increasing pressure on schools, clubs and gyms to strengthen education, testing, ethics frameworks and alternative performance pathways that protect young people.



## Digital and surveillance

New laws criminalising sexualised deepfakes and broader online-safety reforms are closing the gap between voluntary guidance and hard liability, compelling play, active recreation and sport organisations to treat synthetic-media abuse, online harassment and data governance as core safeguarding responsibilities.



## Artificial Intelligence

The refreshed AI Blueprint and emerging evidence of “high-use, low-trust” AI adoption are accelerating pressure for robust governance, skills and assurance, pushing play, active recreation and sport organisations to professionalise AI use in coaching, admin and content while protecting jobs, integrity and inclusion.



## Health and medical

Advances in biomarkers and early-detection tools are reinforcing prevention and healthy-ageing narratives, strengthening the case for sustained, life-course participation strategies and partnerships between sport, health and community providers to keep older adults active longer.



Strengthening



Weakening



No change

# Environmental



## Climate change consequences

Updated projections of more frequent 1.5-degree-plus years, heavy-rain events and variable winters reinforce a more volatile operating climate, driving higher disruption, insurance and maintenance costs for outdoor, snow and turf-based sport and recreation.



## Environmental outlook

El Niño's persistence and growing concern over legacy waste sites and ecosystem stress are highlighting cumulative landscape risks, pushing sport and recreation planners to think beyond single facilities toward catchment-scale resilience and nature-positive design.



## Active Transport

Global and Australian evidence on mode-shift programmes, alongside local congestion and emissions debates, is strengthening the case for integrated active-transport investment, positioning play, active recreation and sport as key partners in creating safe, low-carbon movement networks.



## Climate change response

Budget 2026 investment in a new planning system plus ongoing emission trading scheme and climate-law reforms are raising expectations that councils, funders and sport bodies can evidence credible adaptation and emissions-reduction plans as a condition for future facility and event support.



## Space and place dynamics

World Environment Day campaigns and urban-design narratives about regenerative, 15-minute, climate-resilient neighbourhoods are reinforcing a shift toward greener, multi-benefit local spaces where play, active recreation and sport are woven into everyday streets, parks and blue-green networks.



Strengthening



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No change

# Sector



## Social licence for sport and rec

No new crises have broken, but heightened scrutiny of inclusion, brain health, gambling links and climate responsibility keeps legitimacy fragile, meaning missteps can quickly damage trust and forcing organisations to invest more in ethics, transparency and community voice.

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## Workforce (including volunteers)

Persistent cost-of-living pressure, migration and rising expectations of collaboration and capability are stretching already-thin paid and volunteer workforces, pushing organisations to rethink roles, offer better support and explore new models that share back-office functions and reduce admin load.

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## Athlete and participant wellbeing

High-profile sideline-abuse incidents and growing concern about enhancement drugs underscore a harder edge to participation culture, accelerating moves toward stricter codes of conduct, stronger wellbeing systems and more youth-centred environments that prioritise safety, enjoyment and long-term engagement.

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## International travel

Iran-related conflict continues to disrupt air routes, add risk premiums and dent traveller confidence, increasing costs and fragility for tours, international events and high-performance campaigns and nudging planning toward contingency-heavy scheduling and more selective overseas commitments.

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Strengthening



Weakening



No change