

Holding the country together: How play, active recreation and sport can strengthen trust

How the sector can strengthen belonging,
resilience and public trust





About this paper

This paper is one of a series of issue-specific futures papers designed to help Aotearoa New Zealand's play, active recreation and sport sector think more comprehensively about the future and, in doing so, make better decisions today.

Each paper in the series focuses on one force or issue likely to shape the sector over the next decade and beyond. The aim is not to predict a single outcome. It is to help leaders test assumptions, notice emerging pressures early, and make more future-fit choices about strategy, participation, partnerships, facilities, funding and capability.

This paper focuses on declining trust and weakening social cohesion. It is written for senior leaders and decision-makers across the system, including sports organisations, regional sports trusts, councils, recreation providers, facility planners, participation leaders, funders

and system stewards. While the examples vary, the underlying question is the same for all of them: if trust and cohesion become harder to sustain, is the sector positioned to help hold communities together, or is it still operating as though the wider social fabric is stable?

The time horizon is 2026 to 2035. The key strategic question is how leaders across the system can adapt to, and where possible counter, the effects of declining trust and social cohesion while strengthening resilience, belonging and positive civic engagement.

How to use this paper

This is not a forecast. It is a strategic thinking tool.

The paper is most useful when it is used to test current decisions, not simply to inform discussion. The scenarios are designed to be argued with. Their purpose is to help organisations identify where inherited assumptions may no longer hold, where existing models may become brittle, and where earlier action could create stronger options.

This paper can be used in board sessions, strategy refreshes, regional planning, policy discussions, facility planning, partnership conversations and leadership development. It is intended to be practical across different parts of the system.

- Sports organisations can use it to test participation models, governance settings, volunteer reliance, public legitimacy and future relevance.
- Regional sports trusts can use it to interpret local pressures, shape place-based responses and strengthen local ecosystems.
- Councils can use it to think about trusted public spaces, facility planning, community resilience and local cohesion.
- Recreation providers can use it to test whether their spaces, offers and partnerships are helping people connect, belong and return.

In each setting, the following questions can help turn the paper into practical value.

- Which parts of the current model assume high trust, stable institutions and easy social participation?
- Where is declining trust already visible in participation, volunteering, partnerships or public debate?
- Which communities are most exposed if cost pressure, misinformation, polarisation or institutional distrust deepen?
- What decisions are being made now that could become brittle in a lower-trust environment?
- What would we redesign now if we took social cohesion seriously as part of the sector's core role?
- Are we talking about the sector's value in ways that align with what government increasingly cares about – cohesion, resilience, wellbeing and connected communities?

Why this issue matters

The value of the paper is not in predicting exactly what will happen. It is in helping leaders see that trust and cohesion are becoming part of the operating environment for the whole sector, and that this has implications for more than communications or reputation.

For sports organisations, it affects who joins, who stays, who volunteers, and whether traditional

models continue to feel relevant. For RSTs, it affects how local needs are interpreted and how effectively local partnerships can be built. For councils and recreation providers, it affects whether facilities and public spaces function only as assets, or as trusted places that help communities connect.

Why trust and cohesion matter

Trust and social cohesion are not soft background issues. They shape whether people feel safe to join, willing to volunteer, open to difference, confident in institutions and able to cooperate across community lines.

In New Zealand, the foundations of trust and cohesion are under increasing pressure. Confidence in institutions has weakened, many people feel less connected to others, and public life is being shaped by a more polarised and fragmented information environment. Financial stress, social isolation, uncertainty about the future, and declining confidence that systems are fair or acting in people's interests are reinforcing one another.

This matters for the play, active recreation and sport sector because participation does not happen in a vacuum. Every club, programme, event, trail, park, facility and volunteer network depends on some level of trust: trust that others will show up, trust that rules are fair, trust that people will be welcomed, trust that public investment has value, and trust that shared spaces can be used safely and respectfully.

Where trust weakens, the effects can appear in quieter but highly consequential ways. People withdraw earlier, families become more

selective, volunteers burn out faster, public conversations harden, misinformation spreads more easily, and institutions find it harder to mobilise collective effort.

At the same time, this issue creates an important strategic opening for the sector. Play, active recreation and sport are among the few parts of civic life that still bring people together physically, locally and repeatedly. They create shared routines, visible norms, repeated contact across difference, and practical opportunities for belonging. In a society where many institutions are struggling to maintain credibility and connection, that role becomes more important, not less.

This is also increasingly important to government and wider society. Social cohesion matters to public safety, democratic confidence, health and wellbeing, community resilience, and the ability to navigate disruption without deepening fracture. A sector that can demonstrate it helps build trust, connection and belonging is not offering a peripheral benefit. It is contributing to something that is becoming central to the country's long-term social and civic resilience.

What is changing

Institutional trust is slipping

The most visible shift is declining trust in institutions. Legitimacy can no longer be assumed in the way many organisations once expected. For play, active recreation and sport organisations, that changes the operating environment for everything from consultation and public funding to safeguarding, communications and change management.

This does not mean institutions no longer matter. It means they are being judged more closely. People are less willing to accept opaque decisions, weak communication or inherited authority without evidence of fairness, competence and care.

Social connection is becoming thinner

Wider social connectedness also appears to be softening. More people report isolation, thinner belonging and weaker attachment to conventional civic life. Participation often relies on a web of relationships around the formal activity itself, so when neighbourhood ties, institutional confidence or social trust weaken, the friction around joining, staying and contributing rises.

This matters especially in a sector where much of the value is relational. People return not only because of the activity, but because of the people, the atmosphere, the welcome and the sense that they belong there.

Pressure is becoming cumulative

The decline of trust and cohesion is not the product of one single cause. Financial stress, social isolation, housing pressure, shifting work patterns, identity tensions, anxiety about the future, and declining faith in institutions all interact.

This cumulative pattern matters because participation barriers are rarely just about sport. They are increasingly shaped by household stress, time pressure, confidence, identity, perceived fairness and whether public systems feel trustworthy enough to engage with. As those pressures build, collective activities that once felt straightforward can start to feel harder to sustain.

The information environment is harder to navigate

The wider information environment is becoming more fractured, emotional and contested. Misinformation, digital manipulation, politicisation of public issues and the decline of trusted shared facts make it harder for communities to interpret events in the same way. Privacy concerns, cybersecurity risks and unease about how technology is shaping daily life add to this wider trust challenge.

For the sector, this is not just a communications issue. It affects reputation, crisis response, community debate, safeguarding controversies, inclusion initiatives and any decision likely to be interpreted through political, cultural or identity lenses. In this environment, the ability to communicate credibly, act transparently and maintain trust in both physical and digital settings become more important.

Community life is being reconfigured

The ways people gather, connect and use shared space are changing. Traditional community structures are less reliable than they once were, while demand is growing for informal, flexible and multi-functional places that support social interaction alongside activity.

This suggests that the future of trust and cohesion may be shaped as much by where and how people gather as by what organisations say. Parks, pools, trails, clubs, recreation centres and hybrid community hubs may become more important as low-pressure sites of everyday connection, intergenerational contact and social mixing.

Expectations of institutions are rising

Public expectations are shifting. People increasingly want organisations to be transparent, values-led, ethically governed and genuinely contributing to social and environmental wellbeing. This is especially visible among younger generations, but it is becoming a broader expectation across society.

For play, active recreation and sport organisations, this means trust will increasingly be influenced by how decisions are made, how data is handled, how inclusion is practised, how partnerships are formed, and whether the sector can show that it contributes meaningfully to communities beyond its immediate outputs.

Why it matters for the sector

Play, active recreation and sport depend on social infrastructure as much as physical infrastructure. A facility can exist, a field can be marked and a programme can be funded, but participation remains fragile if people do not feel safe, represented, respected or confident that the system works for them.

This has implications across the sector.

Participation

Lower trust and thinner belonging can reduce willingness to join unfamiliar settings, especially for young people, new migrants, disabled people, lower-income households and communities with weaker historic connection to mainstream institutions.

Partnerships

Schools, councils, health agencies, iwi, clubs and community groups need enough mutual confidence to share resources, align agendas and solve local problems together.

Public legitimacy

In a trust-constrained environment, funding decisions will face sharper scrutiny and the sector will need a stronger case for its contribution to wellbeing, belonging, prevention and resilience, not only participation counts or performance outcomes.

Volunteering and leadership

Trust erosion can make it harder to recruit, retain and hand over leadership, especially where people are already fatigued or sceptical of institutional processes.

But the story is not only one of risk. There is a significant opportunity here.

The sector is unusually well placed to demonstrate what social cohesion looks like in practice. It can create spaces where people encounter one another repeatedly, develop shared norms, build confidence, form relationships, and experience fairness and inclusion in everyday ways. It can provide low-barrier opportunities for connection at a time when many other parts of civic life are becoming thinner, more digital or more contested.

This is important because government and the public are increasingly concerned not just with outputs, but with whether institutions help communities hold together. A play, active recreation and sport system that can show it contributes to trust, belonging, active citizenship, local resilience and intergenerational connection is speaking directly to issues that matter well beyond the sector itself.

This creates a strategic opportunity to reposition parts of the sector not simply as providers of

programmes, competitions and facilities, but as builders of social infrastructure. Community hubs, inclusive clubs, trusted local spaces, intergenerational activity, culturally responsive programming, and partnerships that bring people together across different groups all become more valuable in this context.

The opportunity is especially strong because the sector already works through repeated contact and shared experience. Unlike one-off campaigns or abstract messages, play, active recreation and sport can build cohesion through lived experience: the welcome at the front desk, the fairness of a draw, the accessibility of a public space, the tone of a coach, the openness of a club, the design of a shared activity, and the sense that people from different backgrounds can participate on equal terms.

The strategic question is therefore larger than whether trust decline creates operational risk. It is whether the sector is willing to act as part of New Zealand's social cohesion infrastructure at a time when that infrastructure is becoming more valuable and more fragile.

4 plausible futures

The scenarios that follow are not predictions. They are constructed futures based on forces already in motion, pushed to plausible but distinct end points using Jim Dator’s four archetypes: continued growth, discipline, collapse and transformation. Reading across all four is more useful than choosing a favourite. Aspects of more than one future could emerge at the same time.

Scenario 1

Frayed but functioning (Continued growth)

By the mid-2030s, New Zealand remains institutionally stable, but trust has not recovered to earlier levels. People still participate in play, active recreation and sport, but they do so more selectively. Families and individuals increasingly choose experiences that are flexible, local, low-friction and visibly trustworthy. Large parts of the system keep operating, yet legitimacy must be earned over and over again rather than inherited.

In this future, public agencies and sector bodies continue investing in participation and wellbeing, but the environment is more transactional. Programmes succeed where they are easy to access, clearly beneficial and locally credible. Clubs and organisations with strong community

relationships hold up reasonably well; those relying on legacy status, dense volunteer cultures or automatic loyalty struggle to maintain momentum.

Public expectations around ethics, transparency, data handling and social contribution also rise. Organisations that cannot show how they create value, protect trust and operate responsibly find it harder to retain relevance, especially with younger and more values-driven participants.

The biggest risk in this future is not outright failure. It is gradual thinning. The sector remains busy enough to appear healthy while trust, volunteer depth, civic patience and cross-community connection quietly weaken underneath.

Example

A regional network sees stable headline participation numbers, but repeated complaints about fairness, cost, communication and inclusion become more common. The issue is not whether people value activity. It is that they are becoming less willing to tolerate friction or opaque decision-making.

What to notice in this future	What it means now
Participation continues, but loyalty is weaker	Design for earned trust, transparency and low-friction engagement
Institutions still function, but legitimacy is conditional	Improve communication, visible fairness and responsiveness
Community relationships matter more than formal authority	Invest in local credibility, not only national consistency
Quiet disengagement becomes more common	Track belonging, retention and volunteer health, not just volume

Scenario 2

Rules, rituals and repair (Discipline)

By the mid 2030s, concern about polarisation, misinformation and social fragmentation has produced a stronger public push toward shared norms, civic values and social responsibility. Government, schools, local institutions and sector bodies place more emphasis on inclusion, codes of conduct, tikanga-informed practice and deliberate community-building. Trust improves in some settings, but only where people see rules as fair and leadership as authentic.

In this future, the sector is expected to do more than deliver activity. It becomes a visible site for modelling respectful behaviour, intergenerational connection, cross-cultural engagement and local belonging. Funding and public expectations increasingly reward organisations that can show social value, inclusive governance and trusted community relationships.

Multi-use hubs, wellbeing centres and shared spaces become more important. The sector is not only running programmes inside facilities. It is helping shape the norms, uses and partnerships that make shared places work and that enable different groups to feel welcome in the same civic space.

The biggest risk in this future is overcorrection. If discipline becomes compliance-heavy, moralistic or disconnected from local realities, organisations may create box-ticking inclusion without real trust. The opportunity lies in building strong social norms without losing openness, joy or adaptability.

Example

A national body redesigns club accreditation around safeguarding, cultural capability, dispute resolution and community trust indicators. Some clubs become stronger and more welcoming. Others comply on paper but fail to change everyday experience.

What to notice in this future	What it means now
Social expectations of institutions rise	Build trust through behaviour, not brand language
Public value is judged partly through cohesion outcomes	Strengthen evidence on belonging, inclusion and community impact
Shared norms matter more	Invest in leadership, facilitation and conflict capability
Compliance can expand faster than trust	Keep systems practical, relational and locally grounded

Scenario 3

Splintered society, shrinking commons (Collapse)

By the mid 2030s, cost pressure, political mistrust, misinformation and institutional fatigue have deepened to the point where common ground is much harder to sustain. Trust in public institutions remains low, confidence in the next generation’s prospects is weak, and more people retreat into narrower networks defined by identity, grievance or survival.

In this future, the sector feels the effects in uneven participation, volunteer burnout, local conflict, weaker sponsorship and growing contest over who gets access, whose values count and what public money should support. Some clubs and spaces remain resilient, but others become more exclusive, more brittle or harder to govern. Shared facilities become harder to steward when communities no longer grant each other the benefit of the doubt.

Information warfare, politicisation of events, cybersecurity failures, privacy breaches and AI-enabled misinformation become potential accelerants. Routine operational issues can become legitimacy crises much faster than in the past.

The biggest risk is that play, active recreation and sport lose their role as bridging institutions and become mirrors of wider fragmentation. When that happens, the sector does not simply suffer from lower cohesion. It can inadvertently reproduce it through uneven access, hostile online debate, distrustful governance and shrinking civic imagination.

Example

A local facility redevelopment becomes a flashpoint for wider social tension. The debate is no longer just about courts, fields or budgets. It becomes a proxy battle over fairness, identity, who belongs and whether institutions can be trusted at all.

What to notice in this future	What it means now
Public trust remains low and social patience is thin	Prepare for contested decisions and legitimacy shocks
Shared spaces become harder to govern	Strengthen mediation, local engagement and transparent trade-offs
Volunteer and civic capacity erode	Reduce overreliance on goodwill and informal labour
Bridging across difference weakens	Protect inclusive spaces and repeated positive contact

Scenario 4

Rebuilt from the edges (Transformation)

By the mid 2030s, trust is rebuilt unevenly but meaningfully through new forms of local participation, digital accountability, community-led design and more distributed models of leadership. Large institutions still matter, but people place more confidence in systems that are transparent, participatory and close to lived experience. Some of the most trusted play, active recreation and sport models are no longer the most traditional. They are the ones that combine low barriers, strong relationships, trusted data, inclusive design and shared ownership.

In this future, the sector becomes more networked and adaptive. Iwi, community organisations, schools, councils, health providers and user groups co-create offers that are place-based and culturally grounded. Digital tools help with participation, feedback, safeguarding and access, but they support trust only where governance is credible and communities can see how decisions are made.

Multi-functional community hubs and hybrid public places become valuable platforms for social mixing. Participatory design, shared stewardship and community voice become more important. Technology is used carefully, not as a substitute for trust, but as a way of making systems more transparent, accessible and accountable.

The biggest opportunity is that play, active recreation and sport become part of a broader trust renewal story. The sector helps rebuild confidence not through grand claims, but through everyday experiences of fairness, voice, welcome, reciprocity and shared problem-solving.

Example

A council, iwi, local clubs and youth groups jointly redesign a recreation precinct using participatory budgeting and community stewardship. The asset matters, but the process matters just as much because it produces visible fairness, local ownership and stronger relationships.

What to notice in this future	What it means now
Trust is rebuilt through proximity and participation	Test co-design, participatory governance and shared stewardship
People back systems they can see and influence	Increase transparency and feedback loops
Local solutions outperform one-size-fits-all models	Build place-based partnerships and adaptive capability
Technology can support trust, but cannot substitute for it	Use digital tools to reinforce fairness and accountability

What stays the same across all futures

The scenarios differ, but several realities remain true across all of them. These are not optional issues. They are strategic constants that matter whatever future becomes dominant.

People will still need movement, connection and belonging

No scenario suggests that play, active recreation and sport become less important to everyday life. People will still need opportunities to move, gather, recover, compete, express identity and feel part of something larger than themselves. What changes is the level of trust required to make those opportunities feel accessible, safe and worthwhile.

One-size-fits-all models will keep losing traction

Every scenario points toward greater variation by place, identity, income, age and local institutional strength. Systems built around one dominant participation norm or one standard engagement approach will become less effective over time.

Cohesion outcomes will matter more to public legitimacy

In every future, the sector will increasingly need to explain its value in terms that connect to wider outcomes such as wellbeing, belonging, prevention, resilience and community trust. These are not secondary claims. They are becoming part of the core public case for sport and recreation.

Trust will remain a design issue, not just a communications issue

Across all futures, trust is shaped by everyday experience. Fairness, welcome, transparency, cultural fit, safety, affordability and voice matter as much as messages or brand campaigns.

Ethical practice and data trust will matter more

Across all futures, sector credibility will be shaped not only by what organisations say they value but by how they govern, communicate, use data, protect privacy and demonstrate social contribution.

Partnerships will matter more than isolated delivery

No single organisation can carry the response alone. Whether the issue is misinformation, inclusion, facility conflict, local distrust or civic fatigue, stronger ecosystems will outperform siloed delivery.

Decisions to test now

The purpose of a futures paper is not to produce a complete action plan. It is to help the sector stress test current decisions against emerging change. The table below focuses on decisions to test now, capabilities to build over the next three to five years and warning signs that declining trust and cohesion may be arriving faster than expected.

Area	Decisions to test now	Capabilities to build	Warning signs to watch
Strategy and governance	Are current strategies assuming stronger institutional trust, easier social licence or more civic patience than the future may provide?	Board-level trust literacy, scenario testing, legitimacy mapping	Greater contest over sector priorities, reforms or public funding
Participation design	Do programmes assume people will tolerate complexity, cost, weak communication or culturally narrow formats?	Human-centred design, access testing, inclusive service design	Rising drop-off, weaker re-entry, stronger preference for informal options
Community trust	Is trust being measured directly, or inferred from participation volume alone?	Belonging and trust metrics, community listening, rapid feedback loops	Stable numbers alongside worsening sentiment, complaints or disengagement
Leadership and workforce	Are clubs and organisations too dependent on a shrinking pool of highly committed volunteers and trusted intermediaries?	Micro-volunteering, leadership renewal, conflict resolution, safeguarding confidence	Volunteer fatigue, vacancies, leadership churn, fragile succession
Partnerships	Do current partnership models assume automatic goodwill between councils, schools, funders, iwi and providers?	Convening, brokering, shared accountability, place-based collaboration	Duplication, mistrust, stalled joint initiatives, public disagreement
Public narrative	Can the sector explain its role in strengthening social cohesion without sounding vague or defensive?	Evidence on wellbeing and cohesion, sharper narrative framing, spokesperson confidence	Reduced influence with funders, weak advocacy traction, more sceptical public debate
Digital and information trust	Are organisations prepared for misinformation, online conflict, privacy concerns or credibility shocks?	Reputation monitoring, digital moderation, crisis communication, transparent decision records, cyber readiness	Rapid escalation of local disputes online, low confidence in official information, data breaches or online backlash
Ethical governance and ESG	Are governance, procurement, sponsorship and environmental choices aligned with the values the sector claims to hold?	Ethical decision frameworks, transparent reporting, ESG capability, values-led leadership	Perceived hypocrisy, sponsor controversy, reputational damage, declining confidence among younger stakeholders
Place-based infrastructure	Are facilities and public spaces being designed as trusted community assets or only as sport delivery platforms?	Multi-use planning, hub design, local stewardship, intergenerational programming	Underused formal assets alongside rising demand for informal and hybrid spaces
Purpose and wellbeing	Is the sector prepared for rising demand for connection, meaning and low-pressure participation in an anxious and uncertain society?	Social prescribing partnerships, wellbeing programme design, flexible participation pathways	Increased loneliness, stress-related disengagement, weak fit between community need and current offers

Questions for leaders

These questions can help senior leaders use the paper as a practical board and executive discussion tool.

- Where is declining trust already visible in the sector's own data, complaints, volunteer pipeline or stakeholder relationships?
- Which parts of the current model rely most heavily on inherited legitimacy rather than demonstrated credibility?
- What would become harder if public trust fell another step over the next five years?
- Where does the sector have a realistic opportunity to strengthen local belonging and trust, rather than simply assuming it will happen around the edges of participation?
- Which decisions being made today could look shortsighted in a more polarised, lower-trust New Zealand?
- Which facilities, digital channels and partnership models could be rethought as trust-building infrastructure rather than service delivery mechanisms alone?

Connections to other futures issues

Trust and social cohesion do not operate on their own. They interact with other shifts the sector will need to think about across this futures series.

The future of mobility

The future of education

The future of funding

The future of AI

The future of wearable technology

The future of climate change

The future of geopolitics

The future of geopolitics – Iran conflict

The future of elite sport

The future of demographic change

Thinking about trust and social cohesion in connection with these wider issues will produce better strategic choices than considering them alone.

Final reflection

The decline of trust and social cohesion is not only a social policy issue happening elsewhere in the system. It is becoming part of the operating context for every organisation that depends on people joining, volunteering, cooperating, sharing space and backing collective investment.

For the play, active recreation and sport sector, this makes trust a strategic issue rather than a values statement. The sector cannot control all the forces driving fragmentation across society, but it can shape whether its own spaces, systems and decisions deepen confidence, strengthen belonging and create more reasons for people to work across difference.

The opportunity is significant. At a time when government and communities are searching for practical ways to strengthen resilience, connection and confidence, the sector has the ability to demonstrate public value in one of the most tangible ways available: by creating experiences, places and relationships that help people feel part of something shared.

The central question is therefore not whether trust and cohesion will matter to the future of sport and recreation in Aotearoa. They already do. The more useful question is whether today's leaders are willing to redesign for that reality now.



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