COMMUNITY SECTOR INSIGHTS

2025

Introduction

This document presents key messages from a synthesis of nine substantive research reports relevant to the community and voluntary sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has been commissioned by Community Research with the primary aim of distilling key insights and identifying potential future actions and opportunities for the sector including Community Research.

Every researcher brings their own lived experience and lens to their work. This research was Pākehā-led and insights and potential actions identified largely reflect this worldview. Having said this, care was taken to respect references to Te Ao Māori and mātauranga Māori, and to ensure Māori perspectives are reflected accurately.

The Reports

The reports feature the thoughts, efforts and expertise of many members of our sector.

Ngā mihi to all whose insights and voices have supported this collective learning.

Report Title	Year	Organisation
[Non-profit institutions satellite account: 2018](#)	2020	Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa
[Shaping the future. Enabling Community-led Change. Kia whakamana i te whakawhanake ā-hapori](#)	2020	Inspiring Communities
[State of the Sector 2022](#)	2022	ComVoices and Community Networks Aotearoa
[Make the Move: Shifting how the public sector works with communities](#)	2023a	Inspiring Communities
[He Manawa Māori – A Māori Heart](#)	2023b	Inspiring Communities
[Kōrerotia](#)	2023	Hui E! Community Aotearoa
[A fair chance for all: Breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage](#)	2023	New Zealand Productivity Commission Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa
[He piki tūranga, he piki kōtuku – The future for local government](#)	2023	Department of Internal Affairs Te Tari Taiwhenua
[State of the Nation 2024](#)	2024	The Salvation Army Te Ope Whakaora

What is 'the Sector'?

This research focuses on what Community Research describes as the 'Tangata Whenua, Community, and Voluntary Sector'.

This includes iwi and hapū, voluntary organisations, faith-based groups, NGOs, advocacy groups, charities, sports groups, and community-led organisations.
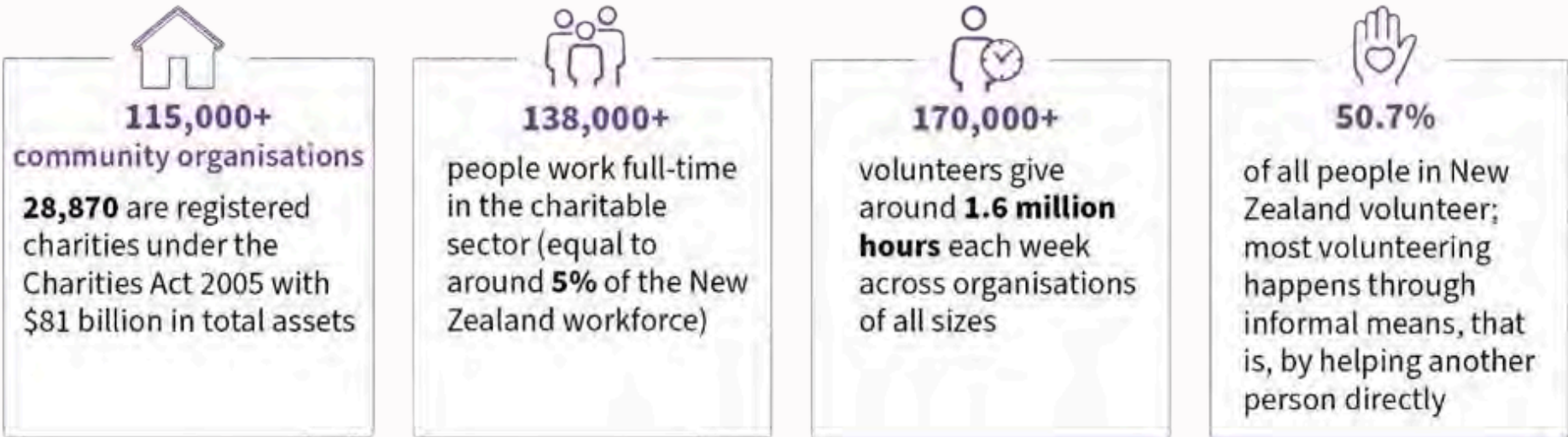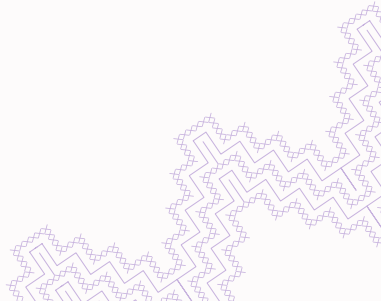
The community sector is broad and diverse in scope, significant in its reach to communities, and high in value to the national economy

115,000+ community organisations
28,870 are registered charities under the Charities Act 2005 with $81 billion in total assets

138,000+ people work full-time in the charitable sector (equal to around **5%** of the New Zealand workforce)

170,000+ volunteers give around **1.6 million hours** each week across organisations of all sizes

50.7% of all people in New Zealand volunteer; most volunteering happens through informal means, that is, by helping another person directly

Source: Briefing to the Incoming Minister for the Community and Voluntary Sector, 2023

Overview

The research analysis brings together insights based around three broad themes followed by potential actions for consideration.
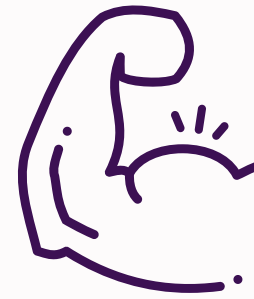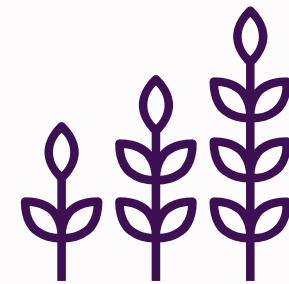
1. Strengths of the Sector

There are a wide range of sector strengths, including its people, its 'manawa Māori' (Māori heart) and its ability to flexibly respond to communities' needs.

2. Challenges Facing the Sector

The sector faces significant challenges including limited resources, risks of burnout, and systemic barriers created by a siloed government.

3. Emerging Opportunities

Despite the challenges, the sector possess an enduring capacity to discover, create and nurture opportunities. There is a wellspring of kotahitanga and mana motuhake in Māori communities; there are opportunities for better and more effective relationships with government; and there is huge potential for partnership between organisations in the sector to build off each other's strengths.

4. Potential actions for the Sector

Based off the insights from the analysis, this section suggests actions for sector organisations to consider to leverage our collective learning and knowledge to build our capability and united power.

Strengths of the Sector

Strengths of the Sector

People and Connections

The community sector is deeply rooted in the efforts of its people, with significant input from Māori community leadership. The sector's diversity, adaptability, passion, and the wellbeing of its workforce are foundational to its resilience and effectiveness.

Community-led development is essential for empowering local communities and fostering national hauora.

DIVERSITY

The sector is dynamic and inclusive – encompassing Māori, diverse ethnicities such as Pacific Peoples, and communities in all facets of life in Aotearoa. Voluntary groups are often 'kaupapa-driven' (focussed on an issue, strategy, policy, or cause that drives people). As a whole, the sector forms an array of networks, groups, and organisations that collectively shape the fabric of our communities. Many of these groups hold a shared commitment to social justice and community wellbeing which help our people and society flourish.

CONNECTIONS BRING STRENGTH

In the State of the Sector 2022 survey, community sector respondents identified that increased collaboration between different sector groups was the 'top' factor having positive impacts on their organisations.

While the sector remains at a stress point, the connections between our organisations, our leadership, and our kaupapa helps to keep our fleet of waka headed in the right direction.

Strengths of the Sector

Manawa Māori

Throughout the sector, Māori self-determination is key.

"Understanding the relationship between Māori Development and Community Led Development means understanding that the 'Manawa' or 'Heart' of Māori development is Māori people.

Simply put a Māori heart means a heartbeat beating proudly that pulses positive outcomes in identity, language, culture, health and wellness and environment and prosperity for all Māori." (Inspiring Communities, 2023b, p.5)
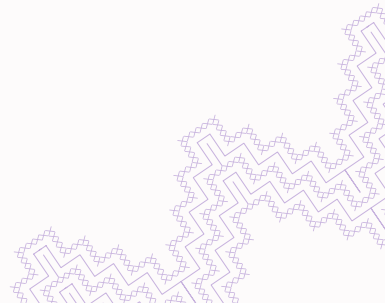
DYNAMIC DEVELOPMENT

Development by Māori is dynamic, whānau-led and evolving rapidly within the global context. The sector is an essential partner in enabling Māori futures.

"Māori Development in Māori society is not static (...). Changing demographic patterns, technological advancement, interaction with other cultures and nations, and increased control over resources, have been accompanied by a strengthening of Iwi management and tikanga." (Inspiring Communities, 2023b, p. 6)

MANA MOTUHAKE

Māori seek the ability to steer their own course. The sector is strengthened and enriched by Māori leadership.

"The waka must belong to us. Mana Motuhake is about determining our own destiny and making the hard calls and challenging the establishment. Tama ora tama mate – Be strong or perish. [Mana Motuhake] is a long way from there. The answers are here, and we need to be solid. (...) We need to stand in our Hapū collectively. We are not looking at anyone to legitimise us." (Ngahau and Debbie Davis: 2022, in Inspiring Communities, 2023b, p. 8)

Strengths of the Sector

Responsiveness

Community-based organisations have shown they have the relationships and responsiveness to design and lead effective services for their communities.

The sector has proven its ability to mobilise quickly and effectively during crises, such as the pandemic and extreme weather events. This responsiveness has strengthened cross-sector relationships and enhanced social cohesion.

GROUND-LEVEL DESIGN

"The shift towards community-led development has enabled communities to take ownership of their challenges and solutions, resulting in more sustainable and locally-tailored outcomes."
(Inspiring Communities, 2020)

"Community-led development does not mean that local residents or community organisations are sole decision makers. Rather it recognises that successful solutions cannot be parachuted in from the outside.

Success is framed within a collective lens – a local systems approach – where everyone has something to contribute."
(Inspiring Communities, 2020)

Challenges Facing the Sector

Challenges Facing the Sector

Increasing Demand

Global and local shocks, including the pandemic, climate disasters, the cost of living crisis and, more recently, changes in government priorities, have exacerbated and intersected with deeply embedded structural inequalities – driving up demand for sector services.

This increased demand has not been met with sufficient growth in funding or workforce capacity, creating risks for the sector of burnout and an inability to meet needs.
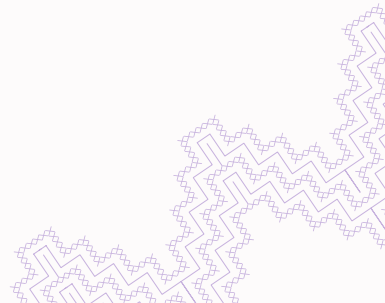
RISING, INCREASINGLY COMPLEX NEEDS

"[...] too many respondents (60%) also said they were working beyond their organisational capacity, largely due to increasing demands for their services exceeding what they were funded to deliver. This imbalance has been reported by a growing proportion of respondents across all surveys over the 10 years: "Covid's tail" lands on the back of the wicked housing crisis, with supply chain issues and public service disruptions pushing more whānau than ever into financial debt, mental anguish, conflict and harm." (ComVoices and Community Networks Aotearoa, 2022)

RISK OF BURNOUT

"Hauora of the sector is underpinned by a workforce committed to their kaupapa, adequate funding, and the benefits that come from connection. When these elements are in place, the sector is remarkably adaptive and responsive. When they are not - or are out of balance - burnout becomes a major risk." (Hui E!, 2023)

"Respondents' comments related how much it affected their workforces, to serve unending and increasingly complex need while understaffed, un- or underpaid and under-resourced." *(ComVoices and Community Networks Aotearoa, 2022)*

Challenges Facing the Sector

Systemic Barriers

Despite movement towards working more collaboratively and community-led development, government systems are not well-suited to support this - often constrained by misaligned accountability settings and siloed thinking.

INVESTMENT AND POLICIES

"*The community and voluntary sector plays a crucial role in addressing social issues, but it requires sustained government investment and supportive policies to thrive.*" (NZ Productivity Commission, 2023)

SYSTEMIC APPROACHES

Public Sector systems were designed in a previous era to address different issues, with different assumptions, expectations and rules. They struggle to operate effectively in a shifted environment and respond to the need to adapt to rapidly evolving social and environmental contexts.

A key factor standing in the way of progress is the lack of an all-of-system approach. Current government accountability settings and siloed thinking constrains system-level approaches and blocks more innovative effective ways of addressing persistent disadvantage and ecological decline. (NZ NZ Productivity Commission, 2023)

However, there are instances of successful partnership in practice, and lessons that can be learnt from these examples. (Inspiring Communities, 2023a)

Emerging Opportunities

Emerging Opportunities

Supporting Te Tiriti o Waitangi

There is an opportunity for parts of the sector to play a stronger role in supporting Māori self-determination and aspirations.

The sector has a significant position - being inclusive of Māori communities and also sitting in and around those communities in a range of supporting and connecting roles. This presents the sector with an opportunity to help forge the path into a future which realises a Te Tiriti-led Aotearoa.
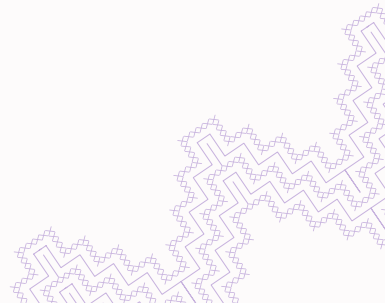
TAUTOKO

The wider sector has a role to tautoko the voices and support the efforts of Tangata Whenua. Collective effort can help to realise Māori aspirations at both leadership levels and on the ground in our communities.

"References to the power of community, hapū and iwi responses may appear in high-level vision statements and in government strategies and plans, but this is not yet translating into change on the ground. [There are] people in communities who ask, when will the Government listen to us and start to value and invest in local ways of working? When will they make the move and shift how they work with communities?"
(Inspiring Communities, 2023a, p.12)

MANA MOTUHAKE IS FLOURISHING

"[Māori] design the kaupapa. We don't need anyone to ride in on their white horse do nothing and leave. We have the resources and the highest levels of capability. We have really good lessons that we would like to share with others and to learn from."
(Erena Mikaere-Most, 2022 in Inspiring Communities, 2023b, p.16)

Emerging Opportunities

Intra-Sector Collaboration

There is a major opportunity to strengthen the collective impact of the sector by operating as more of that: a collective.

By collaborating, joining hands and each focussing on bringing our strengths to the the table while reducing duplication and crossover of efforts, there is huge potential to streamline efforts to meet funding and resourcing challenges.

FUNDING

As the sector is stretched for resource, collaborative approaches to funding can help to ensure impact reaches communities effectively. Simultaneously, collective funding applications should help reduce the administrative burden of the application process on small organisations.

COLLABORATE DON'T CENTRALISE

Efforts to collaborate must not be confused with 'centralisation'. The sector is strong because of its diversity of people and organisations.

"Recognise and respect difference. A variety of responses will be needed to serve and support diverse parts of local communities and enable equity. One size solutions do not fit all, and imposing them can undermine local initiative and marginalise those outside the mainstream."
(Inspiring Communities, 2020, p. 4)

Emerging Opportunities

Improve Partnerships with Public Sector

Public servants and organisations can play a valuable role in enabling locally-led change – by convening, coordinating and connecting people and acting as relationship brokers to support innovative community-led ideas.

The sector can help make this a reality through maintaining a clear narrative of asking for these conditions, and through building clear accountability and success stories to build trust.
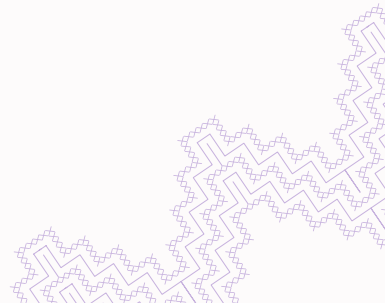
THE 'RIGHT CONDITIONS'

Instead of defining / solving problems for communities, government needs to create the conditions for whānau and communities to work with others to define their own solutions. Our sector sits in a vital position to support and facilitate meeting need and ensuring that communities' voices are heard.

PARTNERSHIP AND EVIDENCE

Fruitful government partnerships are often driven by strong narratives and evidence of success. The sector can empower itself to build these partnerships by showing evidence of impact and reach – as well as operating in a space which is more human focussed, innovative and flexible, and less risk averse.

The New Zealand Productivity Commission recommended building 'learning systems' as *"[w]hat worked for one person may not work for another. What worked in one place in one time may not work in other places. What worked at one time may stop working as the context changes"* they say *"learning needs to be locally led, whānau-centred and centrally enabled"* and *"the learning system must enable two-way learning and accountability between communities and central government."* (NZ Productivity Commission, 2023, pp. 104-114)

Potential actions for the Sector

What's next?

Much of what we have identified across the sector is already 'known'. The challenges and strengths have been consistent for several years - however the pressures on funding, addressing need, and capacity have increased.

As sector organisations look to the future, this section suggests some potential ways to translate what we know into positive action.
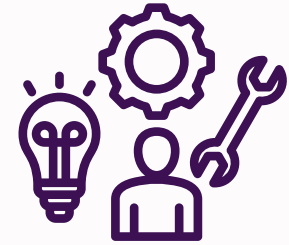
Build Capability

By building the skills and knowledge of our kaimahi, leaders, volunteers, and communities - as well as the resilience of our systems - we can further strengthen and leverage the collective impact of the sector.

Forge Relationships

There is huge opportunity within the sector to strengthen our relationships with each other, reduce duplication, and build trust-based relationships with central and local government.

Promote Wellbeing

Protecting and feeding the wellbeing of our staff and volunteers is an essential task in the context of increased demand and stress.

Share Knowledge

Knowledge is power - the sector can uplift our organisations and our communities by sharing evidence, success stories, and understanding.

Te Tiriti, Mana Motuhake and Te Ao Māori

Build the knowledge and cultural competence of staff, leaders, and communities regarding Te Ao Maori. Specifically, in understanding Te Tiriti and the Mana Motuhake movement, equipping them with the skills to understand and support positive change in the sector and their communities.

Accountability and Reporting

Build robust systems which can 'show' the impact of your organisations
- Develop 'learning systems' which allow continuous improvement, evaluation and adaptation
- Show process and results to partners, building trust.

Risk Tolerance and Innovation

Build an environment of understanding and accepting risk in order to operate with the flexibility which the government often lacks. Let go of perfectionism and fear of failing by building healthy systems to manage risks. Move towards imagination, adaptability, transparency, and tolerance for risk.

Build Capability

Forge Relationships

With Each Other

Strengthen cross-sector relationships, enhance efficiency and funding streams by reducing duplication and supporting each other. Lean into what you 'do best', rather than trying to do everything, and share your expertise with others in the sector. Give and receive support to / from other organisations, developing mutually beneficial partnerships.

With Local and Central Government

Build trusted relationships with government – enabling the conditions for community-led responses to need:

- Build trust through clear reporting on effectiveness, processes, and success stories

- Build preparedness to operate as the connector between government and communities – what would that look like for your organisation?

- Keep presenting the story to government of their role to 'create the conditions for community-led responses to need'. Understand how your organisation interfaces with community and show how government can partner with you for effective results.

Promote Wellbeing

Celebrate Diversity

Build and foster environments which are culturally safe for people to be their whole selves:

- Learn about cultural safety and what this means for your organisation and the people, whānau and communities you work with
- Encourage kaimahi, leaders and community members to bring and share their culture and full selves within your organisation's activities.
- Provide opportunities for Manawa Māori and the full diversity of your community to live and breathe in the daily life of your organisation.

Care for Hauora

Support the hauora / wellbeing of staff and collaborators to reduce burnout:

- Understand your organisation's risk factors (such as the impact of supporting people with traumatic circumstances) and prioritise appropriate support structures for kaimahi
- Build understanding of holistic wellbeing models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā which include more than just physical wellness.

Manage Expectations

Need currently outstrips the sector's output and as the sector is powered by passionate people, burnout is a major risk. One approach can be to manage expectations and activities. Face the limits of your capacity and adjust to a realistic level of what your team can accomplish to reduce overwhelm and overwork.

Share Knowledge

Support Māori Aspirations

Tautoko the efforts of Māori throughout the sector, don't 'speak-for' – uplift voices. Consider how your organisation works with or for Māori and how you are enabling Mana Motuhake. How can your organisation upskill, build relationships, offer resource, and authentically partner with Māori who are shaping the future?

Gather and Share Success Stories and Knowledge

Build and add to a movement of hope by sharing tangible successes and 'wins' by and for the sector.

The sector has a wealth of knowledge, mātauranga and skills. Share with one another that knowledge and expertise – educating and supporting both our sector and our communities to unlock our best. Through partnership we are strong.

Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou ka ora ai te iwi

With your basket and my basket the people will thrive

Concluding comments

Community Research is committed to supporting research and evaluation and amplifying community-led evidence that tells the story of how the sector makes a difference and raises the visibility of community knowledge, mātauranga, and perspectives. We hope that this research provides a useful contribution for organisations and the sector to foster a shared understanding and kōrero regarding opportunities and actions for the future.

Community RESEARCH