NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL
SPORT CLUB SURVEY





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AI Offers Aid To Ailing Community Sport Volunteers

Half of New Zealand community sport clubs are already using artificial intelligence (AI) to help run their organisations, according to new findings from the 2026 National Sport Club Survey (NSCS).

The annual survey, which received responses from over 750 club representatives across 66 sports and all 16 regions of New Zealand, provides a national snapshot of the management and operation of community sport clubs.

For the first time, clubs were asked about their digital capability and use of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude and Copilot.

Half of responding clubs reported already using AI in club-related work, while almost one-third (30.8%) rated their club's overall digital capability as very good or excellent. Only 5% described their digital capability as poor.

However, the findings also suggest that adoption is moving without needed governance oversight. Among clubs using AI, 77% said its use was largely left to individual initiative, rather than being managed or agreed centrally within the club.

Clubs were generally optimistic about the contribution AI could make to community sport over the next three to five years. More than half (54%) believed it could help reduce their administrative burden, while 51% saw opportunities for improved communications. Other potential benefits included making grant applications (44%) and policy development (42%). Just 16% believed AI would not help community sport.

Dr Mel Johnston, Project Lead, said the findings point to a significant shift in how community sport organisations are operating.

"Community sport clubs have traditionally relied heavily on volunteers to undertake a huge range of administrative and organisational tasks. We are now seeing AI become part of that environment, with clubs identifying real opportunities to reduce administration and support areas such as communication, funding applications and policy development.

"At the same time, the fact that AI use is largely being driven by individuals rather than through an agreed club approach raises important questions around capability, governance and good practice. There is an opportunity for the national and regional sport organisations to support local community clubs with policies to ensure these tools are used effectively and responsibly."

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Association Chair Gordon Noble-Campbell said, “while use of AI tools can increase efficiency, users need to be aware of privacy issues when collecting, handling and using club member data, ensuring there are safeguards in place to protect personal information.”

With grant funders now receiving larger numbers of AI-generated grant applications, he also says, “clubs should be aware that there is now greater competition for a diminishing pool of grant funds”, suggesting club committees focus on the quality, not just the number, of applications they are making.

The emergence of AI comes as clubs continue to navigate financial and participation pressures.

The average club responding to the 2026 survey had 211 members, while the average number of volunteers increased to 21, up from 20 in 2025 and 17 in 2024. Volunteer numbers nevertheless remain well below the average 31 volunteers per club recorded in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial indicators have improved slightly. Nine percent of clubs reported operating at a financial loss in 2026, down from 12% in 2025, although this remains above the 6% recorded in 2021. Grant funding continues to represent an important part of club finances, accounting for around 20% of annual club income on average.

Affordability also remains a major challenge. Almost half of responding clubs (49%) reported experiencing affordability challenges in 2026, compared with 53% in 2025.

Dr Johnston said the findings demonstrate both continuity and change within the community sport system.

“Some of the pressures we have been tracking for several years remain very visible. Almost half of clubs are still experiencing affordability challenges, and volunteer numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

“What is changing is the way clubs are responding. Digital tools and AI potentially provide clubs with new ways of managing some of the workload traditionally carried by volunteers.

They are not a replacement for volunteers, but they may help clubs use limited volunteer time more effectively.”

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Now in its ninth year, the National Sport Club Survey provides a longitudinal picture of the management, governance and operation of sport clubs across New Zealand.

The project is undertaken in partnership between the New Zealand Amateur Sport Association (NZASA) and the AUT Sport Performance Research Institute New Zealand (SPRINZ).

For further comment on the 2026 NSCS, please contact Gordon Noble-Campbell, Chairman, NZASA on **021 612 451**, or Dr Mel Johnston, Project Lead on **021 247 0484, melody.johnston@aut.ac.nz**