

Waitomo District IMPACT SNAPSHOT



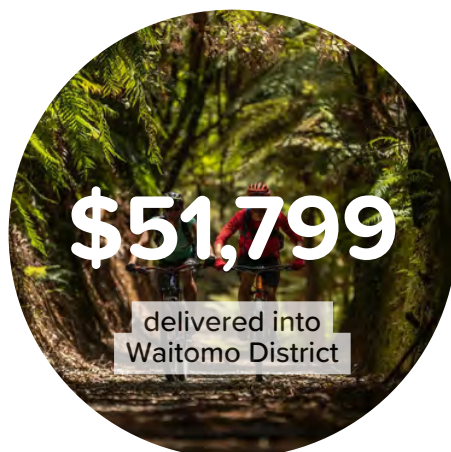
1 JULY 2025 – 30 JUNE 2026

This snapshot highlights what changed in the Waitomo District between 1 July 2025 and 30 June 2026 through local investment, community partnerships and collaborative action across play, active recreation and sport.

During this period, funding was directed towards opportunities for tamariki and rangatahi, schools strengthened their capability to create quality physical activity experiences, community partnerships progressed future facility planning, and new local insights helped inform future investment and decision-making.

The following highlights demonstrate how Sport Waikato is helping create a district where movement is part of everyday life.

Your investment at work



Together, these activities are helping remove barriers to participation and create more opportunities for tamariki and rangatahi to be active, connected and well. By building capability within schools, clubs and communities, the benefits create lasting impact across the district.



Active As is making a difference

Supporting Piopio College and Te Kūiti High School through Sport New Zealand's Active As initiative has contributed to measurable improvements between 2023 and 2025, including:



Piopio College

11%

increase in organised sport participation

45%

increase in regular school attendance



Te Kūiti High School

5%

improvement in physical activity experience

12%

increase in regular school attendance

Stronger Schools and Local Connection

- Focussed support into Benneydale School created locally led movement opportunities, strengthened wellbeing, connection and participation. See attached case study for more information.
- Delivered PALs (Physical Activity Leaders) equipping students to lead active play within their own school communities.
- Built teacher capability and stronger school-community connections through professional learning, aquatic education and school-based initiatives.
- Facilitated the Waikato Secondary School Sport Forum, bringing schools, Council and Regional Sport Organisations together to identify practical opportunities for stronger youth sport pathways.

Supporting Better Community Investment or Community Spaces and Future Investment

- Continued supporting utilisation of Gallagher Recreation Centre through collaborative programming and partnerships.
- Supported collaboration, stakeholders connection and feasibility work for Centennial Park and Piopio hub projects.
- Provided participation data, regional trends, benchmarking information and industry guidance help inform Council's Activity Management Plan.

These initiatives are helping create more opportunities for people to move, strengthening local capability, informing future investment decisions and ensuring community spaces continue to deliver greater value for Waitomo District residents.



Building momentum



Progress collaborative initiatives identified through the Waikato Secondary School Sport Forum to strengthen participation pathways for rangatahi.



Continue using student voice to inform play environments and physical activity opportunities.



Support Piopio College and Te Kūiti High School to embed successful Active As approaches beyond Sport New Zealand funding.

Shaping the Future



Continue supporting implementation of priority Long Term Plan and Activity Management Plan projects.



Progress Gallagher Recreation Centre, Centennial Park and Piopio Hub through strategic advice and partnership facilitation.



Support Council to use local evidence to guide future planning and investment decisions.

Our focus remains on creating the conditions for more Waitomo District residents to move more, connect more and thrive. By combining local insight, strong partnerships and targeted investment, we will continue supporting a movement system that delivers lasting wellbeing benefits for communities across the district.



Waitomo District Report

Date Range: 1 July 2025 – 30 June 2026

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ORGANISATIONAL UPDATE/S – Steve Dalgety, Sport Waikato General Manager Regional Leadership

The work of Sport Waikato staff continues to be guided by the Moving Waikato strategy, now operating within Horizon 3 – a future-focused phase centered on equity, innovation, and strengthening community wellbeing through play, active recreation and sport.



Over the past twelve months, we have continued to work alongside councils, schools, iwi, regional organisations and community partners to strengthen local capability, improve alignment, and support sustainable participation opportunities across the Waikato. A key focus has been helping partners navigate change while maintaining momentum towards shared outcomes.

At a regional level, Sport Waikato has assumed a stronger leadership role in secondary school sport following a strategic review with the Waikato Secondary Schools Sports Association (WSSSA). This transition provides greater alignment across education, sport and community sectors, while ensuring secondary school voices to continue to inform decision-making through an ongoing advisory structure.

Our commitment to evidence-informed planning continues to grow through initiatives such as the Moving Waikato Community Survey, Moving Waikato Youth Survey, Voice of Tamariki and ActiveXchange movement data. These insights are helping councils and community partners make more informed decisions about investment, planning and delivery. Over the coming year, district-specific profiles will further strengthen local decision-making by providing a deeper understanding of participation patterns, community needs and emerging opportunities across each district.

Thank you to Waitomo District Council for the continued partnership and shared commitment to creating active, connected and thriving communities. We look forward to continuing this work together throughout 2026.



WAITOMO DISTRICT: PLAY, ACTIVE RECREATION, AND SPORT PLAN UPDATES

STATUS	On Track 	Some Challenges 	High Risk 	Complete 
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Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
Support activity deliverers in the district to better understand the needs of the participant (with a particular focus on target groups of children and young people, women and girls, and deprived communities)	Tū Manawa During this reporting period, Sport Waikato supported the distribution of \$51,799 through the Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa Fund, increasing access to quality play, active recreation and sport opportunities across the Waitomo District. Funding prioritised tamariki and rangatahi experiencing barriers to participation and supported initiatives including active play, holiday programmes, water safety, waka ama and skateboarding. Key initiatives include: • Aria Primary School – ‘Ignite Aria’ - Lunchtime Activation Equipment • Benneydale Primary School – “The Small Schools Bash” – equipment • Youthtown – ‘Level Up Holiday Programme’ – Multisport & Play activities • Nga Kohoe o Manaipoto – Hauora & holiday programme (Waka ama & open water safety) • Benneydale Skateboarding in the Park – exposing young people to a new skill for life. Each participant received a skateboard. In addition, Sport Waikato supported the distribution of a further \$119,258 in regional Tū Manawa funding to organisations delivering programmes across multiple districts, including Waitomo. While not allocated exclusively to the district, this investment expanded opportunities available to local tamariki and rangatahi through regional delivery, including: • Swim Waikato Inc – “Swim Safe Programmes in schools” • King Country Rugby – “Te Rohe Potae: Kura Maori -Ra Whutuporu” • Maniapoto Sports & Cultural Association – Rugby League (Oto & Waitomo) • King Country Lee Gar – He Ara whakama (Oto & Waitomo) • WILSS Leadership Training – In Kura We are working with future applicants for the next round of funding by providing support and advice through the expressions of interest process.	• Continue supporting activity deliverers to design inclusive, participant-centred opportunities that respond to local community needs. • Strengthen capability across community organisations and schools to maximise the impact of future Tū Manawa investment. • Progress collaborative initiatives identified through the Waikato Secondary School Sport Forum to strengthen participation pathways for rangatahi. • Continue using youth voice and local insights to inform future participation opportunities and experiences.	

Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	Sport Waikato also facilitated a Waikato Secondary School Sport Forum involving secondary schools, Council and Regional Sport Organisations to identify practical opportunities to strengthen youth sport across the district. Representatives from Piopio College, Te Kūiti High School and local partners identified collaborative opportunities including cross-code participation, alternative competition models and shared coach, referee and official development. These initiatives strengthen local collaboration while responding to the changing needs of rangatahi.		
Grow local sector capability through the provision of targeted workshops and education initiatives	Professional Learning in Primary Schools – Sport Waikato has continued working alongside schools across the Waitomo District to strengthen teacher capability, increase opportunities for tamariki to be active, and build sustainable connections between schools, community organisations and local providers. While schools have been navigating significant curriculum change, support has focused on ensuring Health and Physical Education and movement remain important contributors to student wellbeing and learning. Professional learning, aquatic education and school-based initiatives have strengthened teacher confidence, improved the quality of physical activity opportunities and created stronger pathways between schools and community providers. Five schools with moderate to high engagement have demonstrated positive changes in physical activity delivery, with: • 100% increasing the quantity of physical activity opportunities; • 67% improving both the quantity and quality of physical activity; and • 67% improving the quality of physical activity experiences. Student voice continues to inform school planning through the Voice of Tamariki, while Physical Activity Leaders (PALs) training has equipped students across five schools to lead active play during break times. Sport Waikato's Primary Learning Partner, Regional Connectivity Coordinator and Sector Capability teams have also partnered with Pukenui School to pilot the SOLE Support Squad, strengthening volunteer involvement to increase opportunities for students to participate in school sport.	• Continue strengthening teacher capability through Health and Physical Education and Active Learning professional development. • Expand aquatic education, play initiatives and school environment projects as opportunities and funding become available. • Continue using student voice to inform the design of play environments and physical activity opportunities.	
	Play Initiatives – Sport Waikato has continued working alongside schools and Waitomo District Council to identify opportunities that strengthen play within school environments. Initiatives including <i>Play on the Way</i> , footpath stencils and natural play	• Strengthen partnerships between schools, Council and community organisations to increase	

Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	environments are helping build local capability to create engaging spaces that encourage everyday movement and physical literacy. Community Engagement – Collaboration between schools, the Ministry of Education, community organisations and local partners has strengthened the district's capability to provide quality coaching, officiating and physical activity opportunities. These partnerships are creating stronger pathways for tamariki and rangatahi to remain active within their local communities while supporting the long-term capability of the local sector.	opportunities for coaching, volunteering and participation beyond the school gate.	
Support Coach Development in the district in both school and community settings	Positive Vibes Only (PVO) is Sport Waikato's approach to supporting coaches, leaders and organisations to create positive, inclusive sporting environments where rangatahi enjoy participating and want to keep coming back. During the reporting period, Sport Waikato introduced the approach to Waitomo schools and began working alongside local sporting organisations to support wider adoption across the district. King Country Rugby has commenced planning for implementation, while Waikato Rugby has already embedded the approach within its coach and club development activities. Active As is a Sport New Zealand initiative that supports secondary schools to use student voice, leadership and school-wide approaches to strengthen participation, wellbeing and belonging through movement. Sport Waikato continues to work alongside Piopio College and Te Kūiti High School as they transition into the final year of the initiative, with a strong focus on embedding successful approaches to ensure they remain sustainable beyond the life of the project. Piopio College has continued strengthening student leadership, outdoor education and inclusive participation opportunities, resulting in improved wellbeing and engagement. Between 2023 and 2025 the school recorded: • 11% increase in organised sport participation (57% to 68%); • 45% increase in regular school attendance (30% to 75%); • 10% improvement in students' overall physical activity experience; and • 9% increase in students' sense of belonging. Te Kūiti High School has continued embedding student-led activations, education outside the classroom and inclusive movement opportunities. Between 2023 and 2025 the school recorded:	• Continue supporting the rollout of Positive Vibes Only across schools, clubs and community sport settings. • Work alongside Regional Sport Organisations to embed Positive Vibes Only through coach and club development programmes. • Support Piopio College and Te Kūiti High School to embed successful Active As initiatives beyond the conclusion of Sport New Zealand funding. • Continue strengthening collaboration across the King Country Cluster to share innovative approaches that improve participation, wellbeing and positive movement experiences for rangatahi.	

Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	• 12% increase in regular school attendance (38% to 50%); • 5% improvement in students' overall physical activity experience; • 5% increase in students happy to attend school; and • 3% increase in student happiness. Sport Waikato has also continued facilitating collaboration through the King Country Active As Cluster, bringing together Piopio College, Te Kūiti High School, Ōtorohanga College and Taumarunui High School to share ideas, strengthen student leadership and create innovative approaches that encourage more rangatahi to be active. Collaborative initiatives, including GameFIT, Karawhiua Day and the development of the Karawhiua digital platform, are helping schools build on each other's successes while expanding opportunities for young people across the King Country. These outcomes demonstrate the positive impact of prioritising physical activity as a contributor to student wellbeing, stronger school connectedness and improved educational engagement.		
Drive key outcomes, alongside District Council staff, as identified in the district sport and recreation plan – including and with specific attention to local facilities projects	Sport Waikato has continued working alongside Waitomo District Council to progress priority facility projects that improve access to play, active recreation and sport across the district. Our role has focused on providing strategic advice, facilitating partnerships, sharing regional expertise and supporting evidence-informed planning to maximise long-term community benefit. Gallagher Recreation Centre – Sport Waikato has continued working with Council, Belgravia, Game On Charitable Trust and other partners to increase utilisation of the Gallagher Recreation Centre. Progress during the reporting period has included supporting new programming opportunities, facilitating Youthtown's first holiday programme at the facility, exploring seating investment options, and continuing to promote the venue for both local and regional use. Community Facilities and Hubbing – Sport Waikato has supported Council's Activity Management Plan development by providing participation data, regional trends, benchmarking information and industry guidance to help inform future investment in community facilities and open spaces. This work is strengthening the evidence base for long-term planning and asset management across the district.	• Continue supporting implementation of priority Long Term Plan and Activity Management Plan projects through strategic advice, regional insights and partnership facilitation. • Continue working alongside Council, community organisations, schools and iwi to progress the Centennial Park and Piopio hub projects. • Support ongoing activation and optimisation of the Gallagher Recreation Centre through collaborative programming and partnership opportunities. • Continue using participation evidence, regional examples and community insights to inform future facility planning and investment decisions.	

Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	Progress has also continued on the Centennial Park and Piopio hub projects. Sport Waikato has worked alongside Council, community organisations and iwi to facilitate collaboration, connect stakeholders, support feasibility work and provide regional expertise. At Centennial Park, stakeholder engagement has resulted in the establishment of a community-led working group that will drive the next phase of the project, with Sport Waikato continuing to facilitate collaboration and provide strategic support. Sport Waikato has also continued supporting the implementation of Council's Long Term Plan priorities by providing independent, evidence-informed advice on play, active recreation and sport. Through community engagement and collaboration with Council staff, schools, sports clubs and community organisations, Sport Waikato has helped inform planning for: • Centennial Park Sport and Community Hub; • Gallagher Recreation Centre optimisation; • Benneydale school/community revitalisation; and • Future sport hub opportunities in Piopio. Regional participation trends, community insights and examples of leading practice from across the Waikato have also been shared to support coordinated investment and informed decision-making.		
Lead the development and review of the district sport and recreation plan, in collaboration with the District	Local Play active Recreation and Sport (PARS) Plan The Waitomo Play, Active Recreation and Sport (PARS) Plan provides a shared roadmap for Council and community partners, ensuring decisions relating to play, active recreation and sport are guided by local needs, evidence and a coordinated long-term vision. During the reporting period, Sport Waikato continued working alongside Council to progress the priorities identified through the PARS action plan. These include community hub development, school access partnerships, Play Streets, playground renewals and Play on the Way initiatives. Progress has included exploring Play on the Way opportunities in Te Kūiti and Benneydale, considering school access partnership opportunities in Benneydale, and supporting collaboration around the Centennial Park and Piopio community hub	• Progress priority PARS initiatives in partnership with Council, including community hub development, school access partnerships, Play on the Way and other agreed district priorities. • Support Council to identify funding and partnership opportunities that enable delivery of PARS priorities over time. • Continue using local participation data and community insights to	 

Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	projects. While some initiatives remain at an early stage, the PARS Plan continues to provide a clear framework for aligning Council priorities, community opportunities and future investment.	monitor progress and inform future investment and planning decisions. Strengthen cross-Council collaboration to ensure play, active recreation and sport continue to be embedded across Council planning and community development initiatives.	
Provide stakeholders with district specific insights to support decision-making and enable community conversations	Sport Waikato continues to strengthen evidence informed decision making by providing Waitomo District Council, schools and community partners with local participation insights that support planning, investment and service delivery. Through initiatives such as the Moving Waikato Youth Survey, Voice of Coach, and regional planning resources, organisations are better equipped to understand local needs, identify emerging trends and prioritise future investment. The Moving Waikato Youth Survey was completed by Piopio College and Te Kūiti High School, providing district-specific insights into rangatahi experiences of physical activity, physical education and organised sport. The findings are being shared alongside national School Sport Census data to help schools identify practical actions that improve participation, satisfaction and overall physical activity experiences for young people. The Voice of Coach survey has also provided valuable insight into the experiences and development needs of coaches across the region. Findings relating to coach confidence, mentoring, inclusivity and volunteer support will help shape future coach development initiatives delivered alongside Regional Sport Organisations, schools and clubs. Sport Waikato has continued supporting Waitomo District Council through regional Spaces and Places leadership. Council staff have participated in regional forums that share leading practice, strengthen collaboration between councils and provide practical examples to inform long-term planning and investment in community facilities. Regular newsletters have also kept Council informed of emerging trends, national guidance and funding opportunities. To further strengthen local decision making, Sport Waikato has commenced development of district-specific data profiles that will bring together multiple data	- Continue expanding district-specific insights through youth voice, school engagement and community consultation. - Support Council, schools, clubs and Regional Sport Organisations to use local evidence when planning programmes, facilities and investment. - Continue strengthening regional collaboration through the Spaces and Places network and sharing leading practice across the Waikato. - Finalise district data profiles to provide an integrated evidence base that supports future planning and decision-making.	



Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	sources into a single local evidence base. Council has also received the regional Indoor Courts Study , providing a comprehensive assessment of current and future indoor court demand to help inform long-term facility planning and investment decisions.		
Contribute to Council conversations about play, active recreation and sport via regular meetings and collaboration on key projects	Sport Waikato has continued working alongside Waitomo District Council through regular engagement, providing strategic advice, sharing local and regional insights, and supporting collaborative planning across a range of Council priorities. These ongoing conversations have strengthened the partnership between our organisations and created greater opportunities to align play, active recreation and sport with broader community outcomes. During the reporting period, Sport Waikato facilitated a collaborative forum with Council staff to strengthen understanding of Sport Waikato's teams, services and strategic priorities, while also gaining a deeper understanding of Council's priorities and future direction. The forum created new connections across both organisations, identified opportunities for greater collaboration, and reinforced a shared commitment to working together to achieve positive outcomes for Waitomo communities. This ongoing partnership continues to support early identification of opportunities, coordinated planning and stronger collaboration across projects that contribute to healthier, more active and connected communities.	- Continue strengthening strategic relationships across Council and Sport Waikato to support collaborative planning and delivery. - Identify and progress opportunities where Council priorities and Sport Waikato expertise can be aligned to achieve shared community outcomes. - Continue contributing strategic advice and local insights to support implementation of Council priorities relating to play, active recreation and sport. - Support the establishment of the proposed Play Champions group to strengthen collaboration and leadership for play across the district.	
Increase collaboration and connection between key stakeholders in play, active recreation and sport in the district through community partnerships	Sport Waikato continues to play a key role in bringing together councils, schools, community organisations, Regional and National Sport Organisations, iwi and other sector partners to strengthen opportunities for play, active recreation and sport across the Waitomo District. By connecting organisations with shared interests and facilitating collaboration, Sport Waikato is helping develop more coordinated, sustainable approaches that maximise community benefit. During the reporting period, this collaborative approach has supported several strategic initiatives, including the King Country Indoor Stadium project, community hub development, implementation of the District Play, Active Recreation and Sport (PARS) Plan, and the King Country Active As Cluster. These partnerships have strengthened communication between organisations, improved alignment of	- Continue strengthening partnerships between Council, schools, iwi, clubs and community organisations to deliver coordinated opportunities for play, active recreation and sport. - Support collaboration across the King Country to share knowledge, resources and successful approaches that strengthen local participation. - Continue connecting local	

Focus Areas	Progress	Further Considerations/ Proposed Future Actions	Status
	priorities, and created opportunities to share knowledge, resources and expertise across the district. Sport Waikato has also continued connecting Waitomo with regional organisations such as Recreation Aotearoa, the Walking Access Commission, Regional Sport Organisations and neighbouring districts. These relationships provide access to national guidance, regional examples and specialist expertise, helping ensure local decision-making is informed by wider sector knowledge and leading practice.	stakeholders with regional and national organisations to bring new ideas, expertise and funding opportunities into the district. Identify further opportunities where collaborative approaches can improve long-term sustainability and community outcomes.	
Identify opportunities to appropriately celebrate positive sport and recreation outcomes	Case studies created to provide storytelling around our involvement within key projects: - Case Study 1 = Benneydale School – ‘Empowered Local Communities and Hapori’. This case study can be found on our website, under resources or Click : https://shorturl.at/D5tL4 - Case Study 2 = King Country Rugby - Te Rohe Pōtae 'Kura Māori - Ra Whutuporu' – story. 28 teams came together for a festival day focused not on winning but on belonging. Focus was to create a space for all play. Find the story on our website , under resources or Click here	Sport Waikato will continue to have a focus on storytelling to share success stories from across the district	



	REGIONAL SPORT WAIKATO PROGRAMME UPDATES
Moving Waikato Community Survey	The Moving Waikato Community Survey achieved a strong response across the Waikato, including 377 responses from Waitomo residents . Thank you to Waitomo District Council for supporting promotion of the survey. The findings will provide valuable district-level insights to inform future planning, investment and decision-making across play, active recreation and sport.
Sector Capability	Waikato Sport Collective Sport Waikato continues to lead the Waikato Sport Collective, bringing Regional Sport Organisations together to identify opportunities for greater collaboration, reduce duplication and strengthen the capability of the regional sport system. A more connected regional sector ultimately provides stronger support to clubs, schools and communities across districts, including Waitomo.



Empowered Local Communities and Hapori

CASE STUDY:

BENNEYDALE SCHOOL, WAITOMO DISTRICT

Benneydale Hall



SPORT
WAIKATO
Hei painga mō te iwi

Waitomo Baseline data:

9,950
POPULATION OF WAITOMO DISTRICT

49%
SIT IN A HIGH DEPRIVATION LEVEL

Waitomo is one of the Waikato region's smaller and more rural districts.

With a population of approximately 9,950 people, the district has a higher Māori population than the Waikato average, an older population profile, and nearly half of residents live in areas of high deprivation.

	GREATER WAIKATO REGION	WAITOMO DISTRICT
POPULATION	532,100	9,950
MAAORI POPULATION	25.2%	38%
FAMILIES	24%	24%
MEDIAN AGE	37.9 YEARS	40.7 YEARS
MAAORI MEDIAN AGE	26.5 YEARS	31.9 YEARS
POPULATION IN HIGH DEPRIVATION	25%	49%

Through the Moving Waikato Community Survey, residents identified a range of barriers that make it difficult to be active, with the most commonly reported barriers being:



Despite these barriers, people across Waitomo district recognise the value of movement and are motivated to be active, with the most common motivators being:

physical health

mental wellbeing

enjoyment

appearance

fitness/performance

Top 3 places like to move in Waitomo

Top 3 places people in Waitomo visit to be active:



walkways/
footpaths



parks and
reserves



at home

Hamilton
City

Waikato
District

Waipa
District

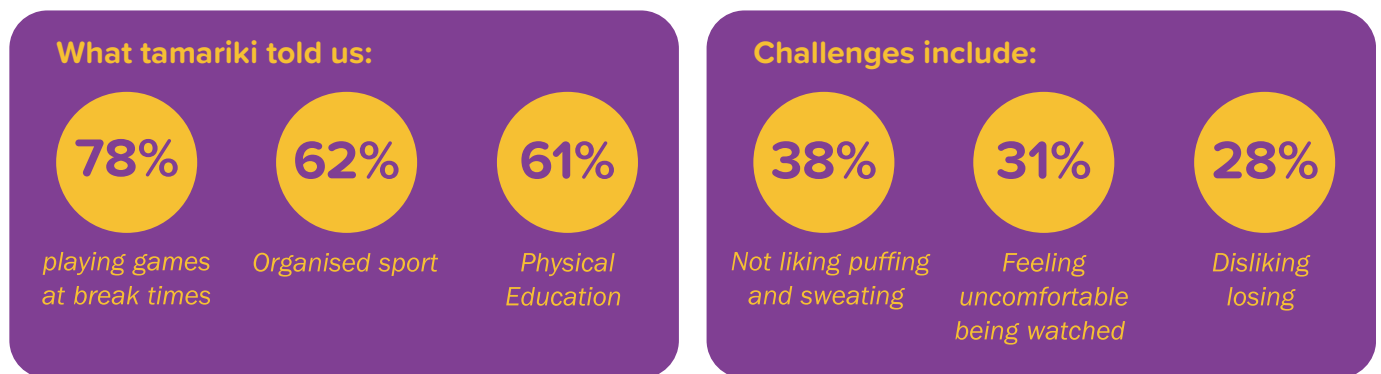


Alongside Waitomo District Council, local schools, community organisations and community leaders, Sport Waikato has identified a number of opportunities to remove barriers and increase movement across the district, including:

- **Improving access** to opportunities and equipment closer to where people live, learn and work
- **Strengthening partnerships** between schools, community organisations and local government
- **Increasing the range of opportunities** available to tamariki and rangatahi
- **Creating more family-friendly** play and recreation spaces
- **Enhancing walking and cycling** connectivity
- **Quality improvements** to local facilities (e.g. netball courts)

Benneydale was identified as a Geographic Priority Community because it reflects many of the challenges and opportunities experienced across rural Waitomo.

Through the **Voice of Tamariki** (147 responses), **Voice of Rangatahi** (243 responses) and **Moving Waikato Community Survey** (282), Sport Waikato heard a consistent message: young people value movement, connection and choice, but do not always feel they have enough opportunities to participate in activities that interest them.



What rangatahi told us:

- 59%** feel they have opportunities to be physically active
- 72%** are encouraged by people around them to participate
- Only **59%** feel confident participating in different activities
- Only **57%** feel able to participate in community, hapuu or iwi activities

Young people also expressed a desire for greater choice, independence and more inclusive opportunities:

“ We don't get to choose for ourselves ” “ I wanna do things independently ” “ Have our own rugby team ”

These insights have informed Sport Waikato's work in Benneydale. The initiatives highlighted in this report demonstrate how local partnerships are responding to community needs, reducing barriers to participation and creating more opportunities for tamariki, rangatahi and whaanau to be active, supporting wellbeing and strengthening social connections.



Benneydale School & Community

In the heart of the King Country, Benneydale School is a small rural primary school with an equity index of 559 and a roll of approximately 33 students at the time of this report. While its size creates a close-knit learning environment, it also presents unique challenges when it comes to physical activity, sport and recreation opportunities.

Unlike larger urban schools, Benneydale students face significant barriers to participation.

Many organised sports and recreation opportunities are located in Te Kūiti or further afield, requiring families to travel considerable distances. For many families, the time, cost and logistics of transport in a high deprivation community make regular participation difficult. The school's small roll also limits its ability to field teams in traditional sports, often requiring students to play outside their age group or combine year levels.

Principal Steve Bodger says the challenge has always been finding activities that suit a small rural school while providing students with the same opportunities enjoyed by their urban peers.

For Benneydale School, physical activity is about more than just sport. It is about connection, confidence, wellbeing and belonging. As the only playground and recreational hub in the township, the school grounds are used by children and families well beyond school hours.

Through Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa funding, Benneydale School has been able to introduce new and innovative opportunities that overcome many of the barriers associated with rural living. Skateboarding, pickleball and the He Awa Whakamua martial arts programme have provided students with opportunities to be active, build confidence, develop new skills and strengthen their sense of belonging.

“They (students) just don't get those opportunities. They're so far away, and I don't even know if they're aware of a lot of things. Everything is in Te Kūiti or further away - Principal Steve Bodger”

“It means we can dream and have a bit of hope. That we can give these kids experiences that town kids get. - Principal Steve Bodger”



Skateboarding Opens New Pathways

When local community organisation *Thrive* identified an opportunity to bring a skateboarding programme to Benneydale, the aim was to provide young people with access to an activity they would otherwise never experience.

Professional Learning Partner Sarah Ryan worked with Nichola Painter from Thrive to explore her idea of bringing skateboarding opportunities to Benneydale. The initial concept of securing coaches and ramps was a strong foundation, which Sarah helped expand by proposing that the Tū Manawa funding application also include skateboards for each child.

This enhancement would ensure that the learning, skill development, confidence-building and enjoyment gained through the programme could continue well beyond the initial activation, providing lasting benefits and ongoing opportunities for participation. The impact was immediate.

Working alongside professional skateboarding coaches and supported by Tū Manawa funding, students participated in coaching sessions that transformed the local park into a temporary skate park. However, the project went beyond simply introducing skateboarding.

Students who had never skateboarded before quickly learned new skills, supported one another and spent break times practicing together. Principal Steve Bodger observed the strong social connections the programme created.

“It was amazing. The unity. It was everyone just there together. They were helping each other, holding hands, doing it together.”

The success of the initial skateboarding project drove the Principal to source some secondhand ramps to ensure students could bring their skateboards to school and continue the enjoyment they were getting from skateboarding.

For many students, the skateboards became more than sporting equipment. They became a means of transport and a reason to be active outside school.



“ I was skateboarding this morning. I have my skateboard here right now. It's fun. Because before I had a skateboard, I'd been just walking everywhere, but now I could, like, ride my skateboard everywhere
- Student ”

And the benefits continued well after the programme finished. Students were regularly seen using their skateboards around town, at the school and throughout the community.

Nichola says that continued participation was one of the project's biggest successes.

“They all left with the skateboard. The reason for that is because I wanted them to continue using it. It's transport, it's play, it teaches them so many things.”

The programme also sparked ongoing community conversations about future developments, including aspirations for a pump track and other wheeled-sport opportunities in Benneydale.

Without Tū Manawa funding, Nichola believes the project would never have reached the same scale.

“They definitely wouldn't have had the skateboards. That was a massive investment.”



2

skateboarding day sessions

33

skateboards given out to participants

\$7,760

Tū Manawa funding received



Pickleball Creates Connections

For a school with only 33 students, finding sports that work with small numbers can be difficult. Traditional team sports often require students to play outside their age group or join larger schools. Pickleball offered an inclusive solution that worked for a small rural school.

Through discussions with Sport Waikato Professional Learning Partner Sarah Ryan, the school identified what they could offer and how to best use the large turf area. Pickleball was an obvious choice, given its ease to play, allowing all students to participate and create a rural schools tournament.

The sport is easy to learn, requires minimal numbers and allows students of different ages and abilities to play together. Principal Steve Bodger saw pickleball as an opportunity to create something unique for Benneydale.

Utilising Tū Manawa funding, Benneydale School purchased equipment and developed pickleball opportunities for students. The school then hosted a rural schools pickleball festival, welcoming neighbouring schools to Benneydale, with each school getting a pickleball set to practice for the tournament and for ongoing use after.

For many students, it was their first opportunity to host an event rather than travelling to one.

The event brought together small rural schools facing similar challenges and helped students connect with peers from other communities.

The festival created new relationships between schools that have continued beyond the event.

"It created a relationship between myself and Mangakino School. We went out to them a couple of times afterwards." said Principal Steve Bodger

“We were often going to other schools, but we weren't offering anything ourselves. This was our opportunity to bring people here - Principal Steve Bodger”

8 Rural Schools received pickleball sets + nets

\$3,615

**Tū Manawa
funding received**

“It was cool for our kids to have other schools come to their school - Principal Steve Bodger”

Beyond special events, pickleball has become a regular part of school life. Students access the courts during organised sessions and free play opportunities.

For a small rural school, the value of having a range of choices to be active is significant. Pickleball has provided an accessible, inclusive activity that can be played by almost every student regardless of age, experience or ability.



He Ara Whakamua

– Building Strong Bodies and Strong Minds

The He Ara Whakamua programme combines martial arts training with journaling, wellbeing education, cultural identity and emotional resilience.

He Ara Whakamua is a kaupapa hauora delivered across the four school terms (4 × 10-week modules) designed to uplift the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of our tamariki and rangatahi through:

- Whakapakari Tinana – kickboxing, MMA, strength & conditioning
- Ngaa Atua me ngaa kare aa-roto – understanding emotions through our Atua framework
- Te Whare Tapa Whaa – nurturing holistic wellbeing
- Te Pukapuka Aronui – daily journaling and reflection
- Tuakiri, Whakapapa, Mana – strengthening identity, pride and purpose

The programme's vision is simple: **“Kia tū rangatira ai ngā tamariki o āpōpō.”** That our young people stand strong, confident and connected.

Delivered by Lee Gar Martial Arts instructors Billy Pohahau and the He Ara Whakamua team, the programme was introduced to Benneydale School through Tū Manawa funding after the school identified a growing need for wellbeing support alongside opportunities for physical activity.

Grounded in Te Ao Māori concepts, each session combines physical training with structured reflection and personal development and provides students with tools to better understand themselves, their emotions and their place within their community.

Programme facilitators and the Principal have witnessed students grow physically, emotionally and socially over time. Students who initially struggled to participate are now volunteering, encouraging others and asking how they can improve.

For a community where access to wellbeing services can be limited, the programme has become a valuable source of support and connection.

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TO WATCH



“ I like working out and learning how to, like, defend myself. - Student

Oh, it's fun. It's, like, really cool. It's like we do some games and boxing, I like the boxing. - Student

“ The ones that weren't so confident are more confident now. Seeing kids going off and doing breathing when they've had a little tiff, and strategies to self-regulate - Principal Steve Bodger”



11 Sessions. one per week over Term 2



The students enjoy jogging down to the community hall for the sessions

Sport Waikato's role is not simply to support the delivery programmes - it is to help communities create the conditions where movement becomes part of everyday life.

In Benneydale, that has meant working alongside Principal Steve Bodger and the school to understand the needs and aspirations of its students and wider community. Guided by student voice, school priorities and local insight, Sport Waikato has helped shape a long-term vision for movement that extends well beyond traditional sport.

Working in partnership, Sport Waikato has helped transform individual ideas into a connected approach that builds confidence, strengthens wellbeing and creates more opportunities for tamariki to move in ways that are meaningful to them.

From skateboarding and pickleball to He Ara Whakamua, each initiative contributes to something bigger - a community where movement is accessible, inclusive and embedded in everyday life.

As the partnership continues, Sport Waikato remains committed to supporting Benneydale School's long-term vision of becoming the active heart of its community and ensure tamariki living in a remote rural community have access to quality physical activity experiences that may otherwise be out of reach.

Next Steps

The success of Tū Manawa-funded initiatives has sparked a much bigger vision for Benneydale School. Rather than simply delivering individual programmes, the school is working towards becoming the active heart of the community - a place where children, whānau and residents can gather, play and be active long after the school bell rings.

For Principal Steve Bodger, this vision reflects the unique role the school already plays in Benneydale.

"There's no other playground in this town. There's no other courts in this town. This is it. This is the town."

Community Pump Track

Following the popularity of the skateboarding programme, the next aspiration is to develop a community pump track on the school grounds. With students continuing to skateboard after school, a pump track would create a permanent space where children could continue building their skills while providing a free recreation facility for the wider community.

The school sees this as a natural extension of the Tū Manawa skateboarding project and an opportunity to further strengthen Benneydale School as the community's recreation hub.

Continuing He Ara Whakamua

The school has seen significant benefits from combining physical activity with wellbeing, emotional regulation and cultural identity. Maintaining access to this programme will remain a priority, recognising that its impact extends well beyond physical activity and into students' wellbeing, resilience and engagement at school.

Growing Opportunities for Rural Tamariki

Future aspirations include:

- expanding pickleball events to bring other small rural schools together;
- introducing new individual activities such as archery and Bow Tag that work well for smaller school rolls;
- increasing access to bikes and scooters to complement future wheeled recreation spaces;
- improving outdoor infrastructure, including additional shelter and future playground development, so children can remain active in all weather.
- purchase of a trampoline

Each of these ideas builds on the same principle that has driven Benneydale's Tū Manawa journey - creating opportunities that are accessible, sustainable and designed specifically for rural communities.

Top of the students' requests from Voice of Tamariki survey were: horses, a trampoline and a pool. Two of those requests have already happened, thanks to a resourceful Principal, with an above ground pool sourced from another school, and horse riding lessons in the pipeline.

For Benneydale School, Tū Manawa funding has been far more than an investment in programmes. It has become the foundation for a long-term vision - one where the school continues to grow as a vibrant community hub, ensuring local tamariki have opportunities to be active, connected and thriving, regardless of where they live.





Sport Waikato's Sarah Ryan with Principal Steve Bodger

