

Reframing social cohesion and societal resilience in New Zealand

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Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is an independent, non-partisan, future-focused institute dedicated to tackling the complex, long-term challenges shaping Aotearoa New Zealand's future.

We provide high-quality, evidence-based insights to address critical national and global issues arising from rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Koi means “the sharp end of an arrow” and “to be bright and clever,” while Tū means “to stand” and conveys resilience. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of the most pressing long-term issues.

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Report context

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) commissioned Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures, through the Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington's Policy Hub to produce this report. It is a synthesis of existing findings and reports, including some previous work from Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. Koi Tū's Social Cohesion work programme has been generously supported by the Wright Family Foundation.

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Foreword

New Zealand has traditionally been perceived as a highly cohesive, high-trust society with a healthy democracy. However, there is rising concern and anxiety about declining social cohesion and societal resilience. Contributing factors, including political, economic, demographic (including cultural and religious diversity) and environmental pressures, are further exacerbated by technological disruptors. Awareness of the causes and effects is vital, as is taking steps to preserve our cohesiveness and resilience. However, the significance of societal resilience is poorly understood and, as such, investments in measures to support and strengthen it are often not prioritised or commensurate with the need. Over time, inaction fuels crime, sparks extremism and undermines democracy.

More importantly, the strategic and economic arguments for a cohesive society have not been explicitly articulated in a compelling narrative that warrants attention from politicians, government officials, or the public. It is well documented that a resilient society thrives with meaningful economic outcomes, including innovation, productivity, trade and growth.^{1,2,3} It also has significant advantages for broader safety and security outcomes, enhanced well-being (reduced health burden), and better crisis management. When basic human needs are unmet, leading to housing insecurity and cost-of-living crises, societal resilience is challenged.

Cohesiveness also enables greater, more collective action on complex and significant challenges we face. These wicked problems, such as climate change, intergenerational disadvantage, youth crime or mental health, need collaboration and cooperation to find sustainable solutions. They inevitably expose societal fault lines and test resilience.

Trust is also paramount. Both institutional and social trust are needed for a democratic society to be resilient and cohesive. Declining trust in core institutions, including the government and media, is problematic, and New Zealand is no exception. Fostering trust in the digital environment is an increasingly important dimension of cohesion and security, as the information environment fractures our shared reality. Proactive investment in digital infrastructure is necessary to strengthen cognitive resilience and protect democracy.

Underpinning societal resilience is also social infrastructure. Third spaces, such as libraries, town centres and marae, are critical public assets and provide shared interactional spaces that strengthen local resilience. A shift to considering place-based strategies, including for major urban centres like Auckland, as well as regional approaches, is necessary and creates an early warning system for an emerging crisis.

The high-level framework presented in this report synthesises existing evidence and analysis to outline the intertwined nature of social cohesion and societal resilience in relation to economic and security outcomes. It also considers potential measures, both short- and long-term, that should be implemented in New Zealand to strengthen society's resilience.

¹ New Zealand Productivity Commission. (2024). *Improving economic resilience: Report on a Productivity Commission inquiry*. The Treasury New Zealand. <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/publications/final-report-improving-economic-resilience>.

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2015). *The innovation imperative: Contributing to productivity, growth and well-being*. OECD Publishing.

³ World Economic Forum. (2023). *Seizing the momentum to build resilience for a future of sustainable inclusive growth* (White Paper). <https://www.weforum.org/publications/seizing-the-momentum-to-build-resilience-for-a-future-of-sustainable-inclusive-growth/>

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Introduction

New Zealand has traditionally been perceived as a highly cohesive, high-trust society with a healthy democracy; however, there is rising concern and anxiety in some sections of our society about declining social cohesion and societal resilience.

While there is no agreed definition of ‘social cohesion’, the term generally describes the state of our collective being as a society.⁴ It is never absolute, except in very repressive and autocratic regimes where individual agency is suppressed by fear and dictate. In a liberal democracy, cohesiveness operates differently and must be actively maintained.

The more cohesive a liberal society is, the better it is prepared to handle current and future challenges. In the absence of significant cohesiveness, a society cannot function well. The well-being of its people will be compromised by the inevitable stresses, shocks and changes we all face. It can lead to considerable and growing instability.

Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures has placed social cohesion at the centre of its work since its inception in 2019. We have worked both globally and nationally, publishing several seminal reports and chairing international workshops on factors that either undermine or enhance social cohesion and trust.^{5,6,7,8,9}

As we have previously described, and building on the work of others, resilient democracies rely on trust to create a cohesive state. In the absence of a threat or crisis (for example, an earthquake or a terrorist event), it takes effort to sustain a high degree of cohesion. A society’s response to threats and stresses can either exacerbate tensions or enhance cohesion.

Cohesion rests on two main pillars: social trust between people and institutional trust in our democratic systems, media, science, and governance. These two dimensions of trust are under pressure and a more deliberate approach is needed to rebuild them. In parallel, digital trust is a critical element that has often been overlooked, yet its consequences are evident in our fractured reality and the growing absence of shared truths.¹⁰

Social cohesion is a precondition for resilience but societal resilience can only be achieved if there is cohesion to begin with. High cohesion leads to greater trust, which enables faster, more effective collective action during crises (e.g., pandemic response). A society that is broken or divided (low cohesion) cannot effectively organise to cope with shocks. Both are undermined by a range of economic and security factors, including inequality, extreme polarisation and low trust in government.¹¹

⁴ Gluckman, P., Bardsley, A., Spoonley, P., Royal, C., Simon-Kumar, N., & Chen, A. (2021). Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Sustaining-Aotearoa-NewZealand-as-a-cohesive-society.pdf>

⁵ Gluckman, P., Spoonley, P., Bardsley, A., Poulton, R., Royal, T. C., Sridhar, H., & Clyne, D. (2023). Addressing the challenges to social cohesion. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Addressing-the-challenges-to-social-cohesion.pdf>

⁶ Gluckman, P. (2021). Transitions, transformations and tradeoffs: Protecting and strengthening societal resilience and cohesion. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Transitions-Transformations-and-Tradeoffs.pdf>

⁷ Bardsley, A., Chen, A., Owens, R., Gluckman, P., & Spoonley, P. (2021). Societal resilience and cohesion: Identifying contributing factors and their interactions. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Koi-Tu-Societal-Resilience.pdf>

⁸ European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Scharfbillig, M., Allegra, A., Brossard, D., Cassio, L. G., et al. (2025). Trust in science for policy nexus. Publications Office of the European Union. https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/JRC141424_01.pdf

⁹ Higgins, A., & Lala, G. (2026). Societal resilience: contextualising cohesion in an age of disruption. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Koi-Tu-Societal-resilience-Contextualising-cohesion-in-an-age-of-disruption.pdf>

¹⁰ Scharfbillig, M., Lewandowsky, S., Altay, S., Van Alstyne, M., Kozyreva, A. et al. (2026). Fractured reality - How democracy can win the global struggle over the information space. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/9358883>

¹¹ UN DESA, & UNU-WIDER. (2025). World social report 2025: A new policy consensus to accelerate social progress. United Nations. <https://desapublications.un.org/publications/world-social-report-2025-new-policy-consensus-accelerate-social-progress>

Cohesion may initially appear strong in the response to a crisis but it can weaken depending on how events unfold during the recovery.¹² We have seen this play out in New Zealand's response to Covid-19, as well as during the Christchurch earthquakes and the Auckland floods.¹³

Social cohesion is not a by-product of economic prosperity or stability. Rather, it is needed to generate both. The country, its leaders and institutions, both public and private, and its people need to value social cohesion. Without it, we risk becoming more divided, less resilient and less able to face the complexity of challenges or to overcome the wicked problems that will inevitably shape our future.¹⁴ However, successive governments have not articulated clearly the significant value of this critical asset to our future. Thus, a compelling narrative that resonates with our diverse society is necessary. This requires clear, strong leadership to champion it at all levels, including communities, the private sector, industry, local and central government and politicians.

Social cohesion and societal resilience

In an era defined by rapid technological change, demographic shifts and global instability, the strength of a nation cannot be measured solely by its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹⁵ Increasingly, as seen internationally, societal resilience is a key measure used alongside economic measures to assess a nation's strength.^{16,17,18} However, central to this resilience is social cohesion, the internal bond that enables a diverse population to function in a unified manner.¹⁹ From Kōi Tū's previous works noted earlier and as described below, it is important to recognise that these two concepts are distinct yet inseparable.

Social cohesion is defined as the willingness of members of a society to cooperate, create a sense of belonging and share purpose. It is characterised by a sense of community, identity, belonging and trust that drives cooperative and constructive action. It involves both social trust (respect between diverse citizens) and institutional trust (trust between the individuals and the institutions that govern them). Social cohesion is a critical precursor or prerequisite for societal resilience.

For New Zealand, social cohesion has served as the bedrock of our liberal democracy, allowing the nation to function effectively and act with integrity for the benefit of all. Social cohesion is not merely a nice-to-have but the connective tissue required for a functioning liberal democracy. It is a vital strategic asset that needs to be protected. For this, we must change how we view social cohesion in New Zealand which, to date, has primarily focused on individuals and communities getting along, rather than on it as the primary determinant of national security, levels of trust and economic stability.

On the other hand, societal resilience is the actual capacity of a society to cope with sudden shocks (such as sudden disruptions from pandemics or natural disasters) and long-term stressors (slow-burning issues such as climate change, rising inequality or other wicked problems). It reflects society's ability to adapt or transform positively in the face of these challenges.

¹² Whitehouse, H. (2021). *The ritual animal: Imitation and cohesion in the evolution of social complexity*. Oxford University Press

¹³ Kōi Tū: Centre for Informed Futures. (2025). *Social cohesion: New Zealand's precious and fragile asset*. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/KTT-Social-Cohesion-WEB.pdf>

¹⁴ Wicked problems can be defined as difficult, if not impossible, issues to resolve due to their complexity, lack of clear definition, and multiple conflicting perspectives. These problems lack solutions that are politically risk-free and easy to implement due to their dynamic nature, multiple causal and compounding factors, and the long timeframe required to make a compelling difference. They are typically interconnected with other issues and can affect various stakeholders in very different ways across the broader system.

¹⁵ United Nations. (2023). *Valuing what counts: Framework to progress beyond gross domestic product (GDP)* (Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 4). <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-beyond-gdp-en.pdf>

¹⁶ World Bank. (2024). *A framework for understanding and measuring resilience: Social cohesion and institutional capacity*. World Bank Group.

¹⁷ World Bank. (2025). *Global socio-economic resilience to natural disasters*. Policy Research Working Paper No. 10243.

¹⁸ Economic and Social Research Council. (2024). *Beyond GDP: A review and conceptual framework for measuring sustainable and inclusive well-being*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(24\)00147-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(24)00147-5)

¹⁹ Whitehouse, H. (2018). Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of extreme self-sacrifice. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 41, Article e192.

Societal resilience acts as the foundational asset that enables the economy to function and the national security system to be effective. Rather than being separate domains, it must be viewed through multiple interconnected lenses in which social cohesion and institutional trust are recognised as direct drivers of investment confidence, productivity and national stability. Fundamentally, resilience leads to better economic outcomes (innovation, productivity, trade and growth), enhanced safety and improved well-being. A stable social environment gives businesses the confidence to take risks and grow. This stability is essential for attracting high-quality foreign investment, fostering innovation and retaining talent.

When a society faces a shock, its effectiveness in responding depends on public confidence, a shared sense of purpose and institutional legitimacy. A lack of cohesion manifests in low productivity, slow economic growth and poor recovery from disasters. It can lead to polarisation and the hollowing out of the middle ground where cooperation occurs. Conversely, a cohesive society possesses the social capital needed to navigate trade-offs and accept difficult policy decisions during times of stress or when addressing complex issues or uncertainty.

A high-trust society directly creates a high-efficiency economy through investment certainty and improved productivity. Thus, from an economic perspective, we need to reframe societal resilience as a driver of prosperity. Long-term productivity is closely connected to the ability of communities and sectors to pivot in response to disruptions and to explore innovative products or solutions, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some businesses were repurposed to produce hand sanitiser.^{20,21,22} However, systemic vulnerabilities like inequality or food insecurity can trigger civil unrest, threatening economic stability.²³

The 2023 New Zealand National Security Strategy explicitly links an informed and cohesive society to improved security outcomes.²⁴ High institutional trust provides the government with a degree of social license and the necessary mandate to act early to prevent threats from causing widespread harm. High social cohesion acts as our primary shield against modern threats and foreign interference, and a better-informed society is more equipped to counter misinformation and radicalisation, which are increasingly reaching New Zealanders directly through social media channels.²⁵ Security outcomes depend on diverse communities having confidence in the national security system's ability to protect them during a crisis. The findings from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch Mosque Attacks have made significant recommendations to further strengthen this.²⁶

However, recent data and analysis highlight that cohesion is under pressure in New Zealand. Confidence in Parliament, the justice system, the police and the public service is declining which, in turn, weakens the state's social license to act. With only 40% of New Zealanders now trusting the government to do the right thing, and trust in the courts dropping to 45%, institutional trust is at risk.²⁷ The sense of belonging and social connectivity are under stress. Furthermore, the health of our media ecosystem, amid the rise

²⁰ New Zealand Productivity Commission. (2024). *Improving economic resilience: Report on a Productivity Commission inquiry*.

<https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2024-05/pc-inq-ier-nzpc-improving-economic-resilience-inquiry-report.pdf>

²¹ World Economic Forum. (2020). *The global competitiveness report 2020: How countries are performing on the road to recovery*.

<https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-competitiveness-report-2020/>

²² OECD. (2020). *Innovative responses to the COVID-19 crisis*. OECD Publishing. <https://trends.oecd-opsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OECD-Innovative-Responses-to-Covid-19.pdf>

²³ UNDP. (2022). *New threats to human security in the Anthropocene: Demanding greater solidarity*. <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-security-report-2022>

²⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2023). *Secure together tō tātou korowai manaaki: New Zealand's National Security Strategy 2023–2028*. <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/publications/aotearoa-national-security-strategy-secure-together-tatou-korowai-manaaki>

²⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2023). *Let's talk about our national security: National security long-term insights briefing*. New Zealand Government. <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-05/National%20Security%20Long-term%20Insights%20Briefing.pdf>

²⁶ Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch mosques on 15 March 2019. (2020). *The report*.

<https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/the-report>

²⁷ Equb, S., Collins, R., Knights, C., Baxter, I., & Marston, T. (2026). *Social cohesion in New Zealand 2026*. The Helen Clark Foundation.

<https://www.helenclark.foundation/social-cohesion>

of news deserts and disinformation, as well as financial distress, are all additional indicators of eroding cohesion.²⁸

As highlighted in a recent Kōi Tū publication, the demographic shifts that the country will face will be significant (e.g., an ageing population and changing fertility rates combined with significantly greater ethnic diversity), and there will inevitably be some difficult decisions and trade-offs that will need to be made (e.g., raising the retirement age) if any long-term policy interventions are to be effective.²⁹ However, we need a resilient and cohesive society for such a debate to effectively take place in the public domain. For this, the inherent value of this intangible asset must be better understood. More importantly, there is a degree of urgency.

International context

In recent years, and as highlighted by numerous international reports (such as the World Economic Forum Global Risk Reports), the global risk landscape has fundamentally changed.³⁰ We are now facing compounding pressures from the convergence of political, economic, technological and environmental drivers, contributing to a deterioration of the social fabric of communities and countries. The cost of inaction in addressing these challenges is contributing to downstream consequences that fuel further distrust, polarisation and extremism, ultimately undermining democracy.³¹ However, many of the issues we face are complex and there are no simple short-term solutions; they rely on society's ability to collaborate. If cohesion is diminished, it creates its own barrier to collective action.

Increasingly, as seen elsewhere in the world, social cohesion and societal resilience are included as part of policy considerations more deliberately. For example, the OECD's Well-being Framework explicitly states that the ultimate aspiration is a society where economic prosperity directly matches relational, environmental, and civic health.³² In the OECD context, an ideal high cohesion, resilient society is typically characterised by the following three aspects:

- Social trust (or horizontal trust): High interpersonal trust, low rates of pervasive loneliness, and deep social connectedness across diverse ethnic and age groups.³³
- Institutional trust (or vertical trust): Widespread public confidence in government transparency, judicial systems, and media credibility.³⁴
- Societal resilience: Communities that spontaneously organise, look out for vulnerable sub-population and comply voluntarily with civic demands during major crises (e.g., natural disasters or economic downturns).³⁵

In recent times and particularly post COVID-19, there is a shift in thinking internationally from stability to a focus on adaptive capabilities of societies.³⁶ This new reality and framing are reflected in several international frameworks and publications, many of which are referenced throughout this report.

²⁸ Ellis, G. (2025). News deserts: Local journalism at risk. Kōi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/news-deserts>

²⁹ Lala, G., Spoonley, P., & Gluckman, P. (2026). People, place and prosperity: The case for a population strategy. Kōi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/population/>

³⁰ World Economic Forum. (2026). The Global Risks Report 2026 (21st ed.). <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2026/>

³¹ Whitehouse, H. (2024). *Inheritance: The evolutionary origins of the modern world*. Harvard University Press.

³² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (n.d.). *OECD Well-being Data Monitor*. oecd.org

³³ OECD (2025), *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>.

³⁴ OECD (2024), *Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/918d8db3-en>

³⁵ OECD (2025), *States of Fragility 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/81982370-en>

³⁶ OECD. (2020). *A systemic resilience approach to dealing with Covid-19 and future shocks* (OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus). OECD Publishing. doi.org

One notable difference is the shift from the idea of ‘bouncing back’ to ‘adaptive capacity’ when thinking of societal resilience.³⁷ In an era of uncertainty, complexity and volatility, it is increasingly recognised that society post-crisis does not return to its pre-crisis state (i.e. bouncing back) but rather it acts, adapts and responds to a new state of recovery. Thus, measurements are shifting to transformative capacity, community mobilisation, flexibility in social infrastructure. This is reflected in new measurement indices and resilience models in place by entities such as the OECD, WEF, UNDP and others.^{38,39}

There is also increased recognition that social dimensions need to be elevated in policy making.⁴⁰ Often economic and national security policies dominate but social policies are increasingly seen as an equal in the trade-offs for decision makers. Increasingly, considerations for social licence and for a new social contract to build trust in institutions are emerging in several national level discussions internationally.^{41,42,43,44}

Human connection is increasingly recognised as a significant factor in resilience.⁴⁵ There is a notable decrease in social connection and increase in loneliness in OECD countries, particularly notable since the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is increased digital connection, these have not changed meaningful connection. Social isolation is a significant issue for many marginalised groups including the elderly and disabled, with the OECD and others highlighting that young people are particularly affected.⁴⁶

The private sector has seen a notable pivot, moving away from viewing social cohesion as a soft social responsibility metric and instead now treating it as a core component of operational risk and systemic resilience. In a volatile landscape defined by complex, compounding global shocks, the private sector is recognising that long-term economic success is inextricably linked to the stability of the communities and the workforce. This is underscored by several notable publications that demonstrate that investments in social capital and community well-being are foundational drivers of economic growth.⁴⁷ Concurrently, a fraying social contract and declining institutional trust represent material threats to business continuity. Leading organisations are actively investing in internal social infrastructure, workplace connectedness, and equitable approaches to buffer their organisations against external societal fragmentation.⁴⁸

³⁷ OECD. (2020). *Development co-operation report 2020: Learning from crises, building resilience*. OECD Publishing. doi.org

³⁸ World Economic Forum. (2024). *The future of growth report 2024*. World Economic Forum. <https://weforum.org>

³⁹ World Economic Forum. (2022). *Resilience for sustainable, inclusive growth* (White Paper).

⁴⁰ OECD. (2026). *OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions 2026: Views of government decision making on complex policy issues and trust*. OECD Publishing. doi.org

⁴¹ World Economic Forum. (2022, May 24). *The world needs a new social contract. Here's why*. *World Economic Forum Agenda*. weforum.org

⁴² OECD. (2026). *Citizen engagement: Beyond the ballot and into budgets*. OECD Publishing. doi.org

⁴³ Welsh Government. (2015). *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015: Essentials*. <https://www.gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-act-essentials-html>

⁴⁴ The Citizens' Assembly. (2018). *How the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change: Report and recommendations*. citizensassembly.ie

⁴⁵ OECD. (2025). *Social connections and loneliness in OECD countries*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>

⁴⁶ Gunnell, D., Appleby, L., Arensman, E., Hawton, K., John, A., Kapur, N., Khan, M., O'Connor, R. C., Pirkis, J., & COVID-19 Suicide Prevention Research Collaboration. (2020). Young people, mental health and COVID-19 infection: The canaries we put in the coal mine. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(12), 1004–1006. doi.org

⁴⁷ World Economic Forum. (2022). *Resilience for sustainable, inclusive growth* (White Paper). World Economic Forum in collaboration with McKinsey & Company. weforum.org

⁴⁸ Deloitte Insights. (2026). *2026 global human capital trends: From tensions to tipping points*. Deloitte Development LLC. deloitte.com

Understanding the risk environment

Part of the challenge of social cohesion and societal resilience is that the risks are not well understood. While we may have mechanisms to identify and mitigate many other hazards and risks, societal risks have not been captured particularly well generally. In the New Zealand context, the National Risk Register (NRR), which takes an all-hazards, all-risk approach, does include safety and prosperity broadly within its framework, however, these risks are not explicitly listed as the register is focused on shocks and largely ignores stresses.⁴⁹ Unlike physical hazards (such as earthquakes or floods), societal risks are slow burning risks that amplify vulnerability, amplify other security threats, and slow recovery in a crisis.

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2026 identifies societal polarisation in the top five short term threats confronting nations today.⁵⁰ This erosion of social cohesion, accelerated by economic inequality and widespread misinformation, weakens societal resilience, fractures local social contracts, and diminishes public trust in institutions. It notes that persistent societal polarisation and structural inequality are critical threats to global stability in the longer term. These risks are compounded by economic strain (amongst other factors) that further degrades trust. It also notes that the surge of AI-generated disinformation is significant in fracturing the public perception and shared realities.

The NZSIS Security Threat Environment 2025 report highlights some of these emerging risks for New Zealand, including grievances and polarising issues in the online information space, which are driving support for a range of violent extremist ideologies within New Zealand.⁵¹ It also notes that young and vulnerable people in New Zealand are particularly at risk of radicalisation, especially while online. Foreign interference activities are also an issue and are usually in the form of transnational repression, often targeting diaspora communities. Given the significant demographic change that New Zealand has experienced in recent years, these issues should not be overlooked.

Table 1 below explores some of the risk dimensions relevant to societal resilience and social cohesion, as well as their implications from economic and national security standpoints. These are based on a range of national and international evidence in recent years. The synthesis presented here integrates evidence and frameworks from a range of sources that includes international entities (such as the OECD, WEF, UNDP, WHO etc) alongside key New Zealand commentary or analysis (such as DPMC, NZSIS, GCSB and the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch Mosques Attack). These references are listed in appendix 1.

It highlights that a multidimensional approach is necessary to identify, assess and respond to the risks presented here and recognising that there are cascading effects on other aspects of society. The intent is to highlight that these risks are interconnected and as such, cannot be treated in isolation or by a single government entity, initiative or policy intervention. Given the increasingly compounding nature of these risks, overlaying these with other pre-existing risks (such as natural disasters or supply chain issues, etc.) is necessary to determine the level of vulnerability of parts or all of our society.

⁴⁹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2026). *National Risk and Resilience Framework*. dpmc.govt.nz

⁵⁰ World Economic Forum. (2026). *The global risks report 2026* (21st ed.). [weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org)

⁵¹ New Zealand Security Intelligence Service. (2025). *New Zealand's security threat environment 2025*. <https://www.nzsis.govt.nz/assets/NZSIS-Documents/New-Zealands-Security-Threat-Environment-2025.pdf>

RISK DIMENSION	SPECIFIC RISK INDICATORS	ECONOMIC AND NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS
Information and trust Risks that degrade the core of society, making it impossible to agree on facts or follow safety instructions.	• Disinformation/misinformation: The spread of false information (accidental or malicious) specifically targeting emergency responses or scientific consensus (WEF, 2024; ISC, 2023). This acts as a risk multiplier, potentially rendering physical mitigation plans (such as vaccines or evacuation orders) ineffective (GCSB, 2024; NZSIS, 2025). • Institutional distrust: A measured decline in public trust in government agencies, science, and media (OECD, 2022, 2024). High distrust leads to non-compliance during crises and can spark civil unrest under stress. • Algorithmic polarisation: The risk of digital platforms creating echo chambers that incite misplaced agitation or radicalisation, eroding the middle ground necessary for consensus-building (OECD, 2022; WEF, 2024).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Wasted public capital on unused infrastructure or services; prolonged business and workforce disruptions due to low crisis compliance; reduced foreign direct investment due to perceived socio-political volatility (OECD, 2024). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Inability to execute coordinated national defence, quarantine, or evacuation orders; vulnerability to hostile foreign interference exploiting echo chambers; rapid escalation of localised civil unrest targeting state infrastructure (WEF, 2024).
Social fabric and connectivity These risks reflect the strength of community relationships.	• Social fragmentation: A lack of respect between different groups (e.g., ethnic, religious, or political) (OECD, 2011; UNDP, 2024). If communities only bond within themselves (bonding capital) but not across groups (bridging capital), resources cannot flow effectively during a disaster. • Isolation and loneliness: High rates of social isolation mean fewer informal safety nets (like checking on a neighbour) (UNDP, 2024). • Us vs. them mentality: The rise of identity-based grievances where specific groups are scapegoated for societal ills (UNDP, 2024; WEF, 2025). This increases the risk of violence or non-cooperation during resource shortages (NZSIS, 2025).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Severe post-disaster labour immobility due to fractured local networks; commercial supply chain hoarding and panic buying are driven by low mutual trust; rising public healthcare burdens from chronic mental health isolation (OECD, 2011; WEF, 2025). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Acute friction and potential violence over the distribution of resources (food, water, fuel); breakdown of the local rule of law as subgroups reject centralised state authority (UNDP, 2024).
Structural and economic Pre-existing structural disparities and historical fractures that dictate shock severity.	• Systemic inequality/deprivation: High levels of poverty or inequality create a segment of the population with no buffer (financial or logistical) to absorb shocks (UNDP, 2023). This group will require immediate, disproportionate state support in any minor crisis. • Digital exclusion: Communities lacking access to reliable internet or digital literacy are effectively off the grid when it comes to modern emergency warnings and recovery assistance (OECD, 2020). • Insecure housing: Transient populations (renters with low security of tenure) struggle to build the local knowledge and neighbourhood networks that form the first line of defence in a disaster (UNDP, 2023). • Disenfranchisement: If specific communities (e.g., Māori, Pacific people, rural sectors) feel consistently excluded from decision-making, they may disengage from official recovery frameworks, preferring to rely on (or create) parallel systems that may not coordinate with national efforts (The New Zealand Treasury, 2019; DPMC, 2023). • Unresolved history: Failure to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations can erode the partnership necessary for unified national responses, leading to friction rather than collaboration during emergencies (The New Zealand Treasury, 2019).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Massive, immediate fiscal strain on budgets to bail out under-buffered sectors; destruction of the regional labour pool due to housing instability and displacements; structural drag on national productivity from disconnected, digitally excluded workforces (OECD, 2020; UNDP, 2023). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Severe friction between state agencies and communities; systemic governance failures or blind spots over geographic and demographic divides; complete breakdown of a unified response mechanism during systemic shocks (The New Zealand Treasury, 2019).
Institutional capacity Risks stemming from operational boundaries, rigidities, or fragmentation of state and local entities.	• Jurisdictional siloes: Incompatible data standards and communication barriers between agencies (OECD, 2014; UNDRR, 2015; GCSB, 2024). • Loss of institutional memory: High staff churn and extreme reliance on external consultants (OECD, 2014). • Over-centralisation: Concentration of decision-making at the national level, paralysing rapid local action (UNDRR & ISC, 2021).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Highly inefficient public capital allocation and duplicated disaster response; delayed regulatory approvals slowing down physical post-crisis reconstruction; massive fiscal waste through uncoordinated state and local government procurement (OECD, 2014). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Paralysis of critical civil defence capabilities in rapidly evolving, fast-moving crises; structural gaps exploited by state or cyber adversaries due to bureaucratic delays; operational blind spots leave key rural or isolated regions unprotected (UNDRR, 2015; UNDRR & ISC, 2021).
Psychological and social Progressive depletion of psychological capabilities across the population.	• Chronic apathy: Where citizens ignore official warning channels due to cognitive overload (WHO, 2021, 2022). • Infrastructure churn: Attrition within emergency services, healthcare, and vital volunteer groups (WHO, 2021).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Severe, lasting drops in macro-level labour productivity across multiple sectors; escalating long-term healthcare and mental health disability claims; the collapse of volunteer-reliant civic organisations, forcing costly state intervention (WHO, 2022). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Acute personnel deficits in frontline defence and emergency responders; widespread civil non-cooperation with emergency rationing or mandates; systemic vulnerability to mass panic or compliance failure during existential shocks (WHO, 2021).
Demographic and generation Friction caused by contrasting priorities and vulnerabilities across ages.	• Concentrated ageing: High concentrations of elderly residents are isolated in high-risk zones (UN DESA, 2024). • Intergenerational fractures: Gaps in priorities regarding who pays for long-term issues such as climate adaptation or growing demographic and ethnic diversity (OECD, 2021; UN DESA, 2024).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Gridlocked public finance allocations as demographics battle over investment types; generational resistance stifling vital infrastructure upgrades; collapse of property values in high-risk zones, wiping out retirement savings (OECD, 2021). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Erosion of the political consensus needed for national mobilisation or funding; strategic vulnerabilities in greying, underpopulated regions unable to self-organise defence (UN DESA, 2024).
Environmental displacement Social, legal, and systemic unrest arising from the physical relocation of populations away from risk zones.	• Eco-grief: Legal and physical resistance from communities refusing to move (IPCC, 2022). • Climate gentrification: Displaced groups pricing out pre-existing low-income locals (IDMC, 2024; IPCC, 2022).	ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS Insurability crises cascading into the banking sector via mortgage defaults; public litigation expenses over property rights; rapid distortion and degradation of property tax bases (IPCC, 2022). NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS Violent or highly destabilising domestic resistance against forced evacuations or zoning laws; regional demographic and localised community conflicts over land usage; internal migration management challenges (IDMC, 2024).

Table 1: The interconnected risk dimensions highlighting several implications (Compiled from multiple sources as indicated).

Key contributing factors

This section provides a summary of the range of key inputs and contributing factors that impact on social cohesion or societal resilience.⁵² It includes both foundational factors as well as a range of structural and social drivers. The intent of this section is to highlight the inherent complexity that decision makers face. Thus, a more systematic approach is necessary to support any proposed actions to foster social cohesion and strengthen societal resilience.

Institutional and social trust

As highlighted in Koi Tū's previous works, the institutions of a healthy democracy aim to ensure both institutional and social trust, the two underpinning elements of a cohesive society. Institutional and social trust are interdependent.⁵³ How a government behaves affects social trust and where social trust breaks down, institutional trust is generally lost. Such an unstable environment of trust provides a breeding ground for autocratic and populist leaders.^{54,55}

A cohesive democracy depends on trust in its many institutions. These include the political system (central and local government) and the policy system that advises the political process. Other critical institutions include the justice system, the fourth estate (the media) and many agencies of local and central government at different degrees of remove from the political process. But many other institutions play key parts in contributing to a healthy society, including universities, religious organisations and components of the commercial sector (banks and insurers, for example). Institutional trust is created and sustained via the performance, integrity and behaviour of these institutions and the actors within them.⁵⁶ Trust in these entities spills over and a loss of faith in one can affect perceptions of the others.⁵⁷ Loss of institutional trust also flows across borders and public attitudes are also likely affected by what they see in other democracies.

Social trust relies on people, irrespective of their identity and values, feeling fully part of a given society. That means their views can be articulated and interests and values will be respected, and that decision-making seems to be fair in relation to the diversity of views present.⁵⁸ Social trust thus depends on implicit understandings of how such diverse groups interact and make collective decisions. Civil discourse and dialogue based on a contest of values and ideas are critical. We need to make a conscious effort to incorporate all identities and views and to promote confidence that discourse will not be manipulated and that no perspectives are discounted or disadvantaged. This is of particular importance as the media landscape continues to shift from traditional institutions toward digital and social media platforms.⁵⁹

A 2024 report by Koi Tū and New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) on perceptions of fairness found that while New Zealanders largely agree on the definition of fairness, they are deeply polarised on whether our society is currently fair.⁶⁰ The perception of fairness is a fundamental aspect of

⁵² Note that this is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of all the relevant factors but rather to highlight the diverse and interdependent set of inputs that need to be considered. A more detailed discussion on any of the individual factors are in the references as indicated.

⁵³ United Nations Development Programme. (2020). *Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications*. United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.undp.org>

⁵⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). *Building trust and reinforcing democracy: Preparing the ground for government action*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/715e4f07-en>

⁵⁵ Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁵⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). *OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions – 2024 results: Building trust in a complex policy environment*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en>

⁵⁷ Edelman. (2024). *2024 Edelman trust barometer: Innovation in peril*. Edelman Trust Institute. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2024-trust-barometer>

⁵⁸ United Nations Development Programme. (2020). *Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications*. United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.undp.org>

⁵⁹ Asia New Zealand Foundation. (2026). *New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia and Asian peoples 2026*. Asia New Zealand Foundation Te Whaitau Tūhono. <https://www.asianz.org.nz/new-zealanders-perceptions-of-asia-2026>

⁶⁰ New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) & Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. (2024). *Perceptions of fairness in New Zealand: Phase 1 report*. <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Public%20Publications/Client%20reports/Fairness%20Phase%201%20Report.pdf>

maintaining trust. When citizens believe society is fair, they trust institutions and each other. Conversely, the lack of fairness undermines both institutional and social trust.

Digital trust

Today, digital trust is increasingly critical. Trust in the information environment was primarily viewed as a technical requirement (such as cyber defence, multi-factor authentication or encryption protocols). However, as the boundaries between the digital and physical worlds blur, the digital environment has become a primary theatre for geopolitical and societal volatility, increasingly widening the gap between perception and reality. Failures in digital trust do not stay online. They manifest as real-world harms, including cybersecurity breaches, deepfakes, further contributions to the digital divide, and the erosion of democratic institutions through disinformation by state and non-state actors.⁶¹

ICT technologies have continued to proliferate and the world is increasingly hyperconnected. We use connective technologies to learn, work, socialise, play and transact. As the world becomes more reliant on connectivity, vulnerable communities or remote communities without adequate infrastructure are negatively impacted. Hyperconnectivity has already and will continue to influence public discourse on several social issues both in a domestic context as well as in the global commons.⁶²

While policymakers strive to maintain a rules-based digital environment, platform governance often struggles with reduced content moderation and engagement-driven business models.⁶³ Much of the effort to date has tried to codify human values into digital systems through platform regulation and algorithmic standards, though these have had limited success. Now, with advanced AI and other technologies, different approaches will be necessary to strengthen cognitive resilience. For a healthy digitally enabled society, there is also a need for greater public confidence in digital ecosystems, data governance and the credibility of online information environments.⁶⁴ In this context, trust requires transparency, shared accountability, provenance and the ability to enable equitable access to services.⁶⁵ It also needs institutional credibility for entities that provide data or ground truth (such as the media, academic institutions or official statistics) to ensure that society has access to accurate, verifiable and reliable information.⁶⁶

If a society cannot agree on basic facts such as the results of an election, the safety of a vaccine or the reality of a climate event, it becomes impossible to achieve the collective buy-in required for any other form of decision. However, the online environment has made it nearly impossible for us to reach any form of consensus.⁶⁷ Most platforms are optimised for an attention economy with algorithms systematically prioritising outrage and conflict over facts to maximise engagement. These are combined with specific techniques such as rage baiting, dopamine-driven tactics and hyper-personalised content to create silos. These are increasingly used to manipulate human emotions, beliefs and shared value systems.⁶⁸

⁶¹ World Economic Forum. (2025). *The Global Risks Report 2025* (20th ed.). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2025/>

⁶² OECD (2025), *Closing Broadband Connectivity Divides for All: From Evidence to Practice*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d5ea99b2-en>.

⁶³ UNESCO. (2023). *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms: Safeguarding Freedom of Expression and Access to Information Through a Multi-Stakeholder Approach*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-trust/guidelines>

⁶⁴ OECD. (2024b). *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2024 (Volume 2): Digital transitions in a global economy*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9b2801fc-en>

⁶⁵ World Economic Forum. (2022). *Earning Digital Trust: Decision-Making for Trustworthy Technologies* (White Paper). World Economic Forum Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/earning-digital-trust-decision-making-for-trustworthy-technologies/>

⁶⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2026). *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions: 2026 Results*. OECD Publishing. oecd.org

⁶⁷ Scharfbillig, M., Lewandowsky, S., Altay, S., Van Alstyne, M., Kozyreva, A., Hertwig, R., Lorenz-Spreen, P., DiResta, R., Valenzuela, S., Egidy, S., Quattrocioni, W., & Orben, A. (2026). *Fractured reality: How democracy can win the global struggle over the information space*.

⁶⁸ Blatny, J. M., & Søndergaard, S. (2025). *Cognitive warfare* (Report No. STO-OCS-001). NATO Science and Technology Organization. <https://www.sto.nato.int/document/cognitive-warfare/>

Many nations are looking at legislative and regulatory measures to hold bad actors accountable and provide victims with recourse. The European Union (EU) Digital Services Act is one such approach to increasing algorithmic transparency, whilst national security measures are designed to detect state-sponsored disinformation campaigns.⁶⁹ However, in parallel, cognitive resilience is also needed, with digital literacy a key element in ensuring citizens can identify logical fallacies, emotional manipulation and AI-generated content. Pre-bunking is also key to proactively warn people about common disinformation techniques or online harm channels before they encounter them.⁷⁰

The transition from a fragile digital state to a healthy digital society requires adopting more structured approaches to strengthen society's digital backbone and build resilience.

Wicked problems

Wicked problems do not just challenge our institutions, they inevitably stress test the very fabric of how societies cooperate, trust and adapt.^{71,72} Issues like intergenerational disadvantage, youth crime, systemic health failures, and climate change continue to expose the fault lines in our society, whether these are economic, cultural, and intergenerational. When institutions offer tokenistic engagement or unequal responses, public trust dissolves and communities feel abandoned, unheard or excluded.⁷³

The urge to promise quick fixes to deeply rooted crises is dangerous. Short-term political opportunism frequently derails effective action, even as the public increasingly recognises that real progress demands a sustained, long-term approach that transcends political cycles. Because wicked problems by nature involve identity, values, and emotion, leaving them unaddressed actively fuels division, which is weaponised by misinformation, sensationalised media, and algorithmic silos.⁷⁴

Tackling these challenges requires a fundamental rethink of our political conventions. As public sectors rapidly integrate AI into decision making, the risks of bias, opacity, moral and ethical drift threaten to erode institutional confidence even further.⁷⁵ If AI is to aid rather than fracture our response to wicked problems, independent oversight and transparent governance are non-negotiable prerequisites for maintaining public trust.⁷⁶

Social infrastructure

Based on the OECD findings, social infrastructure serves as an essential element for a healthy society.⁷⁷ It encompasses the physical spaces and organisational structures, such as libraries, parks, community hubs and sports clubs, that facilitate incidental and intentional social interaction. The significance of these third spaces should not be overlooked as high levels of social connection are linked to improved mental and physical health, increased economic productivity and greater societal resilience.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p. 1–102, europa.eu.

⁷⁰ Scharfbillig, M., Lewandowsky, S., Altay, S., Van Alstyne, M., Kozyreva, A., Hertwig, R., Lorenz-Spreen, P., DiResta, R., Valenzuela, S., Egidy, S., Quattrociochi, W., & Orben, A. (2026). *Fractured reality: How democracy can win the global struggle over the information space* (JRC Science for Policy Report No. JRC144603). Publications Office of the European Union. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC144603>

⁷¹ Alford, J., & Head, B. W. (2017). Wicked and less wicked problems: a typology and a contingency framework. *Policy and Society*, 36(3), 397–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1361634>

⁷² Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>

⁷³ Head, B. W. (2022). *Wicked problems in public policy: Understanding and responding to complex challenges*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94580-0>

⁷⁴ Gluckman, P. (2025). *Wicked problems, policy and politics: Towards more consensual policy-making*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Wicked-problems-policy-and-politics-FINAL-.pdf>

⁷⁵ Leslie, D. (2019). *Understanding artificial intelligence ethics and safety: A guide for the responsible design and implementation of AI systems in the public sector*. The Alan Turing Institute. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3240529>

⁷⁶ Sridhar, H., Low, F., & Gluckman, P. (2025). *Systems thinking, foresight and wicked problems: Implications for policymaking*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/systems-thinking/>

⁷⁷ OECD. (2025). *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>

⁷⁸ Public or commercial locations that are neither home nor work, such as cafes, libraries, and parks.

Conversely, loneliness places a significant strain on public resources, increasing the burden on healthcare systems and reducing trust in public institutions.

In the New Zealand context, strengthening social infrastructure requires a shift from viewing community spaces as nice-to-have amenities to treating them as critical public assets. This could include revitalising local town centres and marae to serve as multi-generational hubs or revisiting urban environments to encourage interactions. Furthermore, digital social infrastructure requires investment to ensure that technology bridges, rather than widens, the gap in social connectivity for vulnerable populations, such as the elderly or rural residents.⁷⁹

Integrating robust social infrastructure with modern digital systems offers a way to improve connectivity and public service delivery. A powerful example of this is India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), which has evolved from a financial tool into a vital component of digital social infrastructure.⁸⁰ By providing a frictionless, real-time method for millions of people, including those in rural or underserved areas, to participate in the formal economy, UPI fosters economic inclusion and strengthens the social fabric of everyday life through accessible, peer-to-peer interactions. This demonstrates how high-tech infrastructure can reinforce social trust and community participation on a massive scale.⁸¹

Human development

Koi Tū has advocated for the life course approach as societal resilience and social cohesion are deeply rooted in the biological and psychological foundations of early human development.⁸² Crucial to this is the early-life development of the brain's executive functions, which are the cognitive architecture responsible for emotional regulation and flexible thinking. When a child's early environment, starting in utero, is compromised by chronic stress or maternal distress, it alters neurodevelopmental pathways, hindering cognitive resilience and executive capacity.⁸³

Over time, these individual psychological vulnerabilities accumulate at scale, manifesting as heightened risks for educational failure, mental health challenges, anti-social behaviours and radicalisation. Conversely, when protective systems like serve-and-return caregiver interactions are nurtured early, they can fundamentally shift the developmental pivot point toward positive outcomes.^{84,85}

This underlying vulnerability is further exacerbated by the rapid expansion of the digital environment, which interacts aggressively with developing minds. In New Zealand, we are no exception and as a nation, we are grappling with a profound youth mental health crisis and extremely high rates of youth suicide.⁸⁶ The online environment introduces unprecedented systemic pressures. For young people whose executive functions and cognitive resilience are still maturing, the digital world presents a relentless onslaught of peer comparison, social validation, and algorithmic echo chambers.

⁷⁹ Deloitte. (2023). *Digital public infrastructure: Case study on emerging market deployments*. Deloitte Africa.

⁸⁰ D'Silva, D., Filková, Z., Packer, F., & Tiwari, S. (2019). The design of digital financial infrastructure: lessons from India. *BIS Papers*, (106), 1–39.

⁸¹ McKinsey Global Institute. (2019). *Digital India: Technology to transform a connected nation*. McKinsey & Company.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/digital-india-technology-to-transform-a-connected-nation>

⁸² Low, F., & Kim, S. (2025). Foundations to thrive: Policy briefs for child and family wellbeing. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures.

<https://informedfutures.org/foundations-to-thrive/>

⁸³ Low, F., Gluckman, P., & Poulton, R. (2021). *Intergenerational disadvantage: Why maternal mental health matters* (Evidence Brief). Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Intergenerational-disadvantage-maternal-mental-health.pdf>

⁸⁴ Low, F., & Gluckman, P. (2023). *Bonding: A brilliant brain builder – The importance of supporting parents to bond with their child from the earliest years*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Bonding-a-brilliant-brain-builder-the-importance-of-supporting-parents-to-bond-with-their-child-from-the-earliest-years.pdf>

⁸⁵ Low, F., Gluckman, P., & Poulton, R. (2023). *Early investment: A key to reversing intergenerational disadvantage and inequity in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Early-investment-A-key-to-reversing-intergenerational-disadvantage-SUMMARY.pdf>

⁸⁶ Hayward, M., Stubbing, J., & Gluckman, P. (2025). Addressing youth mental distress in Aotearoa New Zealand. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Koi-Tu-Addressing-Youth-Mental-Distress-Report-Oct-2025.pdf>

This continuous exposure significantly increases their susceptibility to online harm, transforming digital spaces from tools of connection into vectors for heightened anxiety, depression and psychological distress. The online environment is a channel through which our young people are targeted, whether it is addictive behaviour or grooming. As noted in the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) 2025 report on New Zealand's Security Threat Environment, young and vulnerable people in New Zealand are particularly at risk of radicalisation.

Critically, the digital environment disrupts the vital developmental milestone of identity formation.⁸⁷ Confronted by overwhelming choice, economic uncertainty and intense social pressure to conform, many youth are experiencing premature identity closure. Rather than safely exploring and integrating their authentic selves through gradual, diverse real-world experiences, they rapidly commit to closed identities or ideologies in search of belonging.⁸⁸ This premature locking in suppresses true emotional autonomy, leaves youth ill-equipped to handle the nuances of an uncertain future and deepens individual dislocation. It contributes to the alarming statistics of youth self-harm and erodes the shared social fabric required for long-term societal resilience.⁸⁹

By embedding lifelong emotional regulation and adaptive capacity across generations, this preventative approach directly underpins societal resilience. Ultimately, a society composed of individuals with robust executive functions is better equipped to navigate systemic shocks, resist institutional distrust and disinformation and counteract the us-versus-them polarisation that threatens social cohesion.

The shifting landscape of New Zealand's society

New Zealand has traditionally been perceived, both globally and domestically, as a highly cohesive, high-trust society supported by a healthy democracy. This reputation has underpinned our national self-perception and is embodied in our approach to civic and daily life. However, this perception is in sharp contrast to the noticeable declines in social cohesion and societal resilience that have led to declining social and institutional trust in the lived realities of a range of communities and individuals. As noted earlier, we are living in an era of rapid change and uncertainty, with complex, overlapping disruptions that could destabilise our economy, society and security. However, it is important to recognise that societal resilience in New Zealand is not eroding in a vacuum. Several compounding pressures are exacerbating the situation. This fracturing is increasingly evident in recent evidence and reporting from public-sector entities, think tanks and research organisations.

A 2025 report by the Helen Clark Foundation measuring social cohesion (somewhat narrowly defined in terms of social trust) found that New Zealand's social cohesion is 8 percentage points lower than Australia's, lagging on every dimension measured, including sense of belonging, worth, social inclusion, and acceptance.⁹⁰ While a national sense of belonging remains relatively high in both nations, New Zealanders are less likely to feel connected to or safe in their local communities and exhibit a notably less positive attitude toward migrants, with only 56% stating that migrants make the country stronger, compared to 82% in Australia. In the 2026 report, these trends have not improved.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Whitehouse, H., Lord Alderdice, Quesada, C. A., Gluckman, P., El Haité, H., & Reinhardt, L. (2025). Solving global problems requires global cohesion. *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 37(1), Article 8.

⁸⁸ Hayward, M., & Kim, S. (2026). *Adolescence and the digital disconnect*. Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/youth-mental-health/>

⁸⁹ Stubbing, J., Low, F., & Gluckman, P. (2024). *Exploring factors influencing youth mental health*. Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/youth-mental-health/>

⁹⁰ Analysis & Policy Observatory. (2025). Social cohesion in New Zealand. Helen Clark Foundation. <https://apo.org.au/node/330319>

⁹¹ Note that the Helen Clark Foundation results are somewhat more pessimistic than other similar surveys.

Declining sense of belonging and rising loneliness

The Ministry of Social Development's (MSD) Social Cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand 2024 report confirms that while many New Zealanders maintain meaningful social connections, there is a clear trend of declining community attachment.⁹² The proportion of the population reporting a strong sense of belonging to New Zealand has decreased from 88.5% in 2016 to 83.4% in 2023. Furthermore, rates of loneliness are climbing, particularly among vulnerable demographics. Between 2018 and 2023, the proportion of Pacific Peoples reporting feeling lonely at least some of the time surged dramatically from 30.9% to 51.9%. Transgender individuals and young people also report substantially elevated rates of loneliness and isolation.

Increasing rates of discrimination

New Zealand is an increasingly diverse country but changing demographic diversity must be actively embraced to maintain cohesion. Currently, rates of discrimination are growing. In 2023, 21.8% of people reported experiencing discrimination in the previous 12 months, up from 17.4% in 2018.⁹³ As noted by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch terrorist attack, societies that become polarised around political, economic or ethnic differences provide the conditions in which radicalising ideologies and violent extremism develop and flourish.

The trust recession

As discussed earlier, trust is the foundational element of a resilient democracy, yet both social and institutional trust are deteriorating in New Zealand. Looking at the results from the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, the proportion of people who agreed they held trust for others in New Zealand fell from 65.9% in 2018 to 58.9% in 2023.⁹⁴ At the same time, confidence in our public institutions has declined, with trust in the New Zealand Parliament at 30.4% in 2023, down from 41.5% in 2021. This is echoed in declining trust in several other institutions, including the media (21.3%), education (52.3%) and health services (51.0%).

Low civic agency and diminishing public safety

When individuals do not feel they have agency in the decisions that affect them and their voices are not heard, it creates an environment for disengagement. For example, in 2022, only 28% of surveyed residents felt the public had influence on their local council's decisions.⁹⁵ This is reflected in the low voter turnout numbers in recent local body elections. Over time, inaction in addressing these trust deficits fuels crime, sparks extremism and fundamentally undermines the democratic system.

Crime and crisis response demands

There is rising public anxiety and a reduced sense of physical safety, with New Zealanders feeling increasingly unsafe in the places they live, with only 55.1% in 2023 feeling safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark (down from 61.9% in 2018), and only 42.0% feeling safe using or waiting for public transport at night.⁹⁶ Women are particularly affected, with only one in four feeling safe using public transport alone at night.

⁹² Ministry of Social Development. (2024). Social Cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand 2024: Statistical Report.

⁹³ Stats NZ. (2024, May). Wellbeing statistics: 2023.

⁹⁴ Acumen & Edelman. (2025, January). 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer: Aotearoa New Zealand Report.

⁹⁵ TNS New Zealand. (2022). Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) Reputation Report.

⁹⁶ Stats NZ. (2024). Wellbeing statistics: 2023. Tatauranga Aotearoa / Stats NZ. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023>.

These fears are grounded in lived realities. Almost one in three New Zealanders (31.5%) reported experiencing a crime against them in the year to November 2023.⁹⁷ Concurrently, the New Zealand Police are managing significant long-term growth in demand for crisis responses. Family harm incidents have risen by more than 50% over the past five years.⁹⁸ Similarly, police attendance at events involving people experiencing mental health crises or distress increased by 55% over the same five-year span.

Economic stress

The rising cost of living is placing immense strain on households and perpetuating existing disadvantages. While about 60.9% of New Zealanders report having adequate income, financial distress is increasingly a significant issue for many.⁹⁹ The Helen Clark Foundation noted that 25% of New Zealanders sometimes or often went without meals, nearly double the rate in Australia (13%). Furthermore, the proportion of New Zealanders forced to cut back on fresh fruit or vegetables to save money more than doubled from 23.3% in 2018 to 47.7% in 2023.^{100,101}

Digital disruption and technology divide

The rapid advancement of digital technology and the widespread reliance on social media algorithms have increased polarisation and dividing communities. New Zealanders are increasingly alarmed by the digital landscape; the proportion of people who are extremely concerned about misleading or wrong information online surged from 48% in 2019 to 65% in 2023.¹⁰² Over half the population (52%) is highly concerned about the spread of online conspiracy theories.¹⁰³

New Zealand's approach and international comparisons

Efforts to formally address social cohesion and societal resilience in New Zealand have accelerated significantly over the last few years. These efforts moved from being largely community-focused to becoming core components of national security and social policy but remain largely focused on the social dimension. The 2019 terrorist attack served as the primary catalyst for formalising social cohesion as a government priority, with the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch Mosque Attacks findings articulating a compelling case for change.¹⁰⁴

The 2023 National Security Strategy was the first to explicitly include societal resilience as a core pillar.¹⁰⁵ The strategy acknowledged that threats such as disinformation, foreign interference and climate change cannot be addressed by intelligence agencies alone and require a whole-of-society approach in which a resilient population trusts the government and one another. This is further supported by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), which has moved away from the old civil defence model to a modern National Disaster Resilience Strategy that states that socially connected communities recover faster from disasters (such as the Auckland Anniversary floods or Cyclone Gabrielle).¹⁰⁶ NEMA now serves

⁹⁷ Ministry of Justice. (2024). New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey (Cycle 6).

⁹⁸ New Zealand Police. (2024). Annual Data Report & Demand Metrics.

⁹⁹ Helen Clark Foundation. (2025). *Social cohesion in New Zealand*. Mahi a Rongo | The Helen Clark Foundation. <https://helenclark.foundation/>

¹⁰⁰ Stats NZ. (2024a). *Household income and housing-cost statistics: Year ended June 2023*. Tatauranga Aotearoa / Stats NZ.

<https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/household-income-and-housing-cost-statistics-year-ended-june-2023/>

¹⁰¹ Stats NZ. (2024b). *Wellbeing statistics: 2023*. Tatauranga Aotearoa / Stats NZ. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/wellbeing-statistics-2023/>

¹⁰² InternetNZ. (2023). New Zealand's Internet Insights 2023.

¹⁰³ Asia New Zealand Foundation Te Whitau Tūhono. (2026, June 9). *New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia 2026*. <https://www.asianz.org.nz/new-zealanders-perceptions-of-asia-2026>

¹⁰⁴ Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019. (2020). *Ko tō tātou kāinga tēnei: Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019*. New Zealand Government. <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>

¹⁰⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2023). New Zealand's national security strategy 2023–2028: Secure together—Tō Tātou Korowai Manaaki. Government of New Zealand. <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-11/national-security-strategy-aug2023.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Ministry of Civil Defence & Emergency Management. (2019). National disaster resilience strategy: Rautaki ā-Motu Manawaroa Aitua. New Zealand Government. <https://www.civildefence.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/publications/National-Disaster-Resilience-Strategy/National-Disaster-Resilience-Strategy-10-April-2019.pdf>

as the steward of the entire emergency system, ensuring that iwi, local councils and businesses work toward the same goal of societal resilience.

The New Zealand Treasury's Living Standards Framework (LSF) takes social cohesion from an abstract concept to a measurable system. Social capital and wealth are measured as part of the annual updates, as well as trust in institutions (police, health system, parliament), sense of belonging to New Zealand and social isolation (how often people feel lonely or unsupported). Similarly, the MSD's Te Korowai Whetū: The Social Cohesion Strategic Framework is the government's formal framework for measuring and improving how New Zealanders relate to one another (i.e. social trust).¹⁰⁷ While it aims to provide a real-time health check on the nation's social fabric, operationalising this in practice has proven harder to achieve.

New Zealand is not alone in reflecting on the optimal mechanism to ensure that social cohesion and resilience are enduring. Many other comparable nations, particularly those with diverse populations and democratic structures like ours, such as Australia and Canada have shifted in recent years from theoretical frameworks and static analyses toward implementing more concrete policies to enhance societal resilience.^{108,109} This shift from passive monitoring to active and deliberate interventions should not come as a surprise. The Covid-19 pandemic both exposed and accelerated fractures within societies globally, particularly liberal democracies, such as ours. This is most evident in the declining trust in authorities, as well as in the polarisation and populism seen in many such countries in recent years.¹¹⁰

While New Zealand is often seen as a global leader in wellbeing policy, recent comparisons with countries like Australia, the UK and Canada reveal several structural and operational gaps. We have good intent in developing policies and processes but we lack execution; as a result, other nations have more mature, established frameworks and the infrastructure to implement them.¹¹¹

In several other countries, in addition to national-level monitoring, there are significant efforts at the local and regional levels to identify and respond to specific localised issues. For example, Australia has more mature community-level cohesion programs that fund local social infrastructure (clubs, community hubs, and local government initiatives) which foster ground-up resilience.¹¹² The OECD and the World Bank, among others, have developed significant frameworks to consider resilient cities.^{113,114} For New Zealand, this requires urgent attention, particularly in Auckland, where a city-wide strategy for societal resilience is increasingly necessary.

Enhancing our society requires investing in our people and information. We must monitor the prevalence of disinformation, improve digital literacy and ensure accessible, trusted local journalism. At the same time, we must invest in early childhood development and youth mental health to build future resilience. The United Kingdom's 2026 Protecting What Matters Strategy places a much heavier emphasis on cognitive resilience, which specifically protects citizens from disinformation.¹¹⁵ The UK has mandated digital literacy and citizenship as core parts of the national school curriculum to build a population that is

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Social Development. (2022). Te Korowai Whetū social cohesion strategic framework. New Zealand Government. <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/community/social-cohesion/index.html>

¹⁰⁸ Australian Government Department of the Treasury. (2023). *Measuring what matters: Australia's first wellbeing framework*. Commonwealth of Australia.

¹⁰⁹ Government of Canada. (2021). *Measuring what matters: Towards a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada*. Department of Finance Canada.

¹¹⁰ OECD. (2024). *The OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative: Building trust and resilience in a changing world*. OECD Publishing.

¹¹¹ Gluckman, P., & Sridhar, H. (2025). *Social cohesion: New Zealand's precious and fragile asset* (Policy Commentary). Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/social-cohesion-new-zealands-precious-and-fragile-asset/>

¹¹² NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. (2023). Building social cohesion: A resource for local government. City of Sydney.

<https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/-/media/corporate/files/focus/governance-decision-making/resilient-city/building-social-cohesion---a-resource-for-local-government.pdf>

¹¹³ Figueiredo, L., Honiden, T., & Schumann, A. (2018). Indicators for resilient cities. OECD Regional Development Working Papers 2018/02. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6f1f6065-en>

¹¹⁴ Independent Evaluation Group. (2019). *Building urban resilience: An evaluation of the World Bank Group's evolving experience (2007–17)*. World Bank. [worldbankgroup.org](https://www.worldbankgroup.org)

¹¹⁵ Cabinet Office. (2026). National resilience framework: 2026 implementation update. HM Government.

immune to radicalisation. While online harm is a growing issue in New Zealand, much of the effort is largely focused on content removal or incident response. The proposed social media ban will restrict use for young people, however, in parallel, proactive education measures and critical thinking skills will be needed to strengthen cognitive resilience.¹¹⁶

The OECD 2026 Economic Survey of New Zealand noted that societal resilience is being undermined by specific economic stressors that other nations have addressed more aggressively.¹¹⁷ The OECD argues that social capital cannot survive when basic needs are not met. Without actively addressing cost-of-living issues, including housing and food costs, societal resilience is further tested.

Nations like Norway and Denmark have embedded formal foresight functions in government decision-making, in which social impact assessments are legally required for all major government spending. Similarly, the Welsh Commissioner for Future Generations takes an intergenerational perspective on key decisions across government.¹¹⁸ Australia has also recently established the Office for Social Cohesion to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience.¹¹⁹

For New Zealand, the lack of a central and defined function with agency has meant that we tend to be retrospective (learning from the 2019 mosque attacks or COVID-19) rather than anticipatory. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch Mosque attacks' recommendations explicitly call for a coordinated, government-wide approach to social cohesion and for assigning responsibility and accountability for coordinating it.

A high-level resilience framework

The core focus of this report is to establish a high-level framework for identifying and mapping key indicators of societal resilience, based on existing research, evidence and international best practice. To do so, it is first important to establish which metrics are currently in use in New Zealand and to understand international shifts in monitoring, to ensure that New Zealand's approach is fit for purpose in addressing emerging needs.

The framework presented below synthesises indicators from numerous pre-existing works, including the European Commission Resilience Dashboards, the OECD, the World Bank, the UNDRR Sendai Framework (2024-2026) and a range of national indicators from existing monitoring frameworks. The aim is to demonstrate that a system-level approach is necessary to monitor societal resilience and that considering social factors in isolation from economic and national security factors is insufficient.

It is also important to recognise that we need collective clarity on what indicators are important and what we are trying to measure. While there are myriad indicators and metrics we could leverage, we need to be pragmatic and realistic in our approach. This will vary depending on the scale (such as regional or city levels versus the national level) and the availability of adequate data or proxies to identify weak signals and emerging risks that require attention. The cost and timeliness of data collection will influence which indicators are prioritised. There are various approaches, with some nations opting for a small set of indicators (5-10) while others take a more comprehensive approach (>100). International evidence from the OECD and the UN distinguishes between formal measures, which are often lagging or retrospective indicators, from early-warning lead indicators, which are real-time signals that predict future instability,

¹¹⁶ eSafety Commissioner. (2024). *Protecting children online: Balancing safety, regulation, and digital capability*. Australian Government eSafety Commissioner.

¹¹⁷ OECD. (2026). *OECD economic surveys: New Zealand 2026*. OECD Publishing.

¹¹⁸ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. (2025). *Future Generations Report 2025*. <https://futuregenerations.wales/discover/about-future-generations-commissioner/future-generations-report-2025/>

¹¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025, July 17). *Office for Social Cohesion*. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/social-cohesion/about-social-cohesion/office-of-community-cohesion>

shifts or emerging weak signals.¹²⁰ Distinguishing between subjective indicators (such as sentiment-based surveys) and hard, objective indicators will also need to be considered. This approach is necessary to shift from a reactive system to an anticipatory mode.

Table 2 below presents a comparison of the range of indicators typically available and measured in New Zealand across existing frameworks and reporting. Also included are international indicators that specifically measure societal resilience in New Zealand.

FRAMEWORK / ENTITY	CORE INDICATOR CATEGORIES	CADENCE	DATA TYPE	NATURE	RELEVANCE, BENCHMARKS & GAPS
Indicators Aotearoa NZ Stats NZ	Focus on the social domain: Institutional trust, safety, discrimination experiences, social networks, and loneliness metrics.	Biennial (GSS) / 5-Yearly (Census)	Quantitative representative subjective microdata	LAG	The source data engine for almost all other frameworks. It is broad but lacks real-time responsiveness during acute crises.
Living Standards Framework (LSF) NZ Treasury	Focus on social capital: Generalised trust, civic participation, institutional trust, sense of belonging, and cultural identity.	Triennial / Quadrennial (Te Tai Waiora cycle)	Primarily quantitative (flows vs. capital stocks)	LAG	Highly structural. Struggles with hyper-local granularity, though testing shows community-level wellbeing often deviates from national trends.
MSD Social Cohesion Framework Ministry of Social Development	Focus on five dimensions: Belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition, and legitimacy. Focuses on migrant settlement vs. host community reception.	Variable (Targeted research & admin data)	Mixed (Subjective survey items & admin data)	LAG	Explicitly maps social inclusion transactions; historically hindered by data gaps where ethnic minorities are broadly categorised.
The Helen Clark Foundation (HCF) Annual Social Cohesion Report	Focus on five pillars (Scanlon Foundation): Belonging, Worth, Social Inclusion/Justice, Participation, and Acceptance/Rejection. Tracks flashpoints like financial strain, polarisation, and institutional distrust.	Annual (Iteration 2: April 2026)	Quantitative tracking of highly sensitive social attitudes	LEAD	Acts as an early warning system for structural fracturing and political alienation before it manifests in civic unrest. Directly benchmarks NZ against Australia; 2026 data revealed parallel social realities.
NZ Resilience Index (NZRI) Resilient Organisations (MBIE funded)	Focus on seven capital domains: Social (residency length), economic (employment diversity), cultural (heritage), governance, built, and natural environments.	Intermittent (Census and secondary data dependent)	Quantitative composite index (Spatial datasets)	BLEND	Benchmarks disaster and hazard readiness at sub-national/community levels; relies heavily on secondary data availability. Built infrastructure is lag; local hazard planning is lead.
He Ara Waiora Māori Wellbeing Framework	Complementary to LSF; focused on Māori perspectives on wairuatanga (spirituality), whānaungatanga (relationships), manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga, and cultural connectedness.	Ad-hoc (Interwoven with LSF policy advice)	Qualitative relational metrics	LEAD	Focuses on relational interdependence and collective, intergenerational resilience. Strong cultural connection serves as an upstream indicator.
OECD Society at a Glance / Trust Surveys	Focus on social cohesion factors: Interpersonal trust, trust in central government/institutions, civic engagement, income inequality, and social mobility.	Biennial to Triennial (Depending on indicator suite)	Quantitative comparative global data	LAG	Global benchmarking: Ranks New Zealand against 37 member nations (e.g., historical tracking shows NZ ranking highly in interpersonal trust at 69% vs OECD average of 59%, though recent domestic measures show a decline). Aggregates historical national data.]

Table 2: Comparison of existing frameworks and the associated range of indicators typically available and measured in New Zealand.

These frameworks sit alongside the National Risk Register (NRR), which does not measure social cohesion or societal resilience directly but utilises the Treasury’s Living Standards Framework (LSF) and Statistics New Zealand data to determine whether New Zealand’s societal fabric can withstand, absorb and recover from severe, cascading national shocks. The NRR focuses on high-consequence, low-probability events and considers all elements to determine the nation’s worst-case scenarios. The different time horizons, scales (national level versus hyper-localised) and lead or lag characteristics of these indicators mean there is no single framework that directly monitors trends in social cohesion and resilience.

It also highlights an implicit hierarchy within these frameworks and significant interdependencies. Statistics New Zealand and the LSF framework identify the key social assets; the New Zealand Resilience Index identifies specific locations where these assets are vulnerable; the Helen Clark Foundation reports highlight current strain on these assets; and MSD’s framework looks to provide longer-term trends. The collective health of these indicators determines the nation’s baseline societal resilience, which the NRR then stress-tests against severe, acute national hazards. If the other frameworks indicate high strain on societal resilience, the NRR’s modelled risk of a hazard cascading into societal failure will increase.

¹²⁰ Hermansen, M. & O. Röhn (2015). Economic resilience: The usefulness of early warning indicators in OECD countries. OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1250. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxhgftqx3mv-en>.

It highlights that while the foundational data collection and dissemination infrastructure may exist in New Zealand for measuring shifts in cohesion or resilience, these are generally reactive rather than anticipatory. An effective framework should be forward looking.

Measuring resilience – from principles to practice

The approach presented below draws from a range of concrete existing formal indicators grouped into three dimensions that correspond to different scales of society, namely individual, society and institutional or national level.¹²¹ At the individual and household levels, the selected indicators reflect individuals' personal buffers, such as financial stability and psychological well-being. The societal layer focuses on the connective elements, including digital and social infrastructure, social capital and demographic and cultural measures. At the institutional level, the measures relate to governance, trust, and structural aspects.

In total, they aim to provide an anticipatory mechanism for assessing societal resilience that encompasses the capacity to absorb, adapt and transform, including the categorisation of lead (predictive/early-warning) and lag (formal outcome-based) indicators. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of indicators but rather an exemplar of the types available, and it signals that these, on their own, do not provide an assessment of the nation's health.

There is clearly an ontological gap between the indicators themselves and what is needed to operationalise these in practice. Without the latter, there is no effective mechanism to determine the level of vulnerability of parts of the nation or the nation to a particular threat. More importantly, we have no common baseline from which to track shifts and, as a result, cannot build an evidence base to inform investment in strengthening cohesion.¹²²

The transition from measuring a range of indicators to embedding the results into proactive action, such as a national strategy, needs a major shift in the public sector.¹²³ As multi-layered geopolitical, digital and environmental shocks accelerate, several countries and multilateral bodies have transitioned from tracking metrics to a comprehensive system-level strategy (for example, Singapore and Australia).¹²⁴ This shift typically occurs over a decade, with distinct phases from indicator design to systemic integration.¹²⁵

As indicated in Table 3, many of these metrics are tracked primarily via annual or biannual national surveys and are used retrospectively to diagnose issues. They are not typically anticipatory and thus cannot be used to guide live policy decisions, budget allocations, interventions or system architecture.

For indicators to act as performance indicators, we need to shift from passive observation to active operational targeting and structural integration. This needs to be supported by an all-of-society approach that connects institutional legitimacy, public infrastructure and national security into a single operational architecture. At its core, it must simultaneously reinforce horizontal trust (how citizens interact with one another across cultural or economic divides) and vertical trust (the perception that public institutions are fair, transparent, and legitimate).

¹²¹ These indicators range from the New Zealand Treasury's Living Standards Framework (LSF), the OECD, the UN SDG targets, the WEF Global Risks Report, the Scalton Foundation, and the Helen Clark Foundation.

¹²² MacIsaac, S., Schellenberg, G., Arim, R., & Wavrock, D. (2024, October). *Measuring social cohesion* (Report No. ECE/CES/BUR/2024/OCT/7). United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Conference of European Statisticians. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Work%20under%20the%20Conference_SocialCohesion_paper.pdf

¹²³ OECD. (2023). Supporting decision making with strategic foresight. OECD Publishing. <https://oecd-opsi.org/publications/supporting-decision-making-with-strategic-foresight/>

¹²⁴ United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration. (2021). *Risk management frameworks: Strategy guidance note for sustainable development*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/>

¹²⁵ Carnegie UK. (2025). *Budgeting for wellbeing: International approaches*. Carnegie UK Trust. <https://carnegieuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Budgeting-for-Wellbeing.-International-approaches-FINAL.pdf>

RESILIENCE LAYER	DIMENSION	INDICATOR NAME	TYPE	PRIMARY SOURCE(S)
Human	Financial buffer	Private Sector Credit-to-GDP Ratio	Lead	IMF / OECD
		Ability to face unexpected expenses	Lag	OECD / NZ Treasury (LSF)
		Severe material deprivation (e.g., skipping meals)	Lead	HCF / UN SDGs
	Mental/physical	Psychological Distress Index (K10)	Lag	NZ LSF / OECD
		Loneliness / social isolation by age cohort	Lead	HCF / Scanlon Foundation
		Self-reported health status	Lag	OECD / NZ LSF
	Agency	Digital literacy and high-speed access	Lead	ITU/ World Bank
		Educational attainment / Skill adaptability	Lag	OECD / NZ LSF
		Feeling of safety (walking alone at night)	Lead	Stats NZ
Society	Information	Misinformation/disinformation severity score	Lead	WEF
		Trust in social media vs. traditional news	Lead	Reuters Institute/ AUT
	Social capital	General trust	Lag	OECD / NZ LSF
		Support network (friends/family to count on)	Lag	OECD / NZ LSF
		Bridging capital (friends from different backgrounds)	Lead	Scanlon Foundation / HCF
	Cohesion	Perception of polarisation index	Lead	WEF / HCF
		Experience of discrimination / racism	Lead	Scanlon Foundation/ HCF
		Sense of belonging to neighborhood/country	Lag	NZ LSF / HCF
	Indigenous	Māori Economic Asset Base	Lag	He Ara Waiora (NZ)
		Cultural identity strength	Lead	He Ara Waiora (NZ)
Institutional / National	Trust	Trust in public institutions (Govt, Police, Health)	Lag	OECD / NZ LSF
		Trust in courts & judicial impartiality	Lead	HCF / Scanlon Foundation
	Governance	Reported Social Unrest Index (RSUI)	Lead	IMF
		Support for authoritarianism (non-democratic norms)	Lead	HCF / Scanlon Foundation
		Inclusive decision making / civic participation	Lag	UN / OECD
	Economic	Economic Complexity Index (diversity of industry)	Lead	WEF / Harvard
		Net Core Crown Debt / Fiscal buffer	Lag	NZ Treasury / IMF
		Housing tenure security (renters vs. owners)	Lead	NZ LSF / OECD
	Physical	Infrastructure integrity (power/water redundancy)	Lead	WEF
		Local government Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategy adoption	Lag	UN SDGs

Table 3: A high-level framework with a range of consolidated lead and lag indicators.

Priorities for action

Moving from baseline data collection to an actionable national strategy hinge on solving a core dilemma - deciding what to measure without being burdened by data overload. Rather than selecting metrics simply because they are easy to collect, priority indicators should be filtered through structural models, risk assessments, and targeted consultative processes. Grounded in OECD best practices (including expert panel consensus), effective indicator frameworks explicitly map both horizontal trust (interpersonal cohesion) and vertical trust (institutional legitimacy). These prioritise metrics where these two dimensions intersect to reflect both daily social realities and broader institutional health.

Operationalising these metrics requires rigorous selection criteria. Indicators must be policy responsive and measurable at granular levels (by region, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status) to reveal localised fractures hidden beneath national averages. Furthermore, balancing soft perception surveys (such as surveys tracking attitudes) with real time administrative and spatial data ensures the framework remains forward-looking and capable of tracking active trajectories.^{126, 127, 128}

Ultimately, data alone cannot drive change without an empowered response architecture. Because societal resilience spans multiple portfolios, measurement must trigger a central, coordinated cross-government response backed by clear accountability mechanisms. Successful implementation requires

¹²⁶ European Commission. (n.d.). Resilience dashboards for the social and economic, green, digital and geopolitical dimensions. DataM. europa.eu

¹²⁷ MacIsaac, S., Schellenberg, G., Arim, R., & Wavrock, D. (2024, October). *Measuring social cohesion* (Report No. ECE/CES/BUR/2024/OCT/7). United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Conference of European Statisticians.

¹²⁸ OECD. (2020). *How's life? 2020: Measuring well-being*. OECD Publishing.

balancing immediate interventions for pressing risks with long-term foundational shifts that safeguards future societal well-being.

To translate this into practice, there are several priority areas that warrant consideration as outlined in the remainder of this section.

Leadership

Given that trust in our institutions has significantly declined in recent years, leadership has a critical role to play in rebuilding it in the short term. This applies not only to the public sector but also to business and industry leaders. Trust in our media institutions needs to be restored. More importantly, collective leadership and a multidisciplinary approach is needed to achieve cross-sector alignment, foster healthy discourse on complex issues, and drive unified action.

Prime ministers and ministers rarely publicly discuss social cohesion, societal resilience or, in positive terms, diversity issues. They seldom speak about the benefits of New Zealand's changing demographics, including ethnic and religious diversity, and the related social and economic benefits of social cohesion.¹²⁹ When they do, the discussion is limited to short-term operational matters, such as the consequences of immigration and migrant labour, rather than longer-term issues such as the low fertility rates and an ageing population, which will create huge demand for healthcare and elder-care services while contributing to a shrinking tax base and a growing inability to support the critical infrastructure needed to support our ageing population.

A major factor is the impact of decades of overambitious political promises from across the ideological spectrum that claim simple solutions to complex, deeply rooted problems.¹³⁰ While the public wants action and results, there is a growing awareness that real progress on such challenges requires sustained, coordinated efforts across multiple political cycles. In the current environment, and as seen internationally, such discourse leads to further polarisation, pushing groups further apart.

Community leaders have a unique role to play as they operate at the interface between community needs and realities and government policy.¹³¹ They bridge gaps between groups and are instrumental in building social capital and trust. More importantly, because they are embedded in the community, these leaders can serve as an early warning system, often identifying emerging crises long before they appear in official data. Following the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch Mosque Attacks and the establishment of the Ministry for Ethnic Communities, there is certainly greater engagement and input from community leaders; however, this should not be seen as tokenistic or prioritising the needs of one group over another, or we risk further eroding social trust.

Social capital is a national asset that should be treated as such and thus requires regular monitoring and active investment to maintain its value. It also requires clear and strong leadership to champion this at all levels, including communities, the private sector, industry, local and central government and politicians.

Anticipatory foresight

In an era defined by polycrises and non-linear disruption, static policy planning and reactive metric-tracking are no longer sufficient to safeguard our democratic stability. International bodies, led by the

¹²⁹ Spoonley, P. (2020). *The New New Zealand: Facing demographic disruption*. Massey University Press

¹³⁰ OECD (2024), *The OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative: Monitoring Report – Assessing Progress and Charting the Way Forward*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9543bcfb-en>.

¹³¹ Gluckman, P., Spoonley, P., Bardsley, A., Poulton, R., Royal, T. A. C., Sridhar, H., & Clyne, D. (2023). *Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society*. Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Sustaining-Aotearoa-New-Zealand-as-a-cohesive-society.pdf>

OECD and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), increasingly frame anticipatory foresight as a vital operational capability for preserving social cohesion and societal resilience, particularly under conditions of deep uncertainty.^{132,133} Rather than attempting to predict definitive futures, anticipatory governance systematically scans for weak signals, effectively early, faint indicators of emerging socio-technological shifts, shifts in public sentiment, or localised grievances before they compound into systemic fractures or institutional distrust.

By embedding horizon scanning, strategic intelligence, and participatory scenario planning directly into core policy formulation, governments can stress test institutional legitimacy, map potential fault lines across horizontal and vertical trust, and design adaptive interventions long before a crisis materialises. Operationalising foresight transforms social cohesion from a passive, unmonitored byproduct of stability into an active and resilient national asset.

Government agencies should utilise strategic foresight more formally to guide policymakers in challenging current assumptions, building future scenarios, stress-testing policies against potential disruptions, identifying opportunities and formulating adaptable action plans. This, combined with public-sector capacity building to embed systems thinking, risk listening and foresight applications in practice, will be necessary to shift from a reactive, short-term outlook to proactive, long-term thinking.

It is important to note that foresight practices and approaches are not systematically embedded into policy formulation at present in New Zealand. While the Long-Term Insights Brief (LTIB) is one mechanism that was established to address this gap, it has not necessary been as successful as originally anticipated in shifting the framing of public policy into a forward-looking space.¹³⁴

Systems thinking

Traditional governance and policy design have long operated in silos treating economic development, public health, criminal justice, and social welfare as isolated domains. However, as the interconnected nature of modern wicked problems becomes clearer, decision-making is forced to permeate these rigid boundaries. Rebuilding social cohesion and long-term societal resilience requires replacing linear, reactive policy design with a comprehensive systems approach that accounts for feedback loops, delayed impacts, and complex ecosystem interactions across the public and private sectors.

The shift toward systems-level thinking is already reshaping corporate and public sector accountability. Decision-making is no longer confined to immediate, transactional objectives or narrow investor-shareholder returns. Consideration of broader environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors has moved from voluntary corporate social responsibility to an operational imperative. Globally, statutory frameworks and standardised disclosure requirements are codifying the expectation that business and industry must evaluate their impact on the social fabric and natural capital.

When commercial or public decisions generate negative externalities, such as regional job displacement, algorithmic polarisation, or environmental degradation, the cost is rarely borne by the decision-maker alone. Instead, it accumulates across communities, eroding horizontal trust between social groups and vertical trust in oversight institutions as discussed earlier in this report. Recognising that economic activity is embedded within a broader social ecosystem forces leaders to treat social capital as a finite national asset requiring active maintenance rather than an expendable resource.

¹³² OECD. (2023). Supporting decision making with strategic foresight. OECD Publishing. <https://oecd-opsi.org/publications/supporting-decision-making-with-strategic-foresight/>

¹³³ United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Signals spotter's guide: Foresight for development*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/publications/signals-spotters-guide>

¹³⁴ Sridhar, H., Low, F., & Gluckman, P. (2025). *Systems thinking, foresight and wicked problems: Implications for policymaking*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Koi-Tu-Systems-Thinking-and-Wicked-Problems.pdf>

In the public sector, systems thinking transforms policy design from single-issue interventions into blended, cross-portfolio strategies. Wicked problems such as intergenerational disadvantage, youth mental health, or climate adaptation all defy solution by any single ministry. A systems approach recognises that an intervention in one domain produces ripple effects across others. For instance, early investments in maternal health and early childhood care generate compounding co-benefits in educational attainment, reduced criminal justice expenditure, and stronger community cohesion decades later.

To move beyond theoretical approaches, systems thinking must be embedded into the routine machinery of governance. This requires moving from passive indicator tracking to an active operational architecture supported by anticipatory foresight as discussed earlier in this report. By stress-testing policies against diverse future scenarios and evaluating how decisions impact both horizontal and vertical trust, governments and business leaders can design interventions that strengthen, rather than fragment, societal resilience.

Building long-term societal resilience requires aligning governance infrastructure, public sector capability, and fiscal mechanisms with the preventative nature of social cohesion. Currently, social cohesion and resilience initiatives remain chronically underfunded because their primary return on investment which is preventing systemic crisis, social fragmentation, and institutional decay is indirect and long-term rather than immediate or transactionally visible.

Moving beyond reactive crisis management demands deliberate public sector strengthening, equipping agencies with the institutional capabilities, systems-thinking tools, and strategic foresight necessary to identify structural vulnerabilities before they manifest as acute failures. Furthermore, it requires a fundamental shift in funding and capital allocation with multi-year appropriations that explicitly finance preventive social infrastructure and cross-portfolio benefits.

Adaptive governance and institutional structures

At its core, social cohesion is a wicked problem and, as discussed earlier, to govern such problems, we must evolve from traditional, linear policymaking to adaptive frameworks that prioritise resilience over efficiency. Wicked problems do not have a single ‘correct’ framing; the framing varies depending on who is affected and their respective perspectives. Pluralistic input captures diverse perspectives, values and priorities, helping to avoid narrow solutions that may serve only specific communities or exclude others. Having a shared understanding of the problem is at the crux of developing acceptable solutions. Defining the question requires respecting different framings across disciplines and among diverse end-user groups, including policymakers, communities and businesses.

Interdisciplinarity is also necessary because knowledge in a single discipline cannot sufficiently penetrate the layers of complexity.¹³⁵ Moreover, rapid changes in information and technological environments must now be considered. Most wicked problems transcend multiple domains, including health, environment, technology, economics, culture, geopolitics and education. We need a systems approach to bring coherence to a fragmented knowledge base on any given issue.

At the heart of this discussion is the challenge of time in building resilience. There are no quick fixes or simple solutions. Social, environmental and economic problems can compound or emerge over generations. For example, intergenerational, early-life and contextual factors have all played a role in driving rapidly worsening youth mental health over the past two decades, so all these factors must be

¹³⁵ OECD (2020), “Addressing societal challenges using transdisciplinary research”, *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers*, No. 88, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0ca0ca45-en>.

considered if policy choices are to address the problem properly.¹³⁶ Solutions focused on prevention rather than treatment will require multiple actions, with benefits often not fully apparent for years. However, this cannot be used as an excuse for inaction. We need to take a more deliberate and transparent approach and be willing to adjust it as our understanding improves. Done well, this will be substantially more cost-effective in the long term.

Scale must also be considered. Too often, interventions are considered at a national level when they may need to be tested in a local setting first, or they may be effective in a community or region but fail to scale up to a national level. Many problems are contextual and it is fundamentally important to have clarity on the context of an issue before deciding on approaches to tackling it. Demographics, culture and geography are among the factors that determine whether a solution is effective. More importantly, place-based approaches or localised solutions may have greater buy-in from a range of stakeholders with sufficient locally focused agency and ownership of the outcomes.¹³⁷

The need for compelling narratives

Both social cohesion and societal resilience remain abstract terms that many do not understand or value well, and this needs to change. But this requires a careful, deliberate approach ahead of a national conversation, or else we risk further polarisation of our population.^{138,139} The ‘team of five million’ was effective at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in uniting most New Zealanders around a common goal of eliminating the virus.¹⁴⁰ At this time, New Zealand had some of the highest levels of voluntary compliance with the 2020 lockdown.¹⁴¹ However, as the pandemic transitioned from an acute crisis to a chronic stressor, we saw the narrative fracture, particularly in Auckland.

It is therefore important to reflect on why the ‘team’ narrative failed to survive through the latter stages of the pandemic. This is particularly important if we want social cohesion and societal resilience to be valued and an enduring priority for the nation, rather than ad hoc responses to a crisis or politicised to win votes. Firstly, during the pandemic, sacrifices were uneven. While there was initially a sense of equality, clear divides emerged and some groups were more disadvantaged than others. The disabled community across the country, essential workers who faced a greater risk of exposure to the virus, the establishment of working from home, which only served white-collar jobs, and many other sectors (such as hospitality, tourism and construction) faced job losses and significant economic insecurities. The extended lockdown in Auckland created a sense among Aucklanders that they were bearing a greater proportion of the burden while the rest of the country had largely returned to normal.

Secondly, institutional trust was progressively eroded by vaccine mandates and an unclear rationale for lockdown thresholds, ultimately culminating in the 2022 Parliament protests. Thirdly, the top-down narrative did not account for the diversity of communities, leaving many feeling that their concerns were not reflected in the decisions, with some bearing a greater share of the blame and being vilified.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ Stubbing, J., Rihari, T., Bardsley, A., & Gluckman, P. (2023). Exploring factors influencing youth mental health: What we know and don't know about the determinants of young people's mental health. Kōi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Koi-Tu-Report-Exploring-factors-influencing-youth-mental-health.pdf>

¹³⁷ OECD. (2025). Place-based policies for the future. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e5ff6716-en>

¹³⁸ World Economic Forum. (2022, May 23). Unlocking the social economy: Towards an inclusive and resilient society. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/unlocking-the-social-economy-towards-an-inclusive-and-resilient-society-davos2022/>.

¹³⁹ OECD. (2021). *Perspectives on global development 2021: From protest to progress?* OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/405e4c32-en>.

¹⁴⁰ Cameron, B. (2020). Captaining a team of 5 million: New Zealand beats back COVID-19, March–June 2020. *Innovations for Successful Societies*, Princeton University.

¹⁴¹ Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons Learned. (2024). Royal Commission COVID-19 lessons learned: Main report – Phase 1. New Zealand Government. <https://www.covid19lessons.royalcommission.nz/assets/Report-pdfs/Royal-Commission-COVID-19-Lessons-Learned-MAIN-REPORT-Phase1.pdf>.

¹⁴² Salman, S. Playing in the Team of Five Million: Conformity and Nonconformity to the New Zealand Covid-19 Pandemic Response. *Crit Crim* **31**, 343–361 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-023-09707-7>.

Based on OECD and other international publications, narratives are a powerful tool that should be utilised as more than a communication tactic. Narratives are the structural glue that translates top-down policies to build public support and social trust that is required for resilience. A sound policy or well delivered services do not on their own generate trust, but a well-constructed narrative could function as a determinant of policy success and societal stability (as seen during the early stages of COVID-19 in New Zealand).

Trust in institutions is significantly higher when citizens feel reforms are clearly explained.¹⁴³ A narrative is seen as a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy, explainability of policies and inspire collective action. Narratives can also be a mechanism to translate complex, wicked problems into accessible and relatable context for diverse stakeholders bridging the gap between high level, national policies with localised lived experiences.¹⁴⁴ Narratives also give a mechanism for shared identity, sense of belonging and community. Intentional narratives can also be utilised to mitigate mis and disinformation fracturing societies.¹⁴⁵

As seen internationally, many successful narratives acknowledge that societies are not homogeneous and thus blanket narratives at a national level are not sufficient. Instead, for an enduring narrative it needs to reflect cultural perspectives, local knowledge and context, marginalised voices and socio-economic realities.^{146,147} The OECD, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Economic Forum (WEF) provide the underlying rationale for why distinct narratives are necessary for different groups including the government, industry, communities and the public. These are briefly described below.

- **For government and politicians**

Societal resilience is currently poorly understood, leading to investments that are neither prioritised nor commensurate with actual need. Investing in societal resilience is not a soft policy choice but rather a critical requirement for national security, crisis management and the preservation of democracy.¹⁴⁸ While New Zealand has traditionally enjoyed a high-trust democracy, a range of disruptors, as discussed earlier, are eroding this foundation. Until the strategic arguments for a cohesive society are explicitly articulated, decision-makers may fail to give this issue the attention it warrants. Failure to prioritise and invest in social cohesion has severe long-term costs: it fuels crime, sparks extremism and undermines the trust in democratic institutions. Conversely, proactive investment in a cohesive society yields substantial savings by reducing the national health burden and equipping the population to better handle future crises. Central to this is restoring institutional trust, particularly in government and the media.

- **For the private sector and industry**

Social cohesion is directly tied to economic prosperity. The strategic and economic reality is that a resilient society creates the optimal conditions for growth.¹⁴⁹ High societal resilience translates into tangible economic outcomes, including increased innovation, higher productivity, expanded trade and overall economic growth. But we must address the anxieties and fractures in society to

¹⁴³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2026). OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions 2026 results: Navigating rising expectations and new horizons. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9eb63fec-en>

¹⁴⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2026). *A toolkit for adopting ideas from other cities*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a225ac72-en>.

¹⁴⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). *Facts not fakes: Tackling disinformation, strengthening information integrity*. OECD Publishing.

¹⁴⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *OECD report on public communication: The global landscape and way forward*. OECD Publishing.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations Development Programme. (2021). *Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications*. UNDP Bureau for Policy and Programme Support. <https://www.undp.org/publications/strengthening-social-cohesion-conceptual-framing-and-programming-implications>

¹⁴⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *An updated OECD framework on drivers of trust in public institutions to meet current and future challenges*.

¹⁴⁹ World Economic Forum. (2026). *The global risks report 2026* (21st ed.). <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2026/>.

achieve this and the private sector and industry have a significant role to play in maintaining and building trust with the public and consumers. Lack of transparency, corruption, cyber and data breaches and corporate scandals all contribute to the growing lack of trust. For example, the absence of healthy discourse from a range of technology companies about the potential job losses due to AI has created fear and low rates of AI adoption.

- **For the public and communities**

Our society is under pressure from modern disruptors but protecting it is essential to collective well-being and quality of life and it fosters a healthier society. More importantly, strengthening societal resilience empowers us to take collective action against complex, shared challenges in the global commons, such as climate change. The focus must be on rebuilding social and institutional trust. It is also important for the public and various communities to recognise that the burden of resilience does not rest solely with government institutions.¹⁵⁰¹⁵¹

- **For the rest of the world**

A compelling narrative is necessary to demonstrate the shift New Zealand is taking to reframe social cohesion from a soft concept into a critical, strategic and economic asset in a volatile world. Internationally, societal resilience is becoming a key metric, alongside GDP, for assessing a nation's strength and economic competitiveness, thereby giving foreign investors' confidence.¹⁵² From a global security perspective, a better-informed and cohesive society is better equipped to counter disinformation and radicalisation which undermine democratic institutions. Given the sheer number of wicked problems that require collective action in the global commons, a cohesive and resilient society means that New Zealand is well placed to contribute to global dialogue and international crisis responses (particularly when such efforts require committing resources or investment). While New Zealand may be geographically isolated, maintaining our status as a healthy liberal democracy is fundamental to our international standing, relevance and agency in a fragmented world.

Data and knowledge management

To anticipate shocks and understand the true state of societal resilience, governments must rethink how they measure progress and vulnerability. For New Zealand, how we collect, share and interpret information directly impacts institutional trust and collective resilience. With the rise in the use of AI in government decision-making, social license is as important as ever for maintaining trust. If the government loses the ability to use the data, it will, in turn, weaken the quality of policy and decision-making.

The UNDP's efforts to move beyond GDP as a key measure represent a fundamental shift from measuring progress solely by economic output to valuing the resilience, agency and the dignity of human lives in a poly-risk world.¹⁵³ This approach acknowledges that while GDP is useful, it overlooks the compounding threats of our time, such as climate instability, widening inequality and social fragmentation, which economic growth often exacerbates rather than resolves. When combined with the modernisation of

¹⁵⁰ World Health Organization. (2017). *WHO strategic communications framework for effective communications*.

¹⁵¹ United Nations Development Programme. (2020). *Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications*. <https://www.undp.org/publications/strengthening-social-cohesion-conceptual-framing-and-programming-implications>.

¹⁵² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (n.d.). *Well-being and beyond GDP*. OECD Well-being Portal.

¹⁵³ High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP. (2026). *Counting what counts: A compass of progress for people and planet*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/interim_report_high-level_expert_group_on_beyond_gdp_251105.pdf

statistical and data systems, these tools can leverage AI and high-frequency data sources to detect early warning signals of societal distress long before they reach a crisis point.

Effective oversight requires embedding the Treasury's LSF more deeply within the core of government performance monitoring. While the LSF provides a robust conceptual base for intergenerational wellbeing, its practical impact depends on the quality of its data inputs. This necessitates a strategic approach to future census and the shift towards administrative data should be considered with caution. While admin-data approaches offer short-term efficiency, we do not want to risk creating blind spots. A resilient data ecosystem must balance the speed of digital monitoring tools with the depth of traditional census insights and longitudinal or trend analytics.

The information environment is not well understood. The fragmentation of the media, the rise of social media and the pervasive nature of disinformation have eroded a shared understanding of reality. Transparency is key to restoring trust, which requires governments to be honest and upfront about the data they collect and use in decision-making. This is more than a privacy issue and should not just be treated as such.

The Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) is a critical but underutilised tool for understanding social cohesion and resilience. It provides a mechanism to take a systems view of a range of social issues and move beyond existing silos. The IDI data could be used more effectively to create operational monitoring systems that track shifts in societal well-being before they reach a tipping point.

Technology can play a significant role in building institutional trust, as demonstrated internationally, and over time, has created the foundations of trust by reducing transaction costs and soft corruption. Estonia, for example, has successfully leveraged digital identity to transform the delivery of public sector services. On the other hand, the concept of a single digital identity has become politically contentious in the UK but underpins the very effective Swedish data system.^{154,155}

AI is also transforming the analytical landscape, and as it evolves, it will become increasingly crucial to use data to allocate government funds more effectively, particularly in areas of high complexity and limited resources. AI provides a mechanism for integrating diverse data sources and synthesising knowledge across silos. Machine learning and natural language processing can extract meaning from unstructured data, detect weak signals and identify emergent trends that human analysts might miss.

With the rise in the use of AI systems within the public sector, there are opportunities to use them constructively. Particularly in decision-making that affects individuals, there is growing concern about ethics, transparency, and bias in algorithms and underlying data. New Zealand must develop both a robust mechanism for providing training data that represents our demographics and the ability to evaluate AI systems, giving the public confidence in how their data is used. While AI may offer opportunities to tackle wicked problems, how this is done will be key in ensuring the public maintains confidence and that institutional trust is not further eroded.

Social license

International bodies such as the OECD and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasise that technical competence alone is insufficient for effective governance.¹⁵⁶ Building long-term societal resilience requires maintaining both an active social license and a modernised social contract.

¹⁵⁴ OECD. (2022). *OECD digital government review of Sweden: Governing digital transformation*. OECD Publishing

¹⁵⁵ Whitley, E. A. (2018). Informal governmentalities and the politics of digital identity: The UK experience. *Information Technology & People*, 31(2), 482–500

¹⁵⁶ OECD (2026), *Citizen Participation for Better Cohesion Policy: Insights from 11 Pilot Initiatives*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6b66cff6-en>.

While a legal mandate empowers governments to enact policies and deploy new technologies, social license represents the ongoing, informal acceptance granted by the public. When the government acts through either automated decision-making in public services, algorithmic resource allocation, or emergency regulatory measures, a lack of genuine social license means the public compliance degrades, institutional legitimacy erodes, and policy execution fails.

At a broader level, the social contract defines the implicit agreement between citizens and the state, balancing rights, responsibilities, and mutual obligations. UNDP frameworks stress that conventional social contracts are increasingly ill-equipped to handle compounding environmental, technological, and demographic shocks. A renewed, resilience-oriented social contract must explicitly integrate vertical trust with horizontal trust. Rebuilding this contract requires public institutions to move beyond top-down communication toward meaningful engagement, ensuring that marginalised communities are not merely passive recipients of policy, but active co-designers of societal security.¹⁵⁷

Ultimately, social license and the social contract act as the soft infrastructure that enables a democracy to absorb shocks without fracturing.

Guidelines for policymakers and decision-makers

Based on international evidence and frameworks from organisations such as the OECD and the EU, as well as national approaches adopted by other countries, there are several core principles that New Zealand should consider when contemplating national policy or strategy, outlined as follows:

- **Adopt a whole-of-society approach**

International best practice demonstrates that cohesion needs to be considered at the system level, requiring cross-agency integration. This needs to occur not just at policy formation but throughout implementation and operational decisions. It also needs cross-sectoral collaboration between different levels of government (local, regional, national) and agencies (health, infrastructure, economic). This approach needs to embrace local communities, NGOs and the private sector as active partners in informing and designing prevention measures rather than simply passive recipients. Involving diverse stakeholders in designing resilience plans will ensure they are relevant, trusted and inclusive, particularly for marginalised populations. Cultivating social connectedness, trust and strong partnerships and networks are key, as they will act as critical buffers during shocks.

- **Proactive and long-term thinking**

Our efforts need to shift from short-term decisions to much longer-term ones, and to ensure that short-term decisions do not create long-term risks. This requires focusing on long-term prevention, mitigation and adaptation to reduce vulnerabilities before disasters strike. However, to achieve this effectively, anticipatory foresight methods and discipline need to be established and better institutionalised across government agencies. Foresight and futures-thinking tools, if used well, can be highly effective in tackling the multitude of wicked problems that New Zealand must confront and in anticipating future disruptions. New Zealand has access to many of these tools and methodologies through the OECD (for example, its Strategic Foresight Toolkit) and others and they could be easily adopted across government agencies.¹⁵⁸ Whilst accessing the tools might be straightforward, the challenge for New Zealand lies in effectively embedding these in government thinking and decision-making. Futures thinking and foresight practices need to be

¹⁵⁷ Gluckman, P., & Sridhar, H. (2025). *Social cohesion: New Zealand's precious and fragile asset* (Policy Commentary). Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/social-cohesion-new-zealands-precious-and-fragile-asset/>

¹⁵⁸ OECD. (2025). *Strategic Foresight Toolkit for Resilient Public Policy: A Comprehensive Foresight Methodology to Support Sustainable and Future-Ready Public Policy*. OECD Publishing.

normalised and prioritised across the machinery of government if we are to move beyond knee-jerk policy responses and short-term decision-making. This will require a paradigm shift in public-sector training at all levels to embed foresight disciplines in practice.

- **Evidence-informed decision-making and evaluation**

As highlighted in this report, we do not yet have well-established mechanisms across government to robustly evaluate policy performance or integrate lessons from previous crises for continuous improvement. We do not have explicit, agreed-upon metrics, either hard or soft, that tell us whether any of the policies have strengthened or frayed social cohesion. This is an essential first step before we set out to develop interventions.

Data is also a critical component. New Zealand needs a data strategy that ensures high-quality data collection and management mechanisms and that the data is collected in a timely and consistent manner to inform policy choices. But more importantly, we need to ensure we treat our data ecosystem as a strategic asset, so we invest appropriately and deliberately in its utilisation whilst balancing privacy requirements and maintaining trust. We also need to ensure we have data that reflects reality, as this serves as an early warning system for emerging crises. With developments in AI, the future census and the IDI, amongst other data infrastructure, play an important role in shaping how evidence is used to inform future decisions.

- **Adaptive capacity**

Given the increasingly complex, interconnected and uncertain challenges we face, there is a need to reimagine how we design and implement policies and regulations. We no longer have the luxury of time, nor can we assume that certain policies are enduring. The idea of permanence in our policy formulation has hindered progress in some instances. This is particularly noteworthy given the range of wicked problems we face, their interdependencies and unintended consequences and the fact that we are encountering them concurrently. As is practised internationally, we need adaptive policies or mechanisms that enable flexibility as events unfold, including in unprecedented scenarios. It is time we reimagine how we approach and conceptualise policy formulation – we need bold, innovative strategies and the willingness to take risks.

- **Communication and trust**

Building and retaining trust is a core capability not just in the public sector but also in industry and the private sector. At a time when trust is low, building trust in public institutions and sustaining public confidence in government actions will be key in communicating difficult decisions and inevitable trade-offs to the public. Strong, inclusive communication approaches that provide channels for public consultation and feedback is necessary. This, alongside with mechanisms to ensure accurate information is accessible to all parts of society, including those with language or accessibility needs are important. Together, this empowers individuals and communities and gives them agency to make informed decisions about their futures. Utilising community leaders and trusted community voices will be particularly important for communicating complex information during crises and maintaining trust.

Building on the approach taken by many other nations, the remainder of this section explores the options available to policymakers and decision-makers to address and strengthen social cohesion and societal resilience. These includes measures that consider processes or approaches to identify gaps and vulnerabilities in the near term, while in the longer term, presents structural changes that may be necessary to core institutions and systems. It is important to recognise that for many nations, initiatives are firmly grounded and encompassed by a comprehensive national strategy. This not only provides

coherence among proposed interventions or measures and funding, but it ensures that the initiatives are enduring and transcend political cycles.

Short-term measures

- **Establish a central function within government:** If we are serious about protecting social cohesion and strengthening societal resilience, and given these are inherently cross-cutting and not prioritised by traditional, siloed portfolio approaches, there is an urgent need for a system-level owner. A central function provides accountability by driving cross-agency cooperation, breaking down data silos to build a single, unified source of truth and forcing a shift from passive, retrospective tracking to active, preventative policy intervention. While many other countries have established a lead entity (such as in Australia) to handle this, creating a central function within the government would similarly ensure the mandate to develop a national strategy, determine the metrics necessary for long-term monitoring and oversee the deployment of investment and capabilities to achieve this. This could be through any number of existing entities such as DPMC or MSD).
- **Rebuilding trust through leadership:** Leaders across the public sector, private industry and communities must be encouraged to collaborate to restore trust in institutions, particularly in government and the media. Community leaders should be engaged as early-warning systems to detect emerging issues before they appear in official data and to bridge gaps among diverse groups. Building trust needs to be reflected in our actions, methods, engagement and partnerships.
- **Developing an inclusive strategic narrative:** Decision-makers must carefully craft a compelling narrative that clearly articulates the economic and strategic necessity of social cohesion. This messaging must avoid top-down, universal approaches that alienate groups or introduce inequalities. Instead, it should be tailored to resonate with the lived realities of different communities and sectors.
- **Infrastructure and investment:** For the long-term success of the social cohesion monitoring system, it will require sustainable, deeply integrated fiscal planning and the strengthening of social infrastructure that transcends budgets and political cycles rather than ad-hoc funding. While this is not achievable in the short term, the preparatory work, including underpinning analysis and the theory of change for this investment, will need to be developed now if it is to be considered in future budget cycles.
- **Clarity of roles and accountability:** While there needs to be clarity on the roles and responsibilities within the public sector, the burden of resilience cannot sit with them alone. Individuals, households and communities need to have and take accountability for appropriate aspects. Digital literacy, cognitive resilience and strengthening executive functions are all actions that could be taken at the individual and community scale. While the role of the state is to provide the tools and mechanisms for these, empowering action at the ground level is an important component of our defence mechanism. This also applies to the private sector.
- **Addressing immediate stressors and red flags:** Policymakers should utilise leading, real-time indicators to track immediate vulnerabilities, paying close attention to spikes in youth isolation, the severity of misinformation and disinformation and social unrest driven by financial distress in the short term. Based on current data highlighted earlier in this report, some of these include:

- Youth isolation (Helen Clark Foundation) suggests the next generation is checking out of the social contract.
- Reported Social Unrest Index (RSUI; International Monetary Fund) spikes indicate that cost-of-living stress is converting into organised anger.
- Misinformation (World Economic Forum) is the primary blocker to effective disaster response.

Long-term measures

- **Revitalising social and digital infrastructure:** Physical third spaces like libraries, parks, town centres and marae must be treated and funded as critical public assets rather than optional amenities, as they facilitate essential community interaction. This must be paired with investments in digital social infrastructure to ensure equitable access and prevent the exclusion of vulnerable populations.
- **Establish robust digital interventions:** To combat the erosion of truth and the spread of disinformation, society needs systems that ensure access to accurate, verifiable information. This requires proactive investments in cognitive resilience, such as teaching digital literacy and critical thinking in schools, as well as utilising pre-bunking strategies to warn citizens about online manipulation and harms.
- **Embedding strategic foresight into governance:** The public sector must transition from siloed, reactive policymaking to adaptive, cross-sector frameworks designed to tackle multi-generational wicked problems. This includes formally embedding strategic foresight into government decision-making, utilising AI and modernised data systems to detect weak signals and potentially mandating that all major government spending be viewed through a societal-resilience lens alongside economic and national-security considerations.
- **Implementing localised, place-based solutions:** Rather than relying solely on national policies, New Zealand must develop mature, community-level programs that grant stakeholders local agency, as has been established in many other nations. Our major cities and regions need their own city or region-wide societal resilience strategy to address localised risks and issues as well as helping operationalise interventions. Auckland, for example, will need bespoke policy settings and incentives.
- **Building and investing in social buffers:** Long-term resilience relies on investing in the life course approach, including early childhood development and youth mental health. Cognitive resilience is increasingly important for the health of our population, as is investing in executive function. Furthermore, structural economic buffers must be strengthened, including policies that help households save for emergencies and initiatives that build financial literacy and investment competencies.

Concluding remarks

New Zealand's economic stability and democratic future fundamentally depend on prioritising investments in social cohesion and societal resilience. Rather than viewing social cohesion as a nice-to-have byproduct of prosperity, we must recognise it as a vital strategic asset and a critical prerequisite for navigating compounding pressures, including global disruptions, complex wicked problems and rapid technological shifts. As both institutional and social trust face unprecedented pressures, the cost of

inaction is severe against a backdrop of declining digital trust. Failing to actively maintain our social fabric fuels polarisation, drives extremism and compromises both national security and economic productivity. Ultimately, the fate of our collective futures rests on our ability to move beyond problem definition to decisive, urgent action.

Reframing societal resilience as a primary driver of investment confidence, innovation and collective well-being is key but it also requires a deliberate, whole-of-society approach that transcends short-term political cycles. This demands proactive investments in our social and digital infrastructure, including revitalising local community third spaces and establishing a robust digital infrastructure to combat disinformation. Furthermore, leaders across the public and private sectors must champion a compelling, inclusive strategic narrative that clearly articulates the tangible benefits of a cohesive society. By embedding long-term strategic foresight into policymaking and prioritising adaptive resilience over short-term efficiency, decision-makers can ensure that New Zealand remains a high-trust, cohesive democracy equipped to thrive amid future uncertainties.

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Appendix 1: Additional references

The specific references that were used to inform the summarisation presented in the tables in this report are detailed as follows.

Table 1 – The risk dimensions

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2. OECD. (2024). OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions 2024 results: Building trust in a complex world. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/801a24d8-en>
3. International Science Council. (2023). The contextualisation deficit: Reframing trust in science for multilateral policy (Centre for Science Futures Working Paper). <https://council.science/publications/contextualisation-deficit-trust-in-science/>
4. World Economic Forum. (2024). The global risks report 2024 (19th ed.). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>
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Table 3 - A high-level framework

1. Private Sector Credit-to-GDP Ratio
Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF), *International Financial Statistics (IFS) Database*. Directly cross-referenced with the OECD *National Accounts Statistics* framework.
2. Ability to face unexpected expenses
Source: OECD, *Better Life Index & Subjective Wellbeing Indicators* (Domain: Material Living Conditions). Integrated directly by the New Zealand Treasury into the *Living Standards Framework (LSF) Dashboard* using microdata sourced from the biennial Stats NZ General Social Survey (GSS).
3. Severe material deprivation (e.g., skipping meals)
Source: The Helen Clark Foundation (HCF), *The Aotearoa New Zealand Social Cohesion Reports*; aligned structurally with the United Nations Statistics Division, *Global SDG Indicators Database*.
4. Psychological Distress Index (K10)

Source: New Zealand Ministry of Health, *New Zealand Health Survey Data* (utilising the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale). This series is used by the New Zealand Treasury *Living Standards Framework (LSF)*.

5. Loneliness / social isolation by age cohort
Source: The Helen Clark Foundation, *Social Cohesion Annual Assessment Matrix*; modelled directly on the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute *Mapping Social Cohesion National Report*.
6. Self-reported health status
Source: OECD, *Health at a Glance Statistical Series* (Indicator: Perceived Health Status by Socioeconomic Cohort); systematically adapted inside the New Zealand Treasury wellbeing reporting cycles along with Stats NZ data.
7. Digital literacy and high-speed access
Source: International Telecommunication Union (ITU) ICT Development Index (IDI) or the World Bank Digital Economy Diagnostic series, which Stats NZ uses alongside local census coverage to map regional connectivity divides.
8. Educational attainment / Skill adaptability
Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance / Employment Outlook Data Core*.
9. Feeling of safety (walking alone at night)
Source: Stats NZ, General Social Survey (GSS).
10. Misinformation/disinformation severity score
Source: World Economic Forum (WEF), *Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS)* dataset.
11. Trust in social media vs. traditional news
Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report* (New Zealand local cohort track produced by Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMD) Research Centre at Auckland University of Technology (AUT)).
12. General trust & Support network (friends/family to count on)
Source: OECD, *Social Protection and Wellbeing Database* (Social Capital Pillar) and tracked via the New Zealand Treasury *Living Standards Framework (LSF)*.
13. Bridging capital (friends from different backgrounds)
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, *Mapping Social Cohesion Series* and through The Helen Clark Foundation.
14. Perception of polarisation index
Source: World Economic Forum (WEF) *Societal Risk Architecture*, combined with The Helen Clark Foundation annual reporting.
15. Experience of discrimination / racism
Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, *National Social Cohesion Monitor* with Stats NZ GSS data.
16. Sense of belonging to neighbourhood/country
Source: New Zealand Treasury, *Living Standards Framework (LSF)* with The Helen Clark Foundation social cohesion data.
17. Māori Economic Asset Base & cultural identity strength
Source: New Zealand Treasury, *He Ara Waiora Framework*. Formally codified via Treasury Discussion Paper Series DP 18/11 (*He Ara Waiora / A Pathway Towards Wellbeing*).

18. Trust in public institutions
Source: OECD, Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions; with New Zealand Treasury Living Standards Framework Dashboard.

19. Trust in courts & judicial impartiality
Source: The Helen Clark Foundation with the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.

20. Reported Social Unrest Index (RSUI)
Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF), Research Department Data Core. Originally established under IMF Working Paper Series WP/22/84 (Reported Social Unrest Index)

21. Support for authoritarianism (non-democratic norms)
Source: The Helen Clark Foundation with the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute longitudinal democratic adherence and norm variance indexes.

22. Inclusive decision making / civic participation
Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Governance Centre Datasets using OECD Civic Engagement Scorecard series.

23. Economic Complexity Index (diversity of industry)
Source: The Growth Lab at Harvard University, The Atlas of Economic Complexity Archive. Used directly in the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Competitiveness Index to measure productive knowledge capabilities.

24. Net Core Crown Debt / Fiscal buffer
Source: New Zealand Treasury, Financial Statements of the Government of New Zealand (Core Crown fiscal accounts indicator series), routinely indexed inside IMF Article IV Consultation Reports.

25. Housing tenure security (renters vs. owners)
Source: New Zealand Treasury, Living Standards Framework Dashboard (Housing Domain Capital Asset Index), cross-checked against the OECD Affordable Housing Database.

26. Infrastructure integrity (power/water redundancy)
Source: World Economic Forum (WEF), Global Infrastructure Quality Ratings Framework.

27. Local government Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategy adoption
Source: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Sendai Framework Monitor data portal.