



Trust Waikato: Prioritising community self-determination

Trust Waikato kaupapa

Trust Waikato is one of twelve community trusts in Aotearoa New Zealand, providing grant funding and impact investment to community organisations operating in the Waikato region. It awarded approximately \$25 million in community grants in the year ended March 2022.

The trust has a vision for “vibrant and resilient Waikato communities”, and has a strategic intent that outlines ten-year goals towards “achieving transformational change for people, families, communities, and places where the need is greatest”.

The trust has two priority impact areas – improving outcomes for high-need communities, including intergenerational wellbeing, rural resilience and connectivity, and outcomes for Māori; and strengthening the community sector, through investing in capacity and capability building, partnerships, collaboration, and innovation.

Whakapapa – the journey of Trust Waikato

Trust Waikato developed its current strategy in 2016 through a process of strategic review led by the board. The priority impact areas have remained constant since 2016, with four strategic pou added in 2020-2022 – equity, sustainability, impact, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Each pou has a commitment statement that outlines how the trust intends

to work alongside its communities to bring its priorities into action and its values into practice.

Chief Executive Dennis Turton shared that Trust Waikato has a long-term commitment to its strategy. It has informed its approach to activating strategy through a dynamic mix of data-based evidence and learning from deeper community engagement. “We have a more detailed understanding of regional need through commissioning of deprivation data analysis by Wellington-based firm, Dot Loves Data. At the same time, our staff and I are out in the community seeking to understand the need and discover insights that may not yet have been brought to light by the existing data.”

Dennis also credits his board of trustees for their commitment to understanding need and investing in ways that advance equity. “Our trustees kept asking the question, ‘how do we know our funding is benefiting those with the greatest need?’ That started the conversation which eventually led to the development of our strategic pou around equity, sustainability, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and impact, significantly adding to the strength of our strategy and practice.” The trustees have strong ownership of the trust’s strategy and priorities. Dennis reflects that this has helped to build significant trust in the staff to work proactively and identify strategic funding opportunities that help realise Trust Waikato’s vision for impact.

How The Philanthropic Landscape key practices present in the work of Trust Waikato

Trust Waikato's commitment to its strategic pou has been foundational in shifting funding practice and prioritising support for initiatives that are community-led. The staff team sees empowering community self-determination as the trust's primary tool for working in an equity and Te Tiriti o Waitangi space. It has actively divested from initiatives and organisations that aren't embedded in the community. "We want to get behind local groups, not those that try to come in with a 'fix' and move out again," Dennis reflects. "It's proven not to work to parachute in, we've seen it over and over again. Instead, we establish where the need is and we have conversations with the community about what they want to do, and how we can best support them to deliver meaningful change."

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Over time, this emphasis on empowering community approaches has led the trust to more deeply consider its commitment to Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This is demonstrated by a cluster of marae that Trust Waikato is resourcing to determine and develop shared cultural, economic, and social development priorities, which it can eventually invest in activating. For Dennis, this example embodies the trust's approach to supporting tino rangatiratanga and mana whakahaere. "It's about investing in the strategies of hapū, iwi, marae, and other kaupapa Māori organisations, and if needed, also funding the process whereby tangata whenua determine what they need, first.

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Trust Waikato's partnership with K'aute Pasifika is another key example of the trust's focus on community self-determination. K'aute Pasifika had been through a process of asking the Waikato Pacific communities what they needed. It then developed a vision for a fale where communities could feel at home and have their cultural needs met, where children and families could be educated in a space supported by Pasifika values, and where wellness could be enabled through health services. K'aute Pasifika had struggled to get support from Council, until a \$2 million commitment from Trust Waikato enabled it to further develop its plans and ultimately leverage the funding it needed to build the fale. Dennis remarks that this influencing role is sometimes where the trust's impact is felt the strongest. "We remove a barrier by arming groups with some money to develop their own vision and plans, which then attracts others to come on board. We don't own the vision, the process or the impact; it's our privilege to have helped enable them to move closer to their goals and aspirations."

The trust's principle of community self-determination flows through into the space of understanding impact. Dennis is clear that "the people who create the impact, own that impact – it is not for a funder to say, 'look what we've achieved', as ultimately, we are just passing over money. By the same token, if communities own the impact, then they should be the ones who decide how they want to measure and understand that impact. Evaluation should not be driven by the expectations of funders or government; it should be about continuous strengthening of impact for organisations and communities." This principles-based approach to evaluation also recognises the importance of data sovereignty. "Behind every data point is a story about people, whānau and place; we have no right to own that data, we've been very insistent about that," Dennis reflects.

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Trust Waikato recognises the value of having transactional grantmaking as part of its funding toolkit. However, from an evaluative perspective the trust understands that the cost of trying to measure the cumulative impact of many small or one-off grants can often outweigh the benefit – with significant grantee burden created for minimal visibility of impact. Instead, the trust prioritises its evaluative effort to focus on impact funding, where there are deeper, enduring relationships and greater opportunities to gain insights and learning.

The key evaluative interest area for Trust Waikato is understanding changes in

subjective wellbeing for the communities benefiting from the initiatives that it supports. An important component of the trust's impact funding offer is providing evaluation support via third party, Huber Social, who work with funded groups using a wellbeing impact measurement framework. Dennis comments that this has given the trust a much clearer picture of the outcomes it is supporting. "We now have evidence, for example, that our funding of a driver licencing programme enhanced subjective wellbeing through outcomes including reduced loneliness, greater connection to loved ones, and better opportunities for employment. Young people could see a pathway to a job, and that is an important story to be able to tell."

Through partnering with Huber Social, the trust is growing the evaluation capability of the communities it serves, while capturing evaluative insights that can be consolidated at a community, sector, and regional level to give the trust a clearer picture of its overall contribution to wellbeing. Dennis summarises that, "we are clearer on the impact our communities want to achieve, clearer on the impact that they are having, and clearer on what our role in supporting that is. That's what will guide our future decision-making and funding practice, and what will equip our partners to continue leading change in their communities".