

# SportNZ Mana Taiohi and Youth Voice

Libby Davenport

Sport New Zealand is a kaitiaki of the play, active recreation and sport system in Aotearoa. As a crown agency, Sport NZ promotes and supports quality participation opportunities to improve levels of physical activity and, through this, ensure the greatest impact on wellbeing for all those living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Sport NZ's 2020 - 2032 strategic vision is to see 'Every Body Active'.

This means leading an enriching and inspiring play, active recreation and sport system that meets the needs of all, including those missing out. To achieve this, Sport NZ's current strategic focus (2020 - 2024) is on tamariki and rangatahi, with the aim to reduce the drop off in physical activity levels from age 12 - 18, and engage those who are less active.

In supporting better physical activity and wellbeing outcomes for rangatahi, Sport NZ is committed to empowering young people to 'chase their place'. Sport NZ has turned this commitment into action through the development of the Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan 2021-2024. Active recreation is not strictly defined, but can be thought of as non-competitive physical activity for the purpose of wellbeing and enjoyment. It includes activities such as walking, swimming, biking, yoga, dancing, hunting, diving, and any other form of movement that you engage with for fun.

The Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan journey started in 2019 when Sport NZ released its 'Secondary Age Review' looking at young peoples' participation in physical activity. The Review showed that needs were not being met by the current sport and active recreation offerings. The findings highlighted several key opportunities for active recreation for rangatahi, including developing and supporting participant-led active recreation opportunities, establishing alternative activity offerings in schools that had a social and non-competitive focus, and formalising partnerships with organisations that can meet the active

recreation needs of rangatahi. Consequently, active recreation was identified as a key focus area for Sport NZ from 2020-24, in particular for rangatahi aged 12-18.

In order to activate this new focus area, in an organisation traditionally focused on servicing sport, the development of a plan was essential to align internal decision making. The newly formed Active Recreation team co-designed a collaborative, cross-business plan to guide Sport NZ's commitments, collective actions, and investments, known as The Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan 2021-2024. The plan was intended to act as a metaphorical camp fire for other organisations passionate about this kaupapa to draw near and work collaboratively to improve participation levels and wellbeing outcomes for all rangatahi.

As a key part of this process, Sport NZ partnered with Ara Taiohi, Aotearoa's peak body for youth development, to explore the role of the 'Mana Taiohi' youth development principles to inform the plan. These principles acknowledge the mana that young people have, and how we can work to enhance that mana. This approach recognises the role that active recreation can play as a vehicle for positive youth development, and highlights the opportunity to achieve a broader range of positive outcomes that contribute to youth wellbeing.

The actions within the Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan, along with the Mana Taiohi principles, were synthesised to produce the following four commitments that provide the foundation of the Plan:

- **Commitment 1 (Whakapapa and Matauranga):** Honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and continue our journey to apply it in our work
- **Commitment 2 (Te Ao and Manaakitanga):** Increase internal and external awareness and understanding of great practice in Active Recreation for rangatahi
- **Commitment 3 (Mauri and Whai Wāhitanga):** Incorporate youth voice, and support youth leadership across our work
- **Commitment 4 (Hononga and Whanaungatanga):** Establish new partnerships and invest resources externally and internally.

In realising these commitments, Sport NZ aims to embed youth development practices within the recreation sector. We are achieving this through Mana Taiohi and Code of Ethics Training across the motu, as well as encouraging greater connections between the youth development and play, active recreation and sport sectors when it comes to sector funding (such as Tū Manawa) and networking opportunities.

In a first for Sport NZ, they provided space for young people when designing and articulating the plan. The willing co-leader was Libby Davenport, who was in her first year of the Sport NZ Ihi Aotearoa Graduate Programme at this time.

## The Sport NZ Graduate programme and Libby's experience as it relates to Whai Wāhitanga



My name is Libby and I'm currently in my second and final year of the Sport NZ Ihi Aotearoa Graduate Programme. I was fortunate to be involved in the development of the Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan and I now have the privilege of sharing my experiences in the graduate programme, as they relate to Whai Wāhitanga.

The Sport NZ Ihi Aotearoa Graduate Programme is a two year paid employment opportunity that exists to develop talented future leaders within the play, active recreation and sport sector. The first year on the Graduate Programme is spent in Wellington working at Sport NZ and the second year consists of two six month placements at organisations typically within the play, active recreation and sport sector. I was initially attracted to the Graduate Programme by the various leadership and professional development opportunities that it presents, but the overwhelming positive feedback I received from talking to previous graduates was what affirmed my desire to apply.

After successfully applying to be part of the Graduate Programme, I was fortunate enough to be linked with Fran McEwen as my mentor. Fran cares deeply for the wellbeing of young people and the Active Recreation team that she leads. She is empathetic, courageous, kind, and bold. Through intentional whanaungatanga, Fran took the time to get to know me as a human, finding out what fuels my mauri and how she could support me to be my best self. I can't understate the impact that Fran has had on me throughout my journey of chasing my place within Sport NZ and my wider world. Having Fran as my mentor also meant that I became part of the Active Recreation team, which is a small but mighty team of people who care deeply about wellbeing outcomes for rangatahi.

My experience of whai wāhitanga within the Graduate Programme started from the very beginning. Our first task was to develop our individualised work plan, where we determine our goals, personal and professional development, and map our work areas for the coming year. This represents a key aspect of whai wāhitanga, as although we are supported by our mentors, we as graduates have complete agency on the decisions that affect us, and are able to shape our work plans to reflect our individual priorities, interests and ambitions.

I developed my work plan in my second week at Sport NZ, and some of the goals that I included were big. One of these was to lead a project and present it to the Sport NZ Board. Another was to meet with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Sport and Recreation, Grant Robertson, as I have always admired the support and leadership that he provides the sector. Fran never once told me that these goals were too big or unattainable. Instead, she listened to my ideas, asked me questions so she could understand how to support me, and assisted me to set a series of smaller goals that would help me to achieve these goals. Six months later, I was sitting in Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson's office to discuss mahi that I was helping to lead (pictured outside his office below). Two weeks after that, Fran and I were presenting the Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan to the Sport NZ Board, which was a plan that I had helped develop as a valued member of the active recreation team.

One of the coolest aspects of the graduate programme is that there is an understanding of the capability and skills we bring to Sport NZ, and we are empowered to lead. Staff submit projects for the graduates to consider as part of their work plan, and those projects provide the space and autonomy for us to choose our level of engagement,

which might be leading the mahi. Projects that we can lead from start to finish are typically prioritised, allowing us to have full participation and lead the project at every stage. Even though I did not always feel confident in my ability to lead the entire process, I was always made to feel that my contribution in each of the spaces that I held was valued.

This type of experience is not isolated to me. As Sport NZ graduates, we are consistently viewed as valued contributors across the organisation. We are given space to share our ideas, not for the sake of ticking a 'youth voice' box, but because there is a genuine acknowledgement of the meaningful contribution that we can and do make as young people. Whether it is a question, a wondering, a challenge, or even a half-formed thought, every perspective is considered and we are recognised for our efforts.

**“The number of changes I have seen implemented and have implemented myself based on discussions I have had with various Sport NZ staff members is awesome. They genuinely value my thoughts, opinions and ideas and will give me the power to implement them”**

Olivia Clare, 2022 Graduate

For me, this sense of value within Sport NZ was most amplified in the Active Recreation team. From the beginning, I was always introduced as a 'normal' member of the team, rather than a temporary intern. This may seem minor, but it was integral in helping me to participate fully in opportunities associated with the team as I felt a strong sense of belonging. The teamies (Chloe, Junior, Fran, Simon, and Rog) have all contributed to my sense of whai wāhitanga, ranging from small interactions such as asking me to review their work, to bigger actions such as creating space for me to share my thoughts in meetings with managers, and offering me opportunities originally presented to them as they felt I had something to contribute. While these ways of working have become the 'norm' within the team culture, it is also a result of the commitment each individual has made to supporting and advocating for young people in all of the work that they do.

In the second year of the programme, graduates choose two six-month placements at external organisations. These placements allow graduates to gain further exposure and experience in areas that resonate with our passions and career aspirations. In the early days of the Graduate Programme, some graduates were encouraged to accept placements in organisations preferred by Sport NZ. However, a previous graduate challenged this, and rightfully argued that we should have agency over this decision given the impact it has on us both professionally and personally. This paved the way for the youth-led decision-making process that we have in place now.



Lily Joiner leading a co-design session with a group of former-refugee rangatahi at Sport Tasman in Nelson, 2022.

**Lily Joiner, also in her second year of the Programme, shared her experiences of this process below.**

**“I chose Sport Tasman and Napier City Council as my placements as I'm passionate about meaningful social change and helping those in need- at both grass roots and system level.**

*My mana was acknowledged in that I was the one who truly knew what role, location, and work environment would provide the right balance of challenge and satisfaction for me. Although there were many supportive colleagues to provide suggestions, I was comfortably able to choose organisations outside of their advice, and be respected in my decision. My placements were chosen through my own judgments and research; I prioritised potential managers who shared similar values and showed excitement about the skills and perspectives I could bring to their organisation. My intention was to grow outside my comfort zone with new and different mahi, and a 'safe' supportive team are crucial in enabling this growth”.*

**I feel extremely privileged when I reflect on my first year with Sport NZ. The various opportunities I had to assume agency in my work, take ownership over my decisions and feel valued for the contributions I made, combined to make my experience overwhelmingly positive. I am now confident in the value of what I have to share and am passionate about supporting other young people. I believe the work that the Sport NZ Active Recreation team is doing in partnership with Ara Taiohi, is a leap forward in creating space for young people to thrive and chase their space in the play, active recreation and sport sector.**

**Reflections on where we need to keep pushing and working better in the youth voice/leadership space in Sport NZ and our sector**

While it is awesome that organisations in the play, active recreation and sport sector, such as Sport NZ, are thinking more about how they can listen to the voices of young people in the mahi they are doing, there are some areas in which we can improve.

### Participation

“No decisions about us without us” is becoming an increasingly popular phrase as organisations become more aware of the importance of involving young people in decisions that affect them. Whilst this is a step in the right direction, we also need to ensure we are enabling full participation, and that this involvement is consistent. Restricted participation is often a consequence of environments lacking awareness of youth development approaches, or hierarchical structures that determine who should be involved in certain stages of the process. It is not uncommon for young people to lead a piece of work, and a manager to then present it to key stakeholders. Although often unintentional, this is communicating to young people that their voice is only valued within certain spaces. This can make it harder for young people to participate in those spaces later on, as they have been taught they don't belong there or aren't 'ready'. It's therefore important to be aware of your commitment to young people, and ensure you can honour it before beginning this process.

### Communication

Consistently and thoughtfully communicating with young people while working with them is important but often overlooked. It is unfortunately not uncommon for young people to be approached to be involved in a portion of a project, only to have no idea of how they contributed to the project outcomes, or what these outcomes even are. Therefore, it is important that we are prepared and hold ourselves accountable to communicating with young people throughout the entire process, including letting them know how their voice made a difference. It's even better if they can be involved in shaping how their ideas effect change or are implemented.

### Recognition

I recently attended a webinar led by Tori McNoe, an awesome young person who grew up in a small town ten minutes away from my hometown. Tori spoke about the concept of longitudinal experience, which was explained as the experience you accumulate over time. Naming longitudinal experience helps us to recognise that it is not the only type of experience you can have, and that lived experience is equally valid. When working with young people we can recognise the lived experience they bring through acknowledging their mana, connections, communities, whakapapa, views and perspectives.

### Structure

The kōrero above highlights the need to challenge structures that do not recognise the value of young people, and are therefore not conducive to positive youth development. The concept of hierarchy is still strong in many work environments, and with this comes the consequence that people are often only afforded access to certain spaces based on their job title. Environments where hierarchical structures exist and remain unchallenged usually value age, years of experience, and status, which are earned over time. This approach puts young people at a disadvantage, as these structures do not recognise the value, perspectives and lived experiences that young people bring.

Recognising that power and authority is a privilege that should be shared with others, is a great start to breaking down the barriers that hierarchy creates. There cannot be true collaboration without sharing the decision making power. Challenging systems and mental models that restrict the ability for young people to be heard in these spaces is an important step we must take to support the whai wāhitanga of young people. The essence of this kōrero is encapsulated in the quote below, published on the Ara Taiohi website:

**“We enable young people to be empowered to participate when we allow all young people to navigate and participate in the world, rather than privileging the voices of a few”**

Ara Taiohi

## Conclusion

When we create environments through intentional mana enhancing approaches, where young people feel valued, supported to participate and take responsibility over decisions affecting them, they will thrive. Young people already have a voice, they don't need to be 'given' one. They just need to be given time and space to use their voice how they choose to.

Poipoia te kākano

Kia puāwai

Nurture the seed and it  
will blossom.

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*Libby Davenport is a Graduate at Sport New Zealand, currently on placement at Christchurch City Council and Leadership Lab. She is passionate about advocating for the strengths and value that young people bring to any space that they find themselves in.*

## References:

Active Recreation for Rangatahi Plan (Sport NZ, 2021):  
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Whai Wāhitanga - Ara Taiohi.

