



Clubs face ageing and declining memberships, dwindling volunteers and competition from internet Meetup groups.

Nikki Macdonald asks whether they can survive - and does it matter whether they do?

Between the ends, friendships were forged. Those relationships have endured - the bowling club has not.

Ray Laws was a member of Raumati South Bowling Club for 30 years, before it closed in July, a year short of its 75th anniversary.

He started bowls while still working for the Hutt Valley Electric Power Board. When he retired, he played seriously three times a week. Was he competitive? "Oh shivers, yes."

He's 80 now "and feeling it". The body will no longer bend to bowl. But when his Raumati South club folded, he still joined the small Kāpiti Coast settlement's second club. He goes there every Friday night for a beer and a natter. For

the sense of community, with a good bunch of people from all walks of life.

As just one of about 10 bowls clubs closing nationally every year, Raumati South was not unique in its challenges. Like many sport and community organisations, they faced a declining, ageing membership which struggled to find volunteers willing - or able - to run the place.

"It was a lot of work," Laws says. "We had working bees every week. It's not just the greens themselves, you've got all the surrounding areas and gardens."

The clubhouse and grounds remain for sale, their future unknown.

And it's not just bowls. A new Amateur Sport Association survey found the membership of almost a quarter of sports clubs fell over the past five years and two-thirds were losing money or just breaking even. And the number of club rugby volunteers has fallen by 30 per cent since 2010.

So is the classic community club a dying anachronism in a world of digital meet-ups and two-working-parent families with precious little free time and an internet chocka with ways to spend it?

High on the flanks of Mt Ruapehu, the Auckland Tramping Club Snowsports Lodge has provided a base for skiers, trampers, climbers and Defence Force survivalists since it was built in 1948, in memory of members who died in World War II.

But on September 1, the club pulled its triangular logo from the walls, retrieved its old ski cups and signed over the lease to a charitable trust of Central Plateau schools.

It was a sad day, says club president Tony Walton. But despite the lodge's incredible location, as one of just a handful of buildings allowed on the mountain, it had become a burden rather than an asset. In 2017, it made a loss of \$17,500, as the number of people staying there fell by 30 per cent.

"Sad as it was, you just have to make those decisions," says Walton. "Clubs need to make sure they have a fairly light footprint, in terms of committed costs."

In 2017, the club's membership fell by 8 per cent, to 308. They're still active - Walton's just got back from club trips in Nepal and Hawaii. But it's getting harder to attract new members, and they tend to be aged 40-60, rather than

A survey found sports club membership has fallen from 33 per cent of all adults in 1998, to 22 per cent in 2014. Pensioners had the highest club membership rates, but also the biggest decline.

younger families. The last names on those congratulatory skiing cups dated back to the 1960s - when a group of keen families used the lodge. Doing crazy things on snow is a young person's game, 63-year-old Walton says.

He puts the falling membership down to the explosion of activity options that didn't exist 20, 30 or 40 years ago, and a change in the way people want to access them.

Facebook groups and websites such as Meetup offer a casual way to connect with like-minded Kiwis, without the cost of a subscription and the commitment of a club. Anyone can set up a Meetup group for free and they span everything from light aircraft enthusiasts to rock hunters to bucket-list activities for 20 to 30-year-olds.

"There are 1001 Meetup groups ... Young people will do a bit of this and a bit of that and that's great. But that typically doesn't necessarily involve joining one club and going along to a trip every second week," Walton says.

But the enduring benefit of a club is the same reason he joined in 2009, while tramping the nation-spanning Te Araroa trail. He'd tramped in Christchurch while at university, before the kids

demanding all his time, but wanted to tap into the kind of knowledge you can't read on maps.

"Getting experience from people that already know what they're doing - that's really what the club is all about."

Simon Davis joined Wellington's Tararua Tramping Club in his 20s, after leaving university. He had a bunch of good tramping mates so didn't need a club for that, but wanted to learn to ski.

Like Auckland Tramping Club, Tararua has a ski lodge that members slogged to build in the 1950s, progressively turning a four-bunk bivvy into a 31-bunk lodge. The building phase regimen required lugging two loads of lumber from the car park before breakfast.

Davis - now 62 and the club's vice-president - says the lodge remains viable, although it's not as busy as 10 years ago, when his kids were skiing, and when demand was so high they split school holidays into three five-day blocks to maximise access.

As the club gears up for its centenary next year, membership numbers remain healthy, at more than 700. But it's getting harder to attract volunteers and plan ahead.

Davis estimates he spends 100 hours a year on tramping club business. "People are less willing to commit to a whole weekend to do something, and they're less willing to commit to it days or weeks in advance ... I think people are busier, or they organise their lives differently now."

It's also easier for people to get into the hills independently, with better cars and access roads.

Davis also mentions competition from Meetup groups, which typically don't offer gear hire, bushcraft and snowcraft courses and don't have to pay \$15 per person to be affiliated to national body Federated Mountain Clubs.

Nonetheless, he still sees a role for traditional clubs. "It's a more cohesive community perhaps than a Meetup group ... On top of that, we provide all the support and guidance and an element of health and safety."

Hannah Geraghty was looking for a community after coming out of a relationship and realising she'd lost her mutual friendship

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group. She'd joined Meetup when she moved to Brisbane a few years back, as a way to meet non-work people in an unfamiliar city. When she moved back to Christchurch she joined a group that mixed adventure activities with socialising. She liked the combo, so when she couldn't find something similar this time around, she created one herself.

The group, called Christchurch Bucket List (20s & 30s), is now five months old and has 429 members. They've done everything from a beer cycle and murder mysteries to dodgeball and beach days. There's weekly casual touch rugby in Hagley Park and regular drinks and dinners out.

For the 32-year-old hairdresser, it's a lot of work, sometimes organising 30-35 people for an event and wrangling payments. But she's a born organiser and loves it. And she gets to meet new people, who range from travellers and out-of-towners helping with the city rebuild, to people who've grown up in Christchurch, moved away and then returned and are looking to reconnect.

Yes, it's similar to a traditional club, but without the bricks and mortar and commitment. They have events 2-3 times a week and members might come to all of those, but they never have to feel obligated, and they don't pay a membership fee, Geraghty says.

"People feel locked in sometimes... For myself, it would just be feeling like you have to go to it all the time. Whereas the world is busy and everyone's work is different... I'm just thinking of anything people might want to do, but they don't have anyone to do it with."

Sport New Zealand's Participation Trends report found sports club membership fell from 33 per cent of all adults in 1998, to 22 per cent in 2014.

Pensioners had the highest club membership rates, but also the biggest decline. In 1998, half of over-65s were sports club members. That fell to just one-third in 2014. Over the same period, gym memberships increased, suggesting Kiwis are still active, but participate less in organised sport.

And Rugby New Zealand figures show while club player numbers have held up, volunteer numbers fell 30 per cent from 2010 to 2018.

Ray Laws reckons traditional clubs need to tap into the desire for more flexible, casual activities. The modern clubs are running barefoot bowling on a Friday night to attract the 20 and



Hannah Geraghty, left, started a Meetup group for Christchurch 20 and 30-somethings. While it's similar to a traditional club, its activities are more varied and members feel less locked in.



Wellington Potters' Association member Maria Koroniadis, 30, appreciates the break from technology and the advice of experienced potters.

NIKKI MACDONALD/STUFF

Net closes in on community clubs

30-somethings who don't have the right shoes. And the game is too long, he says. An average game takes 2½ hours, but a club day can go from 9am to after 5pm. "Worse than cricket."

He's confident clubs will survive, with shorter games and the lure of friendship.

Bowls New Zealand chief executive Mark Cameron believes community clubs are not just a nice-to-have, especially for older age groups who are vulnerable to loneliness and depression.

"It's a community... They can have a beer, play the sport – sure, have a natter. If we lose that, I fear for society. Instead, that 65-year-old might be sitting at home getting further depressed, not being able to share and communicate."

But clubs will need to look different. The number of bowling clubs has fallen from 583 in 2010 to 500, and Cameron expects that could fall to 300 clubs by 2040.

Busy lives and greater competition for the entertainment dollar mean newcomers no longer want to sign up as full playing members or volunteer on committees to run the place.

So clubs have to diversify into community facilities, rather than dedicated bowling clubs, offering darts and mahjong and quiz evenings.

There's likely to be more amalgamation to super-venues such as

Wellington's new Naenae facility, which combines two bowling clubs and an RSA at one venue. The move lifted membership from 180 to 900.

Small rural clubs also need to find new ways to survive, Cameron says. He was member No 28 at Auckland's one-green Riverhead club. They've started opening on Thursday and Friday nights for meals and have opened up Sunday afternoons for casual play. Both sessions are run by paid staff.

"Small clubs realise they have to step up. Otherwise the future is looking bleak."

New Zealand Amateur Sport Association chairman Gordon Noble-Campbell wants the national governing bodies for each sport to increase support for community clubs. His organisation surveyed sports clubs about their membership and financial health and the results confirmed what Noble-Campbell had heard anecdotally.

"I think this area of sport in New Zealand has disappeared from the radar screen in terms of focus and attention, either from governing bodies or the government... Many clubs are doggy-paddling at the moment but it's becoming harder to reach the shore."

Nearly two-thirds of clubs were either losing money or just breaking even. Almost a quarter (22 per cent)



Many clubs are struggling to find enough volunteers. Wellington Potters' Association vice-president Elaine Marland juggles a day job with 10 to 15 hours a week on club business.

NIKKI MACDONALD/STUFF



reported falling membership over the past five years.

Like Cameron, Noble-Campbell argues clubs are "critically important to a healthy New Zealand society", as safe places for communities to congregate.

"Sporting clubs in the community are about much more than sport. For many communities it is a focal point where people who ordinarily would not rub shoulders together do come together because of their love of a particular sport."

While volunteer-run clubs seems the only viable model in New Zealand, communities could consider combining different sports in one hub, and national governing bodies should look at funding administrators to free

"Many clubs are doggy-paddling at the moment but it's becoming harder to reach the shore."

suburban building. The Musical Drama Society tap-danced its way around the dance studio above. That petered out and the pottery workshop took over the whole space.

Burton took up pottery to get out of the house when her daughter was six months old. She won't reveal her age, but says her daughter is over 50.

Sole had five kids and was raising bonsai trees. Faced with a \$500 bonsai pot, he decided he needed to make his own. Twenty-four years later he still loves transforming an amorphous giant ball of mud.

"I only like making the stuff, I don't really care what happens to it afterwards... You ought to see my garden! I don't have to mow the lawns because no grass fits in between."

Maria Koroniadis learned to work clay while trying 30 new things before turning 30, and was instantly hooked.

"It's grounding. Connecting to something more creative, getting off your phone. There's no technology – it's just you and the wheel and you just have to try and make something... You can easily go into K-mart and buy something for \$2, but you know everyone else has got the same thing, and there's no love in it."

But the whole club of 450 members is run by just eight committee members. There's a team to mix glazes and a team that runs the twice-weekly kiln firings. That's headed by Peter Rumble, but he wants out because it's so time-consuming that he struggles to make his own work.

Many volunteers have day jobs, including vice-president Elaine Marland, who works for Heritage New Zealand. At present, she's spending 10-15 hours a week on Potters' Association work. "There's a huge amount to do."

Koroniadis, 30, doesn't belong to any other clubs – she spends all her time here. As well as the facilities she appreciates the experience of older club members. "If you don't know something, if you're my age you just Google it. For potting, you can't really Google it. So you guys are the google," she says to Burton and Sole.

While clubs must change with society, there's no substitute for that inter-generational exchange of skills.

"They bring cake and you bring knowledge," Burton says.

up volunteers, he says. "That would be a major change. Clubs in New Zealand have been left to their own devices."

But it's not all doom and gloom. On a quiet capital street, busy hands are throwing and pinching, rolling and sculpting. Started in 1958, the Wellington Potters' Association has never been in such demand. It has imposed a temporary moratorium on new members to decide how to manage the influx.

It's a Tuesday club morning, where veterans Vera Burton and Mal Sole offer their time and expertise to novices. When Burton joined the association in 1983, the club occupied just the bottom room of the two-storey