

# What If... Associations Didn't Exist?

THE INVISIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE  
NEW ZEALAND DEPENDS ON

They don't make headlines.  
They don't chase profit.  
But they hold the system together.  
This is what we'd lose without them.



---

# What If... Associations Didn't Exist?

If associations did not exist, New Zealand would not simply lose events, newsletters, committees, conferences, or professional gatherings.

We would lose something far more important.

We would lose organised collective voice. We would lose professional and sector standards. We would lose institutional memory, trusted networks, volunteer leadership pathways, shared learning, and many of the practical structures that sit between individuals, businesses, communities, professions, industries, and government.

Associations are often most invisible when they are working well. They connect people, build capability, support good practice, inform policy, and hold sectors together in ways that are not always obvious from the outside.

But remove them, and the gaps would become clear very quickly.

## **Evidence**

New Zealand's wider non-profit and membership-based sector is not small, informal, or incidental. It is a significant part of the country's social, professional, and economic infrastructure.

Stats NZ reported that non-profit institutions contributed \$8.1 billion to GDP, representing 2.8 percent of GDP. When the value of formal unpaid work was included, the sector's contribution rose to 4.2 percent of GDP, with volunteer labour valued at \$4.0 billion.

There are also thousands of formal member-based and community organisations operating across New

Zealand. MBIE noted that approximately 24,000 incorporated societies registered under the old Incorporated Societies Act 1908 needed to reregister under the Incorporated Societies Act 2022.

The charitable sector snapshot for 2024/2025 records 29,208 registered charities in New Zealand and 122,608 charity officers involved in governing and supporting those organisations. Not all charities are associations, and not all associations are charities, but these figures show the scale of organised civic infrastructure that New Zealand depends on.

Professional and industry associations also play a wider public-interest role. They do not exist only to serve members. They help support professional trust, competence, ethical standards, public confidence, and markers of quality across their respective sectors.

Government policy also depends on organised engagement. Effective

consultation relies on informed, connected, and representative voices being able to contribute to decision-making.

Associations help make that possible by gathering sector insight, testing ideas with members, and bringing practical experience to the table.

The evidence points to a clear conclusion: associations are not simply membership organisations.

They are part of the way New Zealand organises voice, trust, standards, knowledge, leadership, and community.

**Without them, New Zealand would be more fragmented, less informed, and far less connected.**



“

We don't notice  
infrastructure  
until it's gone.

---


Alternative history is fascinating because it asks us to pause and imagine a different version of the world.

What if one decision had gone another way?


What if one person had survived?

What if one event had changed the course of history?

It made me think about our own sector.



**We feel  
absence  
quickly  
we notice  
presence**



el their  
ce more  
ly than  
ce their  
ence..

## What if associations didn't exist?

At first, it might not seem like much would change.

The traffic would still move.  
The supermarket shelves would still be full. People would still go to work. Events would still happen.  
Services would still be delivered.

But look closer.

Without associations, many of the quiet systems New Zealand relies on would begin to weaken.

The standards behind the food we eat. The professional development behind the people we trust.

The advocacy behind the decisions government makes. The networks that help sectors respond when something goes wrong.  
The shared knowledge that stops every organisation having to start again.

Associations often sit behind the scenes.

But their work shows up everywhere.

In the food on our plates.  
In the buildings we enter.  
In the advice we receive.  
In the events we attend.  
In the communities we belong to.

So let's imagine, just for a moment, a New Zealand without them.

## The Food on the Table

Picture a family sitting down to dinner.

On the table is lamb from Canterbury, vegetables from Pukekohe, milk from Waikato, and bread from the local bakery.

It feels ordinary. Safe  
Familiar.

But behind that meal sits a web of standards, training, industry knowledge, advocacy, supply chains, professional expectations, and good practice.

Now imagine those systems were weaker.

No shared industry guidance.

No coordinated voice into regulation.

No common expectations around quality.

No trusted network to respond when something goes wrong.

No sector body helping producers, processors, suppliers, retailers, and regulators understand one another.

The food may still arrive on the plate.

But trust becomes thinner.

Consumers are left wondering who is setting the standards, who is lifting practice, and who is speaking for the long-term health of the sector.

Associations may not grow the food, transport it, sell it, or cook it.

But they help create the conditions where a sector can operate with confidence.

## **The Building We Walk Into**

Imagine walking into a hotel, conference centre, school, office, marae, sports facility, or community hall.

Most of us do not stop at the door and ask who helped shape the standards behind the design, safety, materials, engineering, accessibility,

fire systems, or professional practice.

We simply trust that the building is safe.

That trust does not happen by accident.

Behind the scenes are professions and industries that share knowledge, build capability, improve practice, and contribute to the standards that help keep people safe.

Without associations, those voices become fragmented.

One company does it one way. Another does it differently. New professionals have fewer places to learn. Good practice spreads more slowly. Lessons from past failures are easier to forget.

The building may still stand.

But the system behind it becomes weaker.

## **The Professional We Rely On**

Think about the accountant, lawyer, engineer, health professional, planner, teacher, fundraiser, event organiser, membership manager, or governance adviser you rely on.



**Standards  
behind  
confidence**



ards sit  
everyday  
dence

You expect them to be competent.

You expect them to keep learning.

You expect them to understand their responsibilities.

You expect their profession to care about standards, ethics, conduct, and public trust.

Associations help make that possible.

They provide professional development, codes of practice, guidance, conferences, resources, mentoring, sector leadership, and trusted networks.

Without associations, people would still call themselves professionals.

But the shared expectations behind that word would become less clear.

Professionalism is not just a title.

It is something that must be supported, challenged, developed, and renewed.

## **The Policy That Shapes Our Lives**

Now imagine government is

considering a major change.

A new regulation.

A funding model.

A compliance requirement.

A workforce setting.

A change that will affect thousands of people across a sector.

Without associations, who brings the practical view?

The largest players will be heard.

The loudest voices will be heard.

Those with time, money, and influence will be heard.

But smaller organisations, regional operators, volunteer-led bodies, and specialist groups may not be.

Associations help gather the view from across the sector. They test ideas. They identify unintended consequences. They bring evidence, experience, and practical reality to the table.

Without them, policy would still be made.

But it would be made with fewer organised voices helping government understand what will actually happen on the ground.

## The Organisation Left on Its Own

Imagine a small membership body with one staff member and a volunteer board.

Their membership is declining.

Their constitution needs updating.

Their website is tired.

Their finances are tight.

Their board is unsure what good governance looks like.

Their chief executive is exhausted.

Without an association, they have fewer places to turn.

No trusted network.

No shared templates.

No sector-specific learning.

No one to ask, "How are others handling this?"

They are left to work it out alone.

And when small organisations are left alone for too long, they do not always fail loudly.

Sometimes they just slowly fade.

## The Crisis No One Prepared For

Then something unexpected happens.

A regulation changes.

A key funder withdraws.

A public issue damages confidence.

A workforce shortage hits.

A natural disaster disrupts services.

A sector suddenly needs to respond.

In those moments, associations matter.

They connect people quickly.

They share information.

They clarify what is known and what is not.

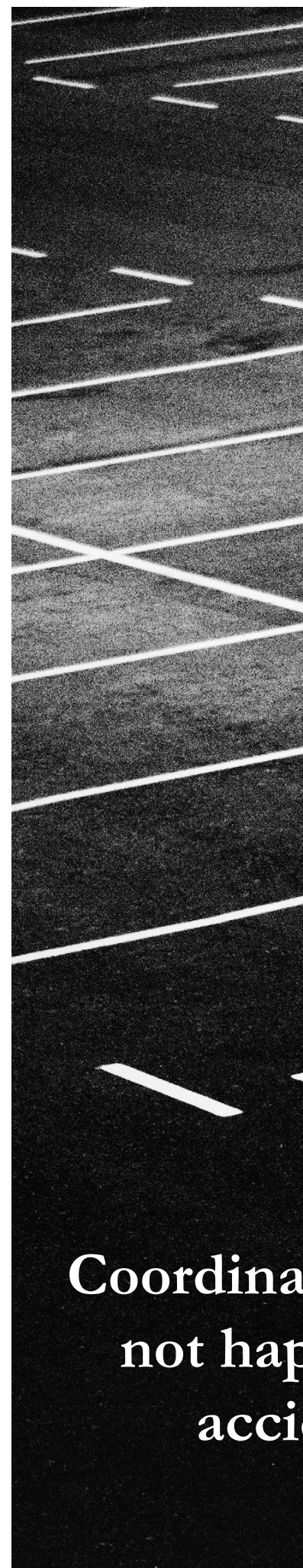
They help members understand what to do next.

They bring government, industry, professionals, and communities closer together.

Without associations, everyone still reacts.

But they react separately.

And in a crisis, fragmentation costs time.



**Coordinating  
not happens  
accidents**



tion does  
open by  
dent

## What We Would Really Lose

A New Zealand without associations would not fall apart overnight.

But it would become more fragmented.

Less coordinated.

Less informed.

Less trusted.

Less prepared.

Less connected.

The work of associations is not always visible, but it is often built into the trust we place in everyday life.

We may not see associations when we sit down to eat, walk into a building, seek professional advice, attend an event, or watch government make a decision.

But their influence is there.

They help set standards.

They help build capability.

They help organise collective voice.

They help preserve sector memory.

They help people belong.

They help leaders grow.

Associations are not simply organisations with members.

They are part of the way New Zealand organises knowledge, trust, voice, leadership, and community.

## And that is why associations matter.

### About NZSAE

*NZSAE is a membership organisation for the people who lead, manage, and strengthen New Zealand's associations, membership bodies, professional organisations, and sector groups.*

*Through connection, professional development, practical resources, sector insight, and shared learning, NZSAE helps association professionals build stronger organisations and better outcomes for the communities, industries, and professions they serve.*

*Strengthening associations in New Zealand.*

If you work in an association, your role is more critical than you may realise.

*If your sector relies on trust, coordination, standards, or a collective voice, then your sector relies on associations.*

*This is the first article in a four-part series asking a simple but important question: what would New Zealand lose if associations were no longer here?*

*Next, we turn to advocacy and influence with What If Government Only Heard the Loudest Voices? We will look at what happens when policy is shaped by those with the most access, the most resources, or the loudest platform — and why associations are essential in bringing informed, practical, and representative sector voices to the table.*

**Coming in the series:**

1. *What If Associations Didn't Exist?*
2. *What If Government Only Heard the Loudest Voices?*
3. *What If Every Organisation Had to Start Again?*
4. *What If Standards Were Left to Chance?*



**Associations Matter**

Published by NZSAE  
New Zealand Society of Association Executives Inc  
Strengthening associations in New Zealand  
[nzsaе.org.nz](http://nzsaе.org.nz)

**NZSAE**  
NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES  
Te Hapori o nga Kaiwhakahaere Hononga o Aotearoa