

Bowls Warkworth: A case study in planning failure

Background

The club was incorporated in 1923 easing land from Alex Warren, adjoining his blacksmith shop, for £24 a year.

After the deaths of Alex and his wife, the club took ownership of the land in 1956.

Ladies' bowls relocated to a site at Shoesmith Domain in 1960. [The ladies moved back in 2007. The former site provided some rental income, but is now abandoned and needs repairs. The RLB plans to decommission it this year at a cost of about \$250,000.]

In 1986 Shoesmith Domain was proposed as a possible alternative site for the club.

In 1996/97 it successfully opposed a proposal for a new road through the town centre as part of the Warkworth Structure Plan. Even then, Warkworth had parking problems, and one suggestion was to build a parking building on the site with a bowling green on its roof. The road proposal was finally deleted from the Structure Plan in 2001.

Problems with location

In 2021 the club discussed selling its site and moving to a new site, which would involve leasing land from Auckland Council (AC). Lengthy consideration of alternatives by the Rodney Local Board (RLB) and Council staff led to no decision or further action. The idea was dropped when AC decided to seek other expressions of interest for use of the proposed reserve site.

The current town centre site remains popular with members, but the club has a declining and ageing membership. The site is a strategically important part of the Warkworth town centre precinct. Its rising land value has increased the rates bill and put pressure on membership fees.

One option is to partner with a developer to use the site in a way that provides parking and retains a green for members. However, the club increasingly believes it cannot remain viable in the town centre without expanding the use of the facilities, and that, in the long term, relocation may be needed to secure the Club's future. Its major expense is the annual rates bill. Selling the increasingly valuable site could help fund a relocated, covered and improved green capable of attracting national and overseas events. Such events would benefit Warkworth, but would also need parking and accommodation, for which the town has no agreed plans despite the obvious benefits for business and the community.

A local developer has already proposed acquiring this key site to extend an existing retirement complex. The club rejected the offer because it didn't meet the club's requirements. Members also recognised that the proposal would shape the future commercial and community development of Warkworth's centre in a way that had not been discussed with local landowners, businesses or residents, and therefore might not have wider community support.

Engagement with adjoining landowners as part of the Mahurangi Community Planning Group's (MCPG) initiative to prepare a proper development plan for the town centre and surrounding area has shown how this site could be developed in a way that better reflects the community vision outlined in the Puhinui Warkworth Town Centre Plan. It could create opportunities for parking, visitor attractions and accommodation while maintaining the traditional town centre character valued by local people.

This all means the club cannot plan confidently for its future because Council has no development plan for the town centre or for new sport, recreation and public facilities in surrounding areas.

What the case shows

The planning failure is not that Auckland Council has chosen the wrong use for the club's land. It is that Council has provided no framework within which the club, neighbouring owners, businesses, developers and the community can make related decisions.

Growth around Warkworth is being enabled through zone-oriented structure planning, plan changes and fast-track applications. That growth will rely on the existing town centre. The Puhinui Warkworth Town Centre Plan, adopted in 2023, expresses a vision for the centre but does not provide an agreed development programme covering land use, access, public facilities, timing, responsibilities and funding.

Council officers have advised MCPG that no funding is available for a further development plan and that the Structure Plan will not be changed. This appears to treat planning as work that proceeds only when Council has money for its own projects. But lack of Council funding does not stop other decisions being made.

Bowls Warkworth must manage an ageing membership, annual rates, a valuable site need for enhancements and the costs of development or relocation. Neighbouring landowners and businesses must also decide whether to sell, invest or redevelop. Each decision may be reasonable for the owner, yet together they may close off opportunities for parking, access, accommodation, public space or integrated redevelopment of the town centre.

That is the landowner's dilemma. Council has not said what future public or shared facilities may be needed, where they might go, how private redevelopment should

connect with them, or in what sequence development should occur. Nor can landowners wait indefinitely for answers. The planning vacuum transfers risk from Council to individual owners and, ultimately, to the community.

A development plan is not a promise that Council will fund every project. It is a way to identify needs and opportunities, test options with affected parties, preserve important choices and show what could be delivered privately, publicly or in partnership. Funding decisions should follow that work; a lack of present funding is not a reason to avoid it.

MCPG is therefore working with the club, adjoining landowners and the community on a coherent plan for the town centre. That work cannot guarantee Bowls Warkworth any particular outcome. It can, however, give the club and others a framework for decisions that take account of Warkworth's long-term interests.

Preparing a proper development plan will not by itself resolve Bowls Warkworth's problem, but a satisfactory resolution is unlikely without one.



Peter Sinton (Chair, MCPG)

Hugh Briggs (Secretary)



6-8-2026

President, Bowls Warkworth

HUGH BATEMAN.



Vice-President, Bowls Warkworth

Brian GEORGE



6/8/2026