
CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S ANNUAL REPORT – 1 January to 31 December 2025

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1. OUR PEOPLE

We were delighted to see three Invercargill choral leaders recognised in the 2025 New Zealand Honours lists: Sarah Rae (MNZM), Michael Buick (KSM) and Peter de Blois (ONZM). Sarah and Michael have both directed choirs in The Big Sing for a number of years and in 2025 Sarah took on the role of Regional Events Coordinator for Southland. Peter has had a long association with NZCF as a former adjudicator for The Big Sing, a current conductor of Big Sing choirs, and a previous member of the Association of Choral Directors committee.

We were also thrilled to see Elise Bradley awarded the prestigious King Charles III Coronation Medal by the Canadian government for her outstanding leadership as Artistic Director of the Toronto Children's Chorus from 2007-2021. Since returning to NZ in 2021, Elise has been a workshop presenter, conducting mentor and Cadenza adjudicator for NZCF, as well as leading choirs to The Big Sing Finale.

In May 2025, NZCF presented Warwick Harvey with a Life Membership award to acknowledge his outstanding service to NZCF and choral music in Aotearoa. Warwick served on the Governance Board for seven years - including two as Vice Chair and three as Chair – and guided NZCF through the hosting of the World Choir Games, the re-writing of the Constitution, the creation of a new strategic plan and the shift to a new, future-focused organisational structure. Prior to chairing NZCF, he was Chair of the Auckland Youth Choir for 10 years. Warwick's Life Membership award was presented to him at the 2025 AGM in Wellington.

Sadly, 2025 saw the passing of NZCF Life Member Craig Pollock (aged 79), as well as one of NZ's leading choral lights, Andrew Withington (aged 46). Craig was NZCF Development Consultant from 1989 to 2005, and in addition to raising substantial funds for NZCF, he made a significant contribution to the development of some of the NZCF 'brands' we know today - including The Big Sing, The Kids Sing and Sing Aotearoa. Andrew Withington made a deep impact on choral music in Aotearoa in his 10-years as Music Director of the NZ Secondary Students Choir. Andrew's considerable contribution to NZCF included roles as a Big Sing and Kids Sing adjudicator and as a conducting tutor and mentor. His legacy is huge and he is greatly missed.

a) Patron

We have been without a patron for NZCF since Dame Patsy Reddy's term as Governor-General came to an end in late September 2021.

b) Officers and staff

Governance Board

My sincere thanks go to the members of the Governance Board for the crucial role they play in guiding the organisation's direction and vision for the future. Special thanks to 2025 chairs Warwick Harvey (Jan-April) and Pete Rainey (May onwards) for their tireless dedication to this voluntary role.

Warwick Harvey	Chair (retired May 2025)
Pete Rainey MNZM	Vice Chair/Chair (from May 2025)
Kim Cunningham	Deputy Chair (from May 2025)
Melissa Absolum	
Dr Karen Grylls CNZM	
Dr Raymond Tan	
Robin Randall	
Dr Igelese Ete	(retired May 2025)
Henrietta Hunkin-Tagaloa	(elected May 2025)
Sam Nicholson	(elected May 2025)

Staff in 2025

Christine Argyle	Chief Executive
Emma Billings	Events Manager
Ann Gibbard	Finance & Membership Manager
Hannah Dahlke	Fundraising Manager
Diana Cable	Communications & Archives Coordinator
Claudette Martin	Accounts Administrator
Maria Winder	Pasifika Outreach Coordinator

NZCF National Advisory Committee 2025

The National Advisory Committee (NAC) comprises the NZCF Board Chair and ten Regional Representatives. The following Regional Reps were elected in 2025, each for a 3-year term:

NZCF Regional Representatives 2025

Penny Christiansen (Auckland)
 Jenny Lewy (Waikato-Bay of Plenty)
 Chris Atkinson (East Coast)
 Nigel Tongs (Manawatū-Whanganui)
 Nikki Truman (Taranaki)
 Jane McKinlay (Wellington)
 Lucy Rainey (Nelson-Marlborough)
 Dr Jared Corbett (Canterbury-West Coast)
 Ben Madden (Otago)
 Christine McLeod (Southland)

Regional Events Coordinators 2025

Regional Events Coordinators were contracted in 2025 to run 1-4 events in their region. The majority of these coordinators were previous Big Sing or Kids Sing regional coordinators who stayed on in the role and, in a number of cases, picked up running a SingFest and or Regional Workshop.

Sophie van Waardenberg (Auckland TBS)
 Maria Winder (Auckland TKS, SingFest, Workshop)
 Bonnie Heberton (Waikato-BOP TBS, SingFest, Workshop)
 Julia McIntyre (Waikato-BOP TKS)

Andrea Wilson (East Coast TBS)
 Suzanne Russell (East Coast TKS, SingFest)
 Virginia Warbrick (Manawatū-Whanganui TBS, TKS, Workshop)
 Jeff Grange (Taranaki SingFest, Workshop)
 Julie Sperring (Wellington TBS)
 Jenny Gould (Wellington TKS)
 Marianne Taylor (Wellington SingFest, Workshop)
 Kay Nalsund (Nelson-Marlborough TBS, Workshop)
 Lucy Rainey (Nelson-Marlborough TKS, SingFest)
 Caitlin Godfrey (Canterbury-West Coast TBS, TKS, SingFest, Workshop)
 Rosemary Tarbotton (Otago TBS, SingFest, Workshop)
 Carole Randall (Otago TKS)
 Alan Menzies (Southland TBS)
 Sarah Rae (Southland SingFest, Workshop)

2. MEMBERSHIP

Choir membership remained steady in 2025 and is close to our peak number of 217 choirs in 2017.

Total individual membership is up on 2024, and it is pleasing to see that paid membership – both Personal and ACD – increased in 2025, though numbers are still down on the peak period of 2019-2022. The absence of complimentary Youth membership is due to the offer not being extended in 2025 (an oversight of the CE, rather than a lack of take-up for the offer). Complimentary Youth membership has once again been offered to NZYC members in 2026.

With fewer tangible benefits to Individual membership, NZCF has struggled to increase its individual member base. Many singers feel it is sufficient to be a member of a Member Choir. At its meeting in August 2025, the Board resolved to lower the cost of Personal membership to \$10 in 2026, in order to connect more individuals with NZCF. The success of this initiative will be reported in the 2026 annual report.

	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Personal	140	142	199	205	153	162	168
<i>Paid</i>	140	129	151	175	153	162	168
<i>Complimentary Youth (offered to NZYC members)</i>	0	13	48	30	n/a	n/a	n/a
ACD total	269	231	249	281	323	384	335
<i>Paid</i>	100	93	112	120	142	124	121
<i>Free via TKS/TBS</i>	169	138	137	161	181	260	214
Life	16	16	17	17	16	14	14
Total Individual	425	389	465	503	492	560	517
Choirs	215	214	211	193	207	204	203
<i># Singers in member choirs</i>	8072	7538	7337	6343	7264	7533	7571

3. FINANCES

In 2025 NZCF accounts resulted in a loss of \$76,080 with accumulated funds sitting at \$1,288,251 at 31 December 2025. Although the year-end result was a substantial deficit, it was \$8k lower than the planned deficit of \$84k agreed by the Board and approved by Creative NZ as an investment in the new operational structure. Key factors contributing to the planned loss were the additional staffing and contractor costs associated with the new structure, including regional SingFest and Workshop coordinators and the

employment of a Fundraising Manager (a role previously funded by special development grants from Creative NZ and the Ministry for Culture and Heritage).

The Board anticipates that the implementation of the new structure will require investment from reserves over a two-year period before we can reasonably expect to return to a breakeven bottom line. This investment has been undertaken responsibly and is supported by NZCF's strong reserve position following the World Choir Games surplus, while remaining mindful that reserves must be used strategically rather than gradually depleted. In March this year, NZCF submitted an application to Creative NZ for increased baseline funding for the 2027–2029 period; if successful, this will support the new structure and will enable the organisation to return to a balanced budget from 2027.

Our sincere thanks to NZCF Finance Manager Ann Gibbard for her meticulous work and valued expertise, as well as to Finance Administrator Claudette Martin for her support of Ann's role in 2025.

4. FUNDING AND SPONSORSHIP

a) Creative New Zealand funding

2025 was the sixth year of NZCF's 6-year funding agreement under CNZ's Tōtara Investment Programme. Feedback from CNZ on our 2025 reporting included: "It's clearly been another extremely busy period for NZCF, on top of business as usual. We want to acknowledge the continued work that has gone into the organisational restructure and the completion of your new Strategic Plan for 2026–2030 — a significant achievement amidst all that mahi... Finally, we note that NZCF farewelled its Board Chair Warwick Harvey during this reporting period. We would like to acknowledge Warwick's incredible contribution to NZCF particularly in his role as Chair overseeing some major events and organisational changes, and the positive impact of this work on the wider choral singing community and arts sector here in Aotearoa New Zealand."

NZCF was offered a 1-year extension on the CNZ contract through to December 2026, and an application was submitted in March 2026 for renewed multi-year funding from 2027 onwards. We will be advised of the outcome of this application in July 2026.

b) Ministry of Youth Development funding

Our multi-year funding agreement with Ministry of Youth Development for \$65k towards The Big Sing ended on 30 June 2025. We applied to their new Youth Contributory fund in November 2024 but were advised in March 2025 that our application was unsuccessful, since The Big Sing no longer closely aligns with MYD's new Youth Strategy (which specifically targets under-served communities). We will continue to engage with MYD regarding new funding opportunities that may align with NZCF activities.

c) Sponsorships, Partnerships and Donations

Our sincere thanks go to the Freemasons Foundation for their substantial donation to The Big Sing Finale, and to Tour Time, the Elizabeth Ball Charitable Trust and Trinity College London (NZ) for their continued support of The Big Sing in 2025. We are also sincerely grateful to the Fehl Charitable Foundation and the Otago Primary Principals Association for their generous support of The Kids Sing, and to Dame Adrienne Stewart and a number of small businesses and individual donors for their support of The Big Sing and The Kids Sing in 2025.

d) Community Grants

We were hugely appreciative of the many grants we received in 2025 from community trusts, foundations and regional councils. These included the Adam Foundation, Aotearoa Gaming Trust, Auckland Council, Community Trust of Mid & South Canterbury, Dunedin City Council, Dunedin Venues, First Light Foundation, Four Winds Foundation, Fulton Foundation, Hastings District Council, Lion Foundation, Margaret Watt Children's Trust, Marlborough Civic Theatre Trust, Nelson City Council, NZ Community Trust, Otago Community Trust, Pelorus Trust, Pub Charity, Redwood Trust, Rotorua Energy Community Trust, The Trusts Community Foundation, Trust Aoraki, Trust House Foundation, Venues Wellington, Wellington City Council and the Whanganui Community Foundation. A huge thank you to Hannah Dahlke (NZCF Fundraising Manager) who wrote the many applications and ably managed the associated accountability reporting.

5. OUR ACTIVITIES

a) The Big Sing Regionals



167 schools sent choirs to The Big Sing regionals in 2025, 7 more than the previous year and exceeding the pre-Covid peak of 149. While the number of schools taking part has now exceeded 2019, the number of choirs is still down on pre-Covid levels, with 243 choirs in 2025 (4 more than 2024) compared with 260 in 2019. Overall student participant numbers continue to rise with 8143 students (957 more than 2024), bringing numbers close to pre-Covid levels (8187 in 2019).

Regional adjudicators in 2025 were Brent Stewart (Auckland, Waikato-Bay of Plenty), Claire Caldwell (Canterbury-West Coast, Otago, Southland), and Judy Bellingham (Wellington, East Coast, Manawatu-Whanganui, Nelson-Marlborough).

Heartfelt thanks go to our 2024 TBS Coordinators: Sophie van Waardenberg (Auckland), Bonnie Hebenton & Jeremy Whimster (Waikato-Bay of Plenty), Andrea Wilson (East Coast), Virginia Warbrick (Manawatu-Whanganui), Julie Sperring (Wellington), Kay Nalsund (Nelson-Marlborough), Caitlin Godfrey (Canterbury-West Coast), Rosemary Tarbotton (Otago) and Alan Menzies (Southland).

b) The Big Sing Cadenza

2025 saw 1201 students from 36 choirs participating across three Cadenza festivals in Timaru, Whanganui and Rotorua, where they competed for awards and enjoyed vocal workshops with adjudicator Morag Atchison.

Our sincere thanks go to our Cadenza Coordinators – Jenny Lewy (Upper North Island), Edwyna McDonald (Lower North Island), Martin Kane (South Island) – and their committees for their highly successful management of these festivals.

c) The Big Sing National Finale

The Big Sing Finale 2025 was held in the Dunedin Town Hall at the end of August. 24 choirs from Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill took part in the three-day event. Adjudicators in 2025 were Peter Watts, Helen Tupai, Debra Shearer-Dirié (Aus) and Kelly Ann Tahitahi (Auahi Kore award). Eight competitive sessions culminated in a gala concert which was compèred by Bryan Crump of RNZ Concert.

The live stream of the Finale attracted a record 150,000 live views across all the live platforms (Facebook, YouTube, NZCF website) - more than twice the number in previous years - including over 36,000 views across 69 countries via on our website. Our Facebook page had 280,677 views over the three days, while RNZ reported a total of more than 2.6 million video views of their social media coverage for the period.

Our warmest thanks go to Rosemary Tarbotton and her Dunedin committee for the considerable work they put into ensuring Finale was such a success. Special thanks also go to our Events Manager Emma Billings and the **TBS National Committee** which in 2025 comprised Pete Rainey (Chair), Melissa Absolum (GB), Dr Siliva Gaugatao, Katie Macfarlane, Peter Watts, Emma Billings (Events Manager) and Christine Argyle (CE).

d) NZCF/SOUNZ composition awards



Since 2021, we have run two student composition competitions in collaboration with SOUNZ. 2025 saw a record number of entries in the open composition category (29 entries), but only 2 for the te reo Māori category. The adjudicators were David Childs (open) and David Tapene (te reo Māori).

The winner of the open category was Abilio Fernandes from St Patrick's College in Wellington for *Autumn Song*; and the winner of the te reo category was Jesse Wallace from Tawa College in Wellington, with *Tēnei Te Arā*. Performances of both winning compositions were recorded and played at The Big Sing National Finale in the Dunedin Town Hall.

e) The Kids Sing



The Kids Sing was held in seven centres in 2025: Auckland, Hamilton, Hastings, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson and Dunedin. A total of 5118 primary and intermediate students participated nationally (680 more than in 2024), with close to 1000 in Dunedin alone. At each event, apart from in Dunedin, school choirs presented up to three songs before joining together as a massed choir. In Dunedin, all schools performed a selection of items together as a massed choir.

Many thanks to our 2024 regional TKS Coordinators: Maria Winder (Auckland), Julia McIntyre (Hamilton), Suzanne Russell (Hastings), Virginia Warbrick (Palmerston North), Jenny Gould (Wellington), Lucy Rainey (Nelson) and Carole Randall (Dunedin).

f) SingFest



SingFests were held in eight centres around the country: Auckland, Cambridge, New Plymouth, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill and involved a total of 1383 singers and conductors. These took a variety of formats, including the long-running May Workshop in Wellington with close to 90 singers performing Mendelssohn's *Elijah* under Mark Stamper.

g) Regional Workshops



Skills development workshops for adult choral singers/conductors were presented in all ten regions and attracted a total of 483 participants. Topics and presenters included *Pacific Voices* (Igelese Ete), *Sing Music of Tinā* (David Squire), *The Art of A Cappella* (Tim Wayne-Wright), *Viagra for the Voice* (Judy Bellingham), *Sing for Life* (Elise Bradley) and *Finding Balance* (James Harrison).

h) Choral Connect



Our Choral Connect biennial conference for choir directors ran from 27-29 September at Queen Margaret College in Wellington. The final gala concert was held at the Cathedral of St Paul. Dr Karen Grylls returned as Artistic Director for Choral Connect '25, assisted by Jono Palmer as Artistic Programme Coordinator, and inspirational US choral conductor Dr Pearl Shangkuan (President-Elect of the American Choral Directors Association) was our Guest International Presenter.

A total of 89 delegates benefitted from conducting classes led by Karen Grylls, Jono Palmer, David Squire and Virginie Pacheco. As well as sessions delivered by in-person presenters, Zoom sessions enabled us to beam in internationally renowned choral practitioners Susanna Saw (Malaysia) and Francisco Núñez (USA). The closing *Choral Connections* concert featuring the NZ Secondary Students' Choir and Aotearoa Academy Choir was a highlight of the conference and attracted an audience of 211 on top of the delegates.

Sincere thanks to Artistic Director Karen Grylls, Artistic Programme Coordinator Jono Palmer and NZCF Events Manager Emma Billings for all the work they put in to ensure the conference was such a success. Thanks also to the 2025 **ACD Advisory Committee** for their input prior to the event: Dr Karen Grylls (Chair), David Squire (Deputy Chair), Maria Colvin, Jared Corbett, Sue Densem, Megan Flint, Jono Palmer and Mark Stamper.

i) Fine Tuning



Fine Tuning workshops for Big Sing choirs and their conductors took place in 12 high schools in Auckland (with Karen Grylls), Cambridge & Palmerston North (Elise Bradley), Rotorua & Tauranga (David Squire), Christchurch (Sue Densem), Methven and Greymouth (Jared Corbett). A total of 380 students took part.

j) Giving Direction and Singing Matters



Rowan Johnston led 7 one-to-one online Giving Direction workshops for conductors of secondary and/or community choirs throughout the year. Megan Flint led 2 Singing Matters online sessions for primary school choir conductors and Sarah Rae led an in-person Singing Matters workshop in Invercargill for 8 conductors.

k) Mana Pasifika Outreach

Our Mana Pasifika Outreach programme (funded through CNZ's Pacific Arts Strategy) was established at the start of 2024 with the goal of reaching school communities with high numbers of Pacific students and where there has been little participation in The Big Sing. Over the course of 2025, NZCF facilitated 80 hours of mentor pairings in 20 schools across Auckland, Rotorua, Tauranga, Gisborne, Napier, Wellington and Hutt Valley, reaching a total of 894 student participants.

Ten mentors were engaged in the 2025 programme: Dr Igelese Ete, Henrietta Hunkin-Tagaloa, Dr Siliva Gaugatao, Simon Matāfai, Elisha Fa'i-So'oialo, Helen Tupai, Enyah Talamaivao, Sola Vuna, Dr Opeloge Ah Sam and Steven Rapana. Our sincere thanks go to our 2025 Pasifika Outreach Coordinator Maria Winder for her dedication to the delivery of this programme. The success of the initiative has resulted in further funding from Creative NZ for 2026.

6. 40th ANNIVERSARY



Close to 100 invited guests attended the 40th anniversary lunch on Sunday 28 September at the Copthorne Hotel in Wellington. The celebration featured a slideshow of more than 200 photographs; a specially prepared songbook, with singing between courses led by John Rosser, Karen Grylls and David Squire; and speeches from three former NZCF Chairs—Marijke Batenburg, Norman Firth and John Rosser—alongside current Chair Pete Rainey, all reflecting on different chapters of NZCF's 40-year history. The occasion concluded with the cutting of a

40th anniversary cake by past and present Chairs of NZCF. Sincere thanks go to Diana Cable, Juliet Dreaver and Emma Billings for their assistance with preparations for the anniversary celebration.

7. IN CONCLUSION

2025 was a standout year for participation across NZCF activities, with significant growth in The Big Sing and The Kids Sing, alongside an expanded programme of regional events for adult singers. In total, nearly 18,000 singers took part in our events, which were enjoyed by a further 16,000 audience members nationwide. None of this would be possible without the commitment, passion, and generosity of our regional volunteers, whose long-standing support is key to the successful delivery of events throughout the country. I am deeply grateful for their continuing dedication.

My sincere thanks also go to Chair Pete Rainey, former Chair Warwick Harvey, and the members of the NZCF Board for giving so freely of their time, expertise and insight. Finally, my heartfelt thanks to the NZCF staff, whose professionalism and commitment continue to advance our vision of New Zealand as a singing nation.

Ngā mihi nui

Christine Argyle

Chief Executive

New Zealand Choral Federation

Te Kotahitanga Manu Reo o Aotearoa