

AI Trust Report 2026: Sustainability Edition

The Trust Imperative: AI and the environment

One NZ AI Trust Report 2026: Sustainability Edition

A growing challenge

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming embedded into customer experiences, employee workflows and operational systems across New Zealand businesses. Much of the conversation to date has focused on productivity, innovation and economic opportunity – but, attention is beginning to shift toward another question: what are the environmental costs of AI at scale?

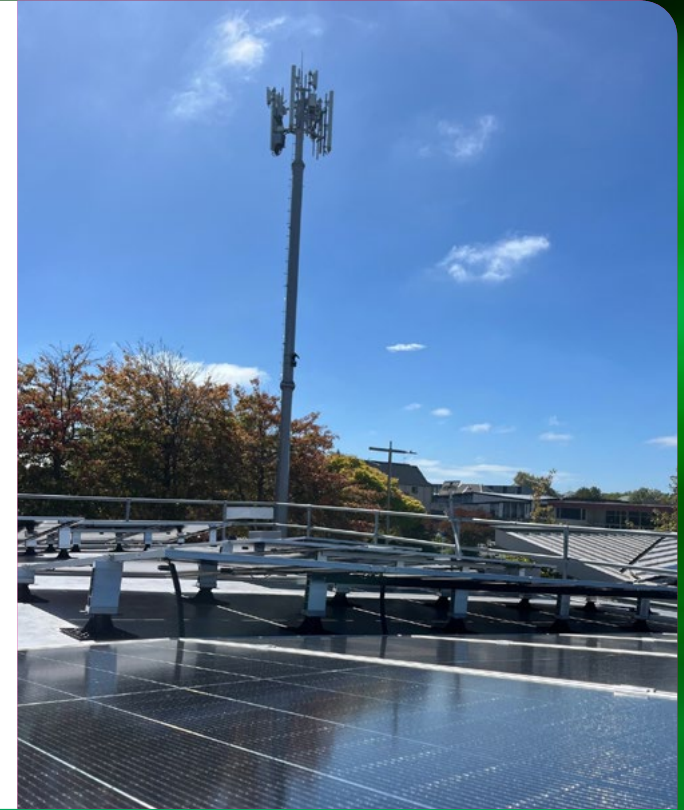
Researchers and business leaders are increasingly warning that the environmental impacts of AI may not be evenly distributed. Large-scale AI systems rely on significant computing infrastructure, energy consumption, cooling systems and hardware supply chains – often concentrated far from the customers and organisations benefiting from the technology.

At the same time, most organisations are still in the early stages of understanding and measuring the sustainability implications of their own AI use. This includes not only infrastructure decisions, but also everyday employee behaviour: how AI tools are used, how often they are used, and whether they are being applied intentionally and efficiently.

The 2026 One NZ AI Trust Report suggests New Zealanders are already beginning to factor these issues into how they evaluate trust in how businesses use AI. Sustainability is emerging alongside privacy, misinformation and human oversight as part of a broader public expectation that AI should be deployed responsibly.

For organisations, this creates a new challenge. AI capability alone may not be enough to maintain trust. As adoption scales, businesses may increasingly be expected to demonstrate that AI systems are not only useful and effective, but also operationally responsible and environmentally conscious.

As AI becomes embedded across everyday products, services and employee workflows, organisations may increasingly be judged not only on what AI enables – but on how responsibly it is powered, governed and deployed.



3 core elements: AI & Sustainability

1

Sustainability is becoming part of the AI trust equation

2

New Zealanders increasingly recognise AI's physical footprint

3

The next phase of AI trust will be operational

1

Sustainability is becoming part of the AI trust equation

The One NZ 2026 AI Trust Report research shows that **45% of New Zealanders have concerns about the environmental impacts of business AI use**. Concern is particularly high among younger New Zealanders, rising to 63% among those aged 18–24.

However, concern is also relatively consistent across the AI adoption curve, as signalled by **45% of AI Actives, 47% of AI Dabblers, and 39% of AI Avoiders**.

The findings suggest sustainability is not simply a niche issue driven by people resistant to AI adoption. Even many of the New Zealanders most actively engaging with AI still hold concerns about the environmental implications of the technology.

At the same time, **30% of New Zealanders say they have not yet thought about AI's environmental impacts at all**. This suggests the conversation is still emerging – but likely to grow as AI becomes more visible across products, services and workplaces.

The pattern mirrors the evolution of other technology trust issues over time. Privacy, data sovereignty and cybersecurity were once relatively niche concerns before becoming mainstream expectations of responsible business behaviour. Sustainability may now be beginning a similar transition in relation to AI.

Respondents segmented into three groups:

- **AI Actives** = Low trust and little interaction with AI (24%)
- **AI Dabblers** = Irregular or emerging AI usage (48%)
- **AI Avoiders** = Confident, frequent AI users (29%)

General Population



45% concerned about the environmental impacts of business AI use

18-24 year olds (Gen Z)



63% concerned about the environmental impacts of business AI use

What this means for organisations

Sustainability is becoming part of the AI trust equation. As AI adoption shifts from experimentation to embedded operational use, organisations may increasingly face scrutiny not only over what AI enables, but whether its deployment aligns with broader expectations around responsibility, transparency and long-term impact.

This creates a new reputational and governance challenge for businesses deploying AI at scale. Organisations that treat sustainability as separate from AI strategy may increasingly find public expectations moving faster than internal governance frameworks.

This could have implications for environmentally-conscious employees and customers, wanting to understand how an organisation is thinking about – and ultimately addressing – its sustainability paradigm.



New Zealanders increasingly recognise AI's physical footprint

Concerns around AI are grounded in tangible infrastructure impacts. Among New Zealanders concerned about sustainability, the strongest concerns relate to:

- **Increased electricity use (66%)**
- **Increased water use (51%)**
- **Electronic waste and hardware turnover (50%)**
- **Local environmental impacts (47%)**
- **Increased carbon emissions (44%)**

These findings are important because they suggest New Zealanders increasingly understand AI as a physical, infrastructure-intensive technology – not simply an invisible digital capability.

Public understanding of AI appears to be maturing. Rather than viewing AI purely through the lens of innovation or automation, people are increasingly associating it with data centres, energy systems, hardware demand and resource consumption.

This reflects a broader global shift in the AI conversation. Internationally, growing attention is being placed on the environmental footprint of large AI systems, particularly as demand for compute power accelerates.

For many organisations, however, these infrastructure implications remain largely invisible internally. AI adoption is often discussed primarily in terms of productivity gains, customer outcomes and competitive advantage, with less visibility around the operational footprint supporting those systems. The findings suggest this gap may narrow over time.

What this means for organisations

Operational decisions that were previously invisible – such as infrastructure location, energy usage and compute efficiency – may increasingly become trust issues as businesses deploy more AI-enabled customer experiences and embed AI more deeply into employee workflows.

At the same time, many of AI's environmental impacts sit within complex global supply chains rather than within an organisation's direct operational control. The energy use, water consumption and carbon footprint associated with AI are often embedded within cloud infrastructure, data centres, hardware manufacturing and third-party technology platforms.

This means AI sustainability is increasingly becoming a procurement and vendor governance issue.

Just as organisations have faced growing scrutiny around labour practices, ethical sourcing and supply chain emissions, AI infrastructure and platform choices may increasingly come under similar examination. Questions around who organisations partner with, where infrastructure is located, and how AI systems are powered may become more important over time.

The challenge for organisations is therefore not simply reducing environmental impact, but demonstrating they understand and are actively managing the trade-offs associated with AI adoption. This may increasingly require:

- greater visibility into AI infrastructure decisions
- closer collaboration between technology and sustainability teams
- clearer governance around AI deployment
- stronger sustainability expectations for suppliers and vendors
- and more intentional use of AI systems internally

Some organisations are already beginning to respond by introducing internal education around responsible AI usage – helping employees understand that everyday behaviours such as unnecessary prompting, repeated retries or generating low-value content can contribute to increased compute demand and digital waste.

This reflects a broader shift in thinking: AI sustainability is not only an infrastructure issue. It is increasingly a behavioural, operational and governance issue as well.



The next phase of AI trust will be operational

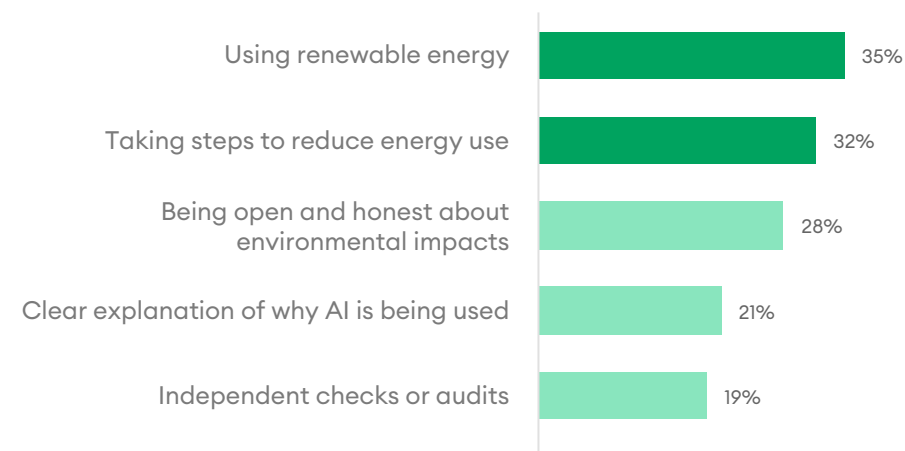
Research from the 2026 AI Trust Report shows that New Zealanders are looking for visible proof that AI is being managed responsibly. When asked what would help address concerns about businesses using AI sustainably, respondents prioritised practical and measurable actions over broad commitments or messaging.

The strongest action identified were related to energy usage – but transparency is also an important factor, as is third-party validation. At the same time, a notable minority remain difficult to convince, with 30% of those holding major concerns saying nothing would address their concerns.

The findings suggest public expectations around responsible AI are becoming increasingly operational rather than theoretical. People are not simply looking for organisations to say they are using AI responsibly. They are increasingly looking for evidence that businesses are actively managing the environmental and operational impacts associated with AI systems. This represents a more demanding trust environment.

Historically, responsible AI conversations have focused heavily on principles, policies and ethics frameworks. While those remain important, the research suggests public expectations are expanding into visible operational decisions including how infrastructure is powered, whether environmental impacts are acknowledged transparently, and whether organisations appear to be deploying AI thoughtfully rather than indiscriminately.

How Businesses Can Help Address Concerns



Q. What would help address your concerns about businesses using AI sustainably? Select up to two.**

Base: Those who are concerned about sustainability or environmental impacts (n=438)

What this means for organisations

Responsible AI is becoming operational. As AI adoption scales, businesses may increasingly need to demonstrate:

- efficient infrastructure choices
- measurable sustainability efforts
- transparency around environmental trade-offs
- credible accountability mechanisms
- and intentional AI deployment practices

This may also change how organisations think about AI maturity internally. Historically, success has often been measured by AI capability and speed of adoption. Increasingly, organisations may also need to consider efficiency of use, governance quality, sustainability impacts, and whether AI is being applied to genuinely high-value problems.

The long-term trust challenge may not simply be how quickly organisations adopt AI – but whether they can scale adoption responsibly.

In Practice: How One NZ is approaching responsible and sustainable AI

At One NZ, our approach to AI is continuing to evolve alongside the technology, data and emerging global best practice. We see significant potential for AI to improve the products and services customers value most – from improving network reliability through AI-powered fault detection and automated network healing, to enabling smarter customer support experiences that help teams focus more directly on customer needs and resolution.

However, we also recognise that scaling AI responsibly requires organisations to think carefully about sustainability, governance and long-term impact.

One NZ takes a sustainability-led approach to AI deployment. The environmental impact of digital services – including AI – are considered as part of the company’s broader Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi)-validated emissions reduction programme. One NZ works with suppliers across its broader value chain to encourage lower-emissions innovation and stronger sustainability practices over time.

Practically, this includes using AI to improve energy efficiency across the mobile network, while also working closely with technology partners such as AWS and Salesforce to reduce the environmental footprint of cloud and AI workloads. As part of this work, One NZ has been collaborating with Salesforce on AI sustainability initiatives focused on understanding and reducing the energy demands associated with AI infrastructure. This included an estimated 83% carbon reduction by shifting Agentforce workloads from the United States to Sweden.

Alongside infrastructure and operational improvements, One NZ is also focused on building internal capability around responsible AI use. This includes a company-wide Responsible AI policy and mandatory staff training programme designed to support ethical, transparent and people-centred use of AI across the organisation – with environmental sustainability a key factor in Responsible AI Principles.

As AI adoption accelerates, One NZ believes sustainable and responsible use will increasingly become part of how organisations build and maintain public trust in AI-enabled products and services.

Emissions reduction target (SBTi) on FY24 base year

100% renewable energy procurement by 2030

42% reduction Scope 1, 2 & 3 by 2030



83% carbon reduction by shifting Salesforce workloads

Responsible AI



- ✔ Policy
- ✔ Principles
- ✔ Staff training

Conclusion

The sustainability implications of AI are still emerging, but the direction of travel is becoming clear.

New Zealanders are beginning to apply the same expectations around accountability, transparency and responsibility to AI that they already apply to other areas of business operations.

The findings in this report suggest sustainability may become one of the defining trust conditions shaping long-term AI adoption.

For organisations, this creates a new leadership challenge. AI capability alone may not be enough to maintain trust.

Methodology

The 2026 One NZ AI Trust Report was conducted by Perceptive using an online survey of New Zealanders aged 18 and over. The research used a nationwide sampling framework and results were weighted to Statistics New Zealand census data, including gender, age and location, to produce a nationally representative sample. A total of 1,001 responses were collected. Fieldwork took place between 6 March and 20 March 2026. The study has a margin of error of plus or minus 3%.

As AI adoption accelerates, sustainability concerns may become a constraint on customer and employee trust and adoption.



Ngā mihi

For more information,
please visit our website:

one.nz/business

This report was developed through a human-led, AI-assisted process using a range of tools, with ChatGPT being used most extensively.

AI was used to support drafting, synthesis and editing, while all analysis, review and final approval remained the responsibility of the One NZ team.

The use of AI throughout the report development process was undertaken in line with One NZ's Responsible AI standards.