WILLS AND PHILANTRHOPY

New Zealand research reveals a multi-billion-dollar bequest gap – and a simple fix

BY **ELEANOR CATER**

We hear it talked about a lot in the professional services sector: the intergenerational wealth transfer of the baby boomers. It's happening now, and it's shifting who makes the big decisions around wealth. Worldwide, it's also increasingly shaping how lawyers and financial advisors approach asset and estate planning conversations.

Overseas, the shift is already visible. In the UK, charitable bequests from estates jumped 22% in 2024. Some of that rise reflects a probate processing backlog, but it also tracks a genuine increase in people choosing to leave charitable gifts, driven largely by a proactive professional services sector, where 21% of professionally written Wills now contain a charitable gift and 77% of advisors say they "always or sometimes" raise the option of charitable giving with clients, often as part of the broader estate planning conversation.[1]

2026 New Zealand research

Recent New Zealand-based research[2] puts a number on the opportunity closer to home. Over half of New Zealanders surveyed said they're open to a conversation about bequests and charitable giving, yet only 20% of professional advisors currently raise the topic. That gap between client appetite and advisor practice is, on the evidence, entirely closeable: simply normalising the giving (or philanthropy) conversation as part of standard practice could dramatically lift the uptake of charitable gifts in Wills.

The 2025 JBWere Bequest Report laid out the New Zealand landscape in detail, and the opportunity it describes is substantial. As our population ages and household wealth remains among the highest in the world on a per-capita basis, there is real scope to grow giving significantly – including structured giving through individual charitable trusts and personal funds held within community foundations. JBWere

frames this as a case for advisors to consider the "full family balance sheet" and what legacy could mean for New Zealand more broadly.

Why the charitable conversation belongs in estate planning

Beyond simply being easy to raise, there are several strong reasons for legal advisors to build the charitable or philanthropy

Community Foundations of Aotearoa NZ

Hei whakakaha i ngā hāpori o Aotearoa

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conversation into asset and estate planning:

1. **Women are increasingly the decision-makers.** A 2024 JBWere report found that the oldest daughter in a family is 50% more likely than other siblings to end up controlling family finances once wealth transfers.[3] Similar research from McKinsey in the US suggests household assets controlled by women will rise from around a third to two-thirds within a decade, and Schroders' UK research points to an even faster timeline given more imminent demographic shifts there. Across every study on the wealth transfer, one theme holds: a major shift toward women as decision-makers is set to reshape wealth management – and, with it, asset and estate planning.[4]
2. **Philanthropy conversations build stickier client relationships.** A values-based conversation about giving can bind clients and the next generation to an advisor or firm in a way that's been described as almost "magical" glue, moving the relationship beyond the technical and into what genuinely matters to a family. Questions like *what do you care about? How would you like to affect change in the world? What do you want to be remembered for?* can prompt real reflection for clients, opening up territory around purpose and wealth that a standard estate plan rarely touches.
3. **It's a distinctly human conversation.** As AI increasingly automates the technical side of advisory work, the "soft" conversations are only becoming more valuable. Philanthropy is a deeply human topic that's unlikely to be replaced by AI any time soon – and open-ended questions about giving can be just as revealing for advisors as they are for their clients.

What are the options for charitable giving?

There are three broad ways a client can structure a charitable bequest:

1. A direct bequest to the charity or charities of the client's choice.
2. A bequest invested in a personal or community fund that gives back in perpetuity.
3. A bequest that establishes a charitable foundation.

In New Zealand, option two is the least well understood of the three – and often the one that needs the most explaining.

Setting up a personal or community fund

New Zealand has 18 not-for-profit Community Foundations that manage personally invested funds. These are often seeded by a bequest and invested in perpetuity to provide long-term giving. They can be personalised to the person making the original bequest, while avoiding the compliance burden and complexity that comes with setting up a private trust.

A curious gap in professional advisor training

It's a curious anomaly that charitable giving and philanthropy rarely feature in legal and financial advisor education, given that there are really only three things a person can do with their wealth: spend it, invest it, or give it away.

That puts legal advisors firmly in the driving seat – and arguably makes it a professional, even ethical, responsibility for those developing asset and estate plans to bring charitable giving and philanthropy into the conversation with their clients. ■

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1. Remember A Charity Professional Advisor Benchmarking Study 2024, Savanta
2. Giving in Aotearoa NZ 2026 BERL and Community Foundations of Aotearoa NZ
3. JBWere The Growth of Women and Wealth 2024
4. UBS Global Wealth Report 2025