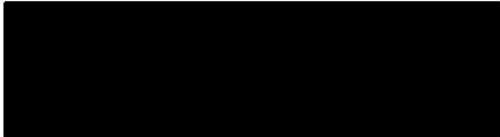


7 July 2025



Via email:



Dear



Thank you for your Official Information Act (OIA) request, received on 26 June 2025. You requested:

"Can I please request any advice Te Waihanga produced on the [changes to the census](#). I'm just looking for formal advice that was provided to Ministerial offices."

Information being released

Searches of our records have identified one document in scope of your request. Please find enclosed the following document:

Item	Date	Document Description	Decision	Section of the OIA applied
1.	19 December 2024	The Government Statistician's in-principle decision on the future of census	Release in part	s9(2)(a)

I have decided to release the document listed above, subject to some information being withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the OIA to protect individuals' privacy.

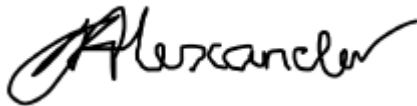
We note that due to the passage of time, some of the commentary in our advice may no longer be current, but this advice did reflect our best understanding of the proposal at the time. Recent information about the future of the census is available on Stats NZ's website here: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/consultations/modernising-our-approach-to-the-2028-census/>.

In making my decision, I have considered the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Official Information Act.

Please note that this letter (with your personal details removed) and the enclosed document may be published on the Commission's website.

This reply addresses the information you requested. You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision.

Yours sincerely



Paul Alexander
Director – Policy, Strategy

The Government Statistician's in-principle decision on the future of census

Date: 19 December 2024

Report No: TW-2024-525

To	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Chris Bishop, Minister for Infrastructure	Consider whether you need any further advice ahead of Cabinet decisions in March 2025.	NA

Attachments

1. The Government Statistician's in-principle decision on the future of census, letter from Hon Andrew Bayly, 7 November 2024.

Contact details

Name	Role	Phone
Philip Stevens	Acting Director, Economics	s9(2)(a)
Peter Nunns	General Manager, Strategy	

Purpose

1. This Aide Memoire provides you with our advice on the Government Statistician's proposal for the future of the census.

Background

2. On 7 November 2024, you received a letter from Minister of Statistics Hon Andrew Bayly outlining the Government Statistician's in-principle decision on the future of census. He expressed a view that "the current approach to the census is unsustainable and facing significant challenges" and that "continuing with the status quo will result in costs continuing to rise and response rates continuing to decline".
3. The Government Statistician's preferred approach is a particular and "significant shift away from the traditional five-yearly census survey". Specifically, delivering the next census primarily using administrative data, supplemented by an annual sample survey and "other tailored solutions (e.g. targeted surveys)".

Census data is essential for infrastructure planning

4. The census is the single most important collection of data supporting our understanding of New Zealand's population. It is the only nationwide survey in New Zealand that requires participation from everyone. It provides an official count of the population and the dwellings where people live and stay, offering a detailed snapshot of life in our communities every five years.
5. Census data is essential for infrastructure planning. Among other things, it is used to understand where population growth is occurring (and hence where new infrastructure is likely to be needed), how the age structure of the population is changing (and hence what type of infrastructure is needed), how people are housed (and hence whether more effort is needed to supply new housing), and how people are using infrastructure like telecommunications and transport. Census data is used as a basis for things like population projections and transport demand modelling.
6. Without good census data, demand forecasting for infrastructure projects is challenging, potentially compromising investment efficiency and value for money.

Administrative data is not yet a good substitute for the census

7. The Government Statistician's proposal is to deliver the next census primarily using administrative data gathered by other government departments and collated and linked together by Statistics New Zealand.
8. Statistics New Zealand has several decades of experience with linking together tax, administrative and survey data through the Integrated Data Infrastructure (which provides data about people) and the Longitudinal Business Database (which provides information about businesses).
9. However, replacing the existing census with administrative data will lead to data quality challenges that may compromise the usefulness of the census over time. We highlight two key aspects of the data quality challenge.

Mitigating data 'drift'

10. First, the existing census survey provides a comprehensive 'frame' that other administrative and survey data can be joined to. Without this, we cannot be certain that we are comprehensively and uniquely counting all people in New Zealand. Exclusive use of administrative data may over-count some people (e.g., people who have interacted with different government agencies using slightly different identifiers) and under-count others (e.g., people who do not use government services or pay taxes). It may also mis-estimate where they live (e.g., if addresses are inaccurate or infrequently updated).
11. In the past, population estimates based on non-census data have exhibited 'drift' relative to actual census counts, especially at the council, local board, or suburb level. Without a periodic census, there may not be a mechanism to periodically correct this drift. A 2016

Statistics New Zealand review found that errors tend to be larger for smaller areas, which creates challenges for infrastructure and housing as demand for these services can be location-specific.¹ Council-level age-group population estimates are considerably less accurate than total population estimates, which creates further challenges for school and hospital planning.

Data quality issues

12. Second, administrative data is gathered or produced by a range of agencies for various purposes, and quality control of this data is variable. While Statistics NZ works with suppliers to improve the quality of this data, data quality remains, at best, variable. In practice, getting good use out of administrative data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure relies on a community of researchers inside and outside of government that assesses, cleans, and transforms the data into a more reliable form for research use.
13. There is no permanent or ongoing funding for these activities, and no dedicated capability outside of the research community. Fundamental improvements to the data system are needed to improve data quality before administrative and survey data can be used to replace the existing census survey. This is alluded to in paragraph 42 of the Minister of Statistics' letter, which states that "Stats NZ will need agencies to commit to: addressing critical data gaps; provide clear and accurate data; consistently implement data standards; collecting data ethically".
14. Without committing to and adequately funding these activities across government, the quality of a census based on administrative data is likely to be compromised.

Alternative approaches could be considered

15. Alternative approaches may address the rising cost of conducting census surveys through greater use of administrative data while better managing the risks identified above.
16. The following approaches could be considered instead, noting that we have not comprehensively scoped or investigated them:
 - a. Moving from a five-yearly census survey to a ten-yearly census survey (as is already standard in some countries like the United States), using administrative and survey data to provide inter-census population estimates
 - b. Funding improvements to data systems and administrative data quality on an ongoing basis, for instance through social investment budgets
 - c. Monitoring and reviewing quality improvements to administrative data and using this to identify when it is likely to be feasible to make a permanent change away from a census survey.
17. If desired, the Infrastructure Commission can provide you with further advice on the implications, for infrastructure planning, of changes to the census.

¹ <https://www.stats.govt.nz/methods/how-accurate-are-population-estimates-and-projections>

Hon Andrew Bayly

Minister of Commerce and Consumer Affairs
Minister for Small Business and Manufacturing
Minister of Statistics



Hon Chris Bishop
Minister of Housing

7 November 2024

Dear Hon Chris Bishop

The Government Statistician's in-principle decision on the future of census

Stats NZ is required to conduct a census every five years surveying the entire population. The census supports various critical functions across government, including setting of electoral boundaries, long-term planning on infrastructure and transport, and population funding models.

The current approach to the census is unsustainable and facing significant challenges. The 2023 Census programme cost approximately \$326 million over five years and had a response rate that fell short of the 90% target. Continuing with the status quo will result in costs continuing to rise and response rates continuing to decline.

Stats NZ has undertaken a public consultation, received advice from an Independent Evaluation Panel on options for the future of census, and presented two options for the Government Statistician's consideration. The Government Statistician has taken an in-principle decision on the preferred approach, which is the option that can be delivered with the funding available. This is set out in the attached briefing.

The Government Statistician's preferred approach is a significant shift away from the traditional five-yearly census survey. The change will result in a delay and temporary reduction in the accuracy of some data – particularly data on smaller population groups. However, the benefits of this change are substantial. In time, the preferred approach will mean Stats NZ can deliver key statistics faster, more frequently, with higher quality, and at a reduced cost. The census will also be more resilient to external events (like earthquakes) and more responsive to changing data needs. The preferred approach will require legislative change and will rely on direct support from across government to improve the quality of data, address data gaps, and build a high-quality pipeline of administrative data.

The Government Statistician cannot implement this change without Cabinet's endorsement. I intend to seek Cabinet endorsement of the Government Statistician's in-principle decision in March 2025. This approach carries some risks and challenges and will rely on your agencies contributing to the change. I am writing to you to highlight the significance of this decision and encourage you to engage with your agencies on what this means for your portfolios ahead of Cabinet.

Beginning today, Stats NZ will be reaching out to inform your agencies of the in-principle decision. Stats NZ will spend the next several months working with them to support understanding of the preferred approach and identify what needs to be done to achieve success. If you wish to meet with the Government Statistician directly to discuss the decision and what it means for you and your portfolios please reach out to my office or the Government Statistician at OfficeoftheGSCE@stats.govt.nz

Yours sincerely,

Hon Andrew Bayly,
Minister of Statistics