

# Decision Paper

## Approach to the manner of taking the next Census



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## Purpose of the report

This report seeks your in-principle decision on the manner of taking the next Census.

## Executive summary

We are on a journey to modernise and transform the census so it can meet the evolving data needs of a modern world. With more population information available, there is an expectation for greater flexibility and responsiveness – delivering faster, more timely data and statistics, meeting the diverse needs of various communities, better serving those typically under-represented in data, and reducing the burden on respondents during data collection.

We have recently undertaken census design work, targeted engagement, and public consultation. We also facilitated a Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel to inform our approach to the next census and beyond. As Government Statistician, it is now your responsibility to determine the manner of taking the census.

Five future administrative data-first census options were considered by the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel. The Panel generally supported our intention to shift to a more transformative administrative data-first census approach, recognising the potential benefits of delivering robust, timely, targeted, and adaptable information in a sustainable way. However, their main concern was that the government's data and statistics system would not be ready to move to, and successfully implement, a more transformative approach by 2028 (when the next census is due to be taken). This is similar to the view also provided in the Report of the Statutory Review of the 2023 Census.

For these reasons, the Panel recommended taking a staged approach. This involved proceeding with a full-enumeration survey in 2028 (Option 1), moving to an approach using a Continuous Attributes Survey in 2033 (Option 4), before transitioning to an approach where census data collection is integrated into other household surveys (Option 5).

Following costing, the five options considered by the Panel were found to significantly exceed the available funding. We therefore cannot implement the Panel's preferred option for 2028 Census as it was originally proposed. Additional funding is unlikely, so we have had to re-design options to fit within the available budget.

In September 2024, two revised options were proposed and considered by your Executive Leadership Team:

Option	Next census	Subsequent censuses
Option A	An administrative data-first approach with a streamlined full-enumeration survey in 2028 (with some administrative data-based measures published as official statistics from late-2026)	Transitioning to an approach in 2033 that uses a continuous Census Attributes Survey and bespoke, tailored collection solutions for the following census
Option B	<p>An administrative data-first approach with a continuous Census Attributes Survey and bespoke, tailored collection solutions that will deliver the census across two phases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- interim population and dwelling counts in 2028</li> <li>- full census variables including updated population and dwelling counts by 2030</li> </ul> <p>(with some administrative data-based measured published as official statistics from late-2026)</p>	Transitioning to an approach where census data collection is undertaken on a continuous and rolling basis.

Both options consider the Panel's view that we must allow sufficient time for the system to improve the quality and availability of administrative data.

Option A presents an opportunity for a measured transition where we attempt to manage risk pertaining to data quality and demonstrate that we have listened to concerns raised by some communities by taking a more familiar approach. However, we consider that Option A has a low likelihood of successful delivery because of limitations involved with achieving desired response rates, while also limiting our ability to shift in the future. Option A also encounters many of the same risks as Option B, just at a later point in time.

Option B presents an opportunity to move directly to a transformed census and enables Stats NZ to realise its strategic ambitions faster. The modular nature of the design provides greater flexibility to manage risks, and we consider our capacity to mitigate the different types of risks associated with Option B to be higher than Option A, especially on a 2030 timeframe. Option B also allows us to actively step into the role of data system lead – developing and enabling an administrative data system that supports government.

There is no risk-free option and both options pose risks to data quality (for different reasons). Under Option A, we expect there would be a reduction in response rates, which would lead to varying data quality levels for different attributes, particularly for priority populations. We would have a limited ability to improve data quality through administrative data, targeted surveys or other bespoke solutions under this option, as there would be limited resources available to prioritise these activities simultaneously.

Under Option B, there will likely be an initial decline in the granularity of the data, particularly for the first census taken under this new approach, while we build up our administrative and Census Attributes Survey data. This may disproportionately affect the variables of interest to iwi-Māori and priority population groups. Over time, however, Option B would allow us to increase our use of community-targeted surveys and other bespoke solutions and publish data more frequently.

Following an analysis of the options, we recommend you agree in-principle to Option B.

We also recommend amending the Data and Statistics Act 2022 (the Act). The Act requires that a census is taken in 2028. Option B involves delivering census data in two parts, with key census variables – population and dwelling counts – published in 2028 using administrative data (meeting the legislative requirement). However, it is also important that our legislation is future-proofed, enabling our future state and better reflecting the new approach to collecting and publishing census data under Option B (and for subsequent censuses). We therefore recommend seeking agreement from Cabinet to make amendments to the Act to provide clarity and flexibility around the timing of census as it transforms to occur on a continuous basis rather than as a one-off event.

Before making your decision, you must be satisfied that your engagement and consultation responsibilities to Māori, the public, and others under legislation have been met. A summary of this activity is provided for you to make that determination.

Progressing with Option B will require a shift in the government data system to ensure we are successful. We will need to build a reliable and high-quality pipeline of administrative data to inform census outputs. There is an opportunity for the data system to take collective responsibility for the future quality of census data and there are a range of levers available to help ensure the successful flow of high-quality relevant data. Preparing the data system will be essential to ensuring success.

To ensure the organisation is planned and prepared, and to provide confidence to Ministers and key stakeholders about the preferred approach, we need to undertake some critical work immediately, including developing a high-level implementation plan and further costing work. This information will be required for the upcoming Cabinet process.

If you agree with the recommended approach, we will brief the Minister on your in-principle decision in mid-October, followed by a briefing to other relevant Ministers of the decision. We will then seek Cabinet endorsement of this approach in March 2025.

## Recommendations

1 **Agree**, in-principle, that Option B (an administrative data-first approach using a continuous Census Attributes Survey and other bespoke, tailored collection solutions, that will deliver census data in two parts: in 2028 and 2030), will be the manner of taking the next census

**Agree** | ~~Disagree~~

2 **Note** that we recommend that the Data and Statistics Act 2022 is amended to future-proof and better reflect the new approach to collecting and publishing census data under Option B (and for subsequent censuses)

**Noted**

3 **Note** that there are data quality limitations with both options, and Option B will likely result in an initial decline in data granularity, particularly for the first census taken under this approach, and that mitigations are being designed to help reduce the impact as much as possible

**Noted**

4 **Note** that you must be satisfied that your engagement and consultation responsibilities to Māori, the public, and others have been met

**Noted**

5 **Note** that robust implementation planning and costing work is critical to the success of Cabinet endorsement of this approach (to be completed by the end of 2024)

**Noted**

6 **Note** there are implications for the data system, and Cabinet agreement will be sought to strengthen the levers available to help mobilise the data system

**Noted**

7 **Agree** to the next steps outlined in this paper to inform Ministers, Cabinet and agencies.

**Agree** | ~~Disagree~~

*Rachael Milicich*

**Rachael Milicich**

Deputy Government Statistician and Deputy Chief Executive,  
Insights & Statistics

*4.10.24.*

**Date**

*Mark Sowden*

**Mark Sowden**

Government Statistician and Chief Executive Stats NZ

*4/10/24*

**Date**

## Context

### Transforming and modernising the way we do census

- 1 For over a decade, we have been thinking about how we can deliver a census differently by using an administrative data-first approach. We first informed Cabinet of these plans in 2012, and in 2015 Cabinet provided approval for us to explore and develop this approach more closely. As society evolves, expectations for delivering more data, and faster, are increasing. We need to ensure our data collection and production methods keep up with these demands and that we are well-placed to support the information needs of different communities.
- 2 This exploratory programme of work provided the foundation for the development of a ‘combined’ census model, which integrated administrative records with census survey responses to reduce the impact of low response rates to the 2018 Census. This model was refined for the 2023 Census and provided a critical component in increasing the resilience of the census collection during challenging external circumstances. Our experience running recent censuses provides good evidence of our ability to embrace change.
- 3 The current census model uses a full-enumeration approach, which relies on conducting a large-scale survey every five years, delivered through a large temporary field workforce. This model is particularly vulnerable to external events, as we have experienced recently through earthquakes, flooding, COVID-19, and a cyclone. It is also becoming increasingly expensive and harder to meet survey response targets, particularly for hard-to-reach groups and populations of interest. This, together with changing societal needs and expectations, means the current model is no longer sustainable. The opportunity to transform to an administrative data-first census model is timely.
- 4 We have spent much of the last 12 months ramping up efforts to transform the way we do census and working towards the possibility of taking a new approach to the next census. This work includes census design work, targeted engagement, public consultation, and running a Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel. It is now time to decide the approach for the next Census.

### International trends

- 5 Our desired shift towards an administrative data-first approach aligns with a growing international trend of National Statistics Offices (particularly in OECD countries) moving away from only using traditional data collection methods, such as a surveying, and towards approaches that increasingly use administrative data.
- 6 For example, across the EU-27, the number of countries undertaking a traditional census model decreased from 17 in 2001 to 6 in 2021. At the same time, the number of EU-27 countries undertaking a register-based or a combined admin data/survey model has increased from 10 in 2001 to 20 in 2021. Across the world, in 2020, about one-quarter of census models had shifted to non-traditional models. In 2023, the United Kingdom’s Office for National Statistics consulted publicly about their plans to evolve towards an administrative data-only census model and an announcement on their approach is expected before the end of 2024. Scotland’s national statistics office will decide on the future of their census in 2026.
- 7 Our international counterparts are facing similar pressures and challenges, including falling response rates, rising survey costs, growing opportunities and expectations for data use, and shifting social attitudes and behaviours. These factors are pushing them to explore new approaches to data collection and census delivery.

## Determining the manner of taking the next census

- 8 As Government Statistician, it is your responsibility to determine the manner of taking the census (as specified under section 16 of the Data and Statistics Act 2022). This paper seeks your in-principle decision on the manner of taking the next Census, with a view also to the manner of taking future censuses.
- 9 In the lead up to this decision, we have undertaken activities such as:
  - convening the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel (which made a recommendation to the Transformation Board on 8 August 2024)
  - ongoing targeted engagement with key stakeholders and partners (e.g. government agencies, iwi and Māori, key communities and groups, and academics)
  - six weeks of public consultation via an online discussion document in May-June 2024.
- 10 Your in-principle decision is an important step towards seeking Cabinet endorsement of the future approach to census.
- 11 To help inform you to make this decision, this paper provides:
  - an overview of the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel's recommendation
  - an overview and analysis of two revised future census options
  - a recommended approach to the manner of taking the next Census
  - supplementary advice and considerations regarding the recommended approach (e.g. implications for legislation, electoral boundary setting, and meeting your engagement and consultation obligations)
  - advice on implementation
  - next steps and timeframes.

## The Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel

### Scope of the Panel

- 12 The Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel (the Panel) consisted of 10 members representing a range of backgrounds and chaired by Dr Jonathan Godfrey. The Panel formed for four weeks between 8 July–2 August 2024 to evaluate the following five administrative data-first options for 2028 Census and beyond:
  - Option 1 – a full-field enumeration in 2028 with targeted non-response follow-up and a target response rate of 80 percent. The 2033 Census cycle will then follow one of Options 3-5.
  - Option 2 – a 25 percent (achieved) sample survey of occupied dwellings in 2028. The 2033 Census cycle will then follow one of Options 3-5.
  - Option 3 – a 5 percent (achieved) sample survey of dwellings annually from 2026, based around an annual collection window (e.g. a 'census day').
  - Option 4 – a 5 percent (achieved) sample survey of dwellings annually from 2026, based on a continuous survey data collection.
  - Option 5 – a 5 percent (achieved) sample survey of dwellings annually from 2026, based on integrating continuous census data collection within other household surveys.

- 13 The scope of the Panel was to provide an independent review and evaluation of the five future census options to enable a robust, defensible, and fulsome review, evaluation, and recommendation process. The Panel evaluated each option against a list of criteria (discussed further below) that were previously agreed by our Strategic Governance Board. The Panel were instructed to deliver a recommendation report to our Transformation Board, which would form a key input into your in-principle decision on the preferred manner of taking the next Census.
- 14 To inform their recommendation, over 100 documents were made available to Panel members. This included a large amount of detailed and technical information about each option, reports and information from the stakeholder engagement and public consultation processes, and guidance on the framework to evaluate and score each census option against the criteria.

## Evaluation criteria

- 15 The Panel evaluated the five census options against the following nine criteria, which were split into the three categories, as below:

### *Meets the data needs of stakeholders, Māori iwi, and hapū*

1. Information needs and data quality
2. Delivers for and with Māori, iwi, and hapū
3. Level of dependence on response rates

### *Feasibility*

4. Complexity
5. Timeline to deliver
6. Change impact

### *Strategic considerations*

7. Strategic enablement
8. Trust and confidence
9. Risk.

- 16 The initial plan was for the Panel to evaluate based on ten criteria. A tenth criterion ('Cost') was included in the feasibility section, but we were unable to provide detailed and accurate cost estimates in time for their assessment. As a result, the Panel were unable to fully evaluate the costs with confidence. This limitation was reflected in their updated Terms of Reference.
- 17 Supported by guidelines, Panel members were asked to score all census options against each of the nine criteria using a five-point scale. The scoring was intended to provide a means for the Panel to help make judgements about the option(s) they might recommend. However, the Panel did not have to recommend the option that had the highest overall score and were welcome to recommend any option.

## The Panel's recommendation

- 18 Following the completion of the four-week Panel process, on 8 August 2024, the Panel Chair, supported by Members, provided the Panel's recommendation and advice to our Transformation Board. Below is an overview of their recommendation.

***The Panel recommend Stats NZ proceed with Option 1 for 2028 Census, with a goal to move to Option 4 in 2033 and then Option 5 after that***

- 19 The Panel generally supported our intention to shift to a more transformative administrative data-first census approach, recognising the potential benefits of delivering robust, timely, targeted, and adaptable information in a sustainable way.
- 20 However, their main concern was that the government's data and statistics system would not be ready to move to, and successfully implement, a more transformative approach (such as Options 3-5) by 2028. This is similar to the view also provided in the Report of the Statutory Review of the 2023 Census. As improving administrative data quality is essential for all options, the Panel recommended taking a staged approach to transforming census. This would ensure trust and confidence is maintained and would also give the system enough time to develop the quality and supply of administrative data. A secondary consideration to minimise the data gap while a transition in approach takes place was also an important factor in the Panel's recommendation to take a staged approach.
- 21 Under their recommended approach:
- Stats NZ would proceed with Option 1 for 2028 Census. Option 1 uses an administrative data-first approach which is supplemented by a full-field enumeration. This equates to surveying approximately 2.25 million private dwellings in 2028. Option 1 is considered an 'evolved' version of the full-field enumeration model that has traditionally been run for census. Of the five options considered, this option is the closest in nature to the combined census model we used in 2023.
  - Stats NZ would then transition to Option 4 for 2033 Census. Option 4 uses an administrative data-first approach which is supplemented by continuous data collection from 5 percent of the population (approx. 97,000 households) throughout the year, every year (as opposed to a single data collection window).
  - Option 5 would then be adopted for censuses beyond 2033. Option 5 builds on Option 4, but the continuous collection is integrated within other household surveys.
- 22 You can find more information about the Panel's analysis and recommendations in their report.

## Revised options

- 23 The Panel's analysis is thorough and the rationale for their recommendation of taking a staged approach to the transformation is clear and well-considered.
- 24 However, after further analysis, we have found that the five options considered by the Panel significantly exceed the available funding. The 2028 Census appropriation, which represents the funding available for running the census, is \$227.120 million (1 July 2024 to 30 June 2029). This represents an approximate mid-point between the \$113.088 million funding for the 2018 Census and the \$326.020 million of funding for the 2023 Census, which included funding to extend the census operation in response to Cyclone Gabrielle. The cost of the next census will also be affected by inflationary pressures.
- 25 Delivering Option 1, as recommended by the Panel, means that the available \$277.120 million would need to fund both a full-enumeration census in 2028 and the work required to shift to a new census model for 2033 and beyond, meaning the funding available to spend on the full-enumeration census will be significantly limited. We consider that we cannot implement the Panel's preferred Option 1 for 2028 Census as it was originally proposed, and have re-designed options to fit within the available budget.

- 26 We have developed two revised options, which you have discussed with your Executive Leadership Team following the Panel's report and updated funding information. In doing so, we have considered the Panel's perspective that we need to allow sufficient time for the system to enhance the quality and supply of administrative data to maintain trust and confidence in the transformation. A summary description of both revised options is provided below.

### Description of Option A

- 27 Option A is an administrative data-first approach with a streamlined full-enumeration survey in 2028, transitioning to a continuous Attributes Survey with bespoke, tailored collection solutions for subsequent censuses.
- 28 The option comprises a full-field enumeration survey in 2028, with a streamlined data collection approach and a target response rate of 80 percent, which is lower than previous censuses. This is designed to be a full-field enumeration approach with a reduced cost to support a measured transition from running a 'combined' model for 2023 Census towards an administrative data-first approach using an annual Census Attributes Survey and targeted surveys and bespoke solutions.
- 29 The field collection approach is fully multi-modal, with an emphasis on self-completion and providing no paper forms - reducing costs and improving flexibility and quality. It involves non-response follow-up activity that is narrowly targeted towards obtaining responses that improve the overall quality of the census dataset.
- 30 This option reuses as much enterprise and 2023 Census infrastructure as possible, with uplifts to meet new capability needs, and introducing some new critical infrastructure to deliver the integrated administrative data-first and survey census environment (which also supports our wider Transformation Programme ambitions).
- 31 Option A will produce administrative data-based measures (e.g. population counts, attributes) that will be published as official statistics from late-2026 to demonstrate the value of an administrative data-first approach and familiarise customers with changes. These releases will become biannual outputs from 2028.
- 32 Outputs from combined data sources for 2028 Census are published from mid-2029 through to mid-2030 (a similar release timeframe and schedule to 2023 Census), with annual census outputs possible from that point.
- 33 With the transition to a continuous Census Attributes Survey, outputs from combined sources would be available annually from 2030, with an ever-increasing ability to aggregate survey data to produce more granular estimates for small population groups (e.g. medium-sized iwi) and small geographies (e.g. territorial authority and Statistical Area Level 2 estimates).

### Description of Option B

- 34 Option B is an administrative data-first census approach that is supplemented by a continuous Census Attributes Survey (that achieves responses from a 5 percent sample of the population annually (planned from 2027)) and bespoke, tailored collection solutions.
- 35 The sample design of the Census Attributes Survey is unclustered, which differs to our current household survey collection. While a clustered household approach makes it easier for Data Collection Specialists to visit households, an unclustered approach is expected to increase data quality.
- 36 The field collection approach is multi-modal, with an emphasis on self-completion and providing no paper forms to reduce costs and improve flexibility and quality. It anticipates mainly self-

completion online, with field collection activities to encourage self-completion or to support phone-based or face-to-face interviewing.

- 37 The questionnaire design is set up to be highly flexible, with the Census Attributes Survey incorporating core census content, rotating content, and sub-sample content to deliver value across different information needs for partner, customer, and community groups. However, it is expected the Census Attributes Survey design will be simple in the first three years of operation to monitor and address performance and adjust the design, if necessary. The design also allows for a targeted survey to follow each annual Census Attributes Survey cycle, slightly offset, to allow the use of the Census Attributes Survey as a frame, if required.
- 38 Questionnaire design and build is pushed out by one year (compared to the original conceptual design for 'Option 4') and the timeline to deliver the Integrated Statistical Data System is extended, reducing delivery pressure and risk.
- 39 The timeframes for Option B also provide the government data system with sufficient lead-in time to prepare the required administrative data for census at the quality needed.
- 40 Option B will produce administrative data-based measures (e.g. population counts, attributes) that will be published as official statistics from late-2026 to demonstrate the value of an administrative data-first approach and familiarise customers with changes. Further, administrative data-based population and dwelling counts will be released in 2028, meeting the legislative requirement to take a census in 2028.
- 41 Outputs from combined data sources (i.e. administrative data and survey data) will start in 2030 and then will be available annually on an ongoing basis, with an ever-increasing ability to aggregate survey data to produce more granular estimates for small population groups (e.g. medium-sized iwi) and small geographies (e.g. territorial authority and Statistical Area Level 2 estimates). Three years of aggregated data will (approximately) equate to territorial authority-level estimates and five years of aggregated data will equate to Statistical Area Level 2 estimates by 2032.

### Re-engaging the Panel on the revised options

- 42 On 30 September 2024, the Panel was reconvened so that we could update them on progress. Specifically, an update was provided on subsequent costing work and the development and refinement of the new options-set.
- 43 The opportunity was provided to the Panel to offer any further insights, should they wish to.
- 44 Panel members highlighted that the budget constraints meant we were in a sub-optimal position for census. They considered that further funding could provide more choice to adequately address data quality limitations and improve data quality from the outset, particularly for smaller and priority populations.
- 45 With knowledge of the new information, the Panel consider their original report to be robust and their recommendations to largely hold true.

### We recommend proceeding with Option B

- 46 A detailed assessment of the impacts of each option against key criteria is set out in **Appendix 1**.
- 47 Both revised options carry a significant risk profile and, while the nature of risk profiles across Option A and Option B differ slightly, the overall severity of those risks is similar. The key distinguishing factors between the risk profiles is that Option A also encounters many of the same risks as Option B, just at a later point in time, with the additional risk that streamlined full enumeration design will not deliver significantly higher quality data than Option B for the

investment. Our capacity to mitigate the different types of risks for Option B, particularly on a 2030 timeframe, is also considered to be higher.

- 48 Option A presents an opportunity for a measured transition. It demonstrates we have listened to the user communities spanning agencies and academia, accepted the recommendation of the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel for a staged approach, and reduces risks pertaining to data granularity. However, it is difficult to escape the low likelihood of successful delivery given the limitations involved with achieving the response rates required for the full enumeration design. Additionally, while Option A is more familiar, it will be all-consuming for the organisation, limiting our ability to manage a dual focus and therefore risks the work needed to successfully shift to a transformed model in the future. Option A also remains vulnerable to external shocks, such as natural disasters, given its one-off event design.
- 49 On the other hand, Option B presents an opportunity to move directly to a transformed census and positions us to realise our strategic ambitions faster. It provides us with the catalyst and authorising environment to actively step into the role of data system lead – developing and enabling an administrative data system that supports government to make agile, fit-for-purpose decisions, including for social investment. The nature of the design of Option B is modular, meaning greater flexibility to manage delivery risks. Option B achieves this without having to commit (more than) two-thirds of the 2028 Census multi-year appropriation to an approach that the organisation has significantly less confidence and capacity to mitigate delivery risks for (i.e. Option A). Option B timeframes also enable a sufficient runway to make the necessary shifts to the administrative data supply chain.
- 50 On balance, it is recommended that you agree in-principle to Option B for the manner of taking the next census.
- 51 We need to rise to the challenges associated with Option B. We need to be mindful of optimism bias – a key learning from the Independent Review of the 2018 Census – and progress at pace, despite the two additional years. Furthermore, Option B comes with significant external dependencies that need to be well-governed and managed, as do the internal dependencies and work to maintain our authorising environment.
- 52 Option B needs communities excited for success. This comes via the modular and flexible design of Option B, particularly the targeted surveying and bespoke solutions for iwi Māori and priority population groups. Option B will also require external support to propel it to succeed. This will be challenging, with information needs for iwi Māori and priority population groups not being met to the same degree (compared to the 2023 Census), particularly in the first (transition) cycle. Our ongoing partnerships and relationships, as well as a clear prioritisation mechanism to meet the needs and aspirations of iwi Māori and priority population groups, will be critical mitigations. These will need to sit alongside our understanding of differential impacts and acknowledgement of enduring information gaps and issues.
- 53 We have identified a series of pre-conditions for Option B to be successfully delivered. These are:
- Ministerial/Cabinet support for the requisite data system shifts related to improving administrative data collections,
  - a transparent and interactive process for engaging with user communities, particularly iwi Māori and priority population groups (this equally applies to technical users and communities questioning the approach and seeking greater value),

- investment in the adoption and implementation of processes, practices, standards and policies for the collection and management of Māori data in a way that delivers to iwi-Māori aspirations),
- an implementation plan that covers a data acquisition plan; high-level design, timing and operational field strategy for the attribute survey, IT roadmap, timing and plan for the investigation of new methods and sources (including a plan to produce dwelling counts in 2028), timeframes for the delivery of datasets, and a stewardship strategy to build trust and confidence in approach, and
- a full cost profile including the cost of data supply from across government, noting the need to reassess current cost estimates on data collection and surveying.

## Legislative implications

- 54 Section 34(1) of the Act states that a census must take place every fifth year after 2023. We are therefore required to take a census in 2028.
- 55 Option B involves delivering census data in two parts, with key census variables – population and dwelling counts – published in 2028 using administrative data.
- 56 However, we acknowledge that people have come to expect the release of a much broader set of variables from a census. In other jurisdictions the census is designed to focus on a smaller list of priority variables (e.g., the United States census – which takes place every ten years – typically asks 10 questions, while we asked over 65 questions in our last census). The UN Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses also define census as a much smaller undertaking – with a focus on population and dwelling counts.
- 57 The planned release of population and dwelling counts under Option B meets obligations for taking a census. This release will also likely include detail on aspects such as household size and relationships, personal income and employment status. The second release in 2030 will be more fulsome (e.g. it will include data on a range of other variables) and updated population and dwelling counts.
- 58 We have sought Crown Law advice on any potential legal risks of this approach, and their advice on possible mitigations that we can build into our design.
- 59 More broadly, it is also important to us that our legislation is future-proofed – enabling our future state and better reflecting the new approach to collecting and publishing census data. This includes:
- clarifying the timing of data collection and publishing under the new approach. For example, that census data collection will occur on a continuous basis rather than as a one-off event (e.g. a ‘census day’) and that some census variables could be released more regularly than every five years
  - simplifying the notification process for collection and clarifying the requirements of the Government Statistician under the new approach.
- 60 We recommend seeking agreement from Cabinet to make these amendments to provide clarity and flexibility. These amendments will also provide a backstop, should Crown Law advise that there may be legal risk associated with the intended Option B outputs meeting the timing requirement of a census as per the current legislation.

- 61 It typically takes 12 months from Cabinet approvals to legislation being passed, but this could be extended to 18 months (or longer) depending on government priorities. If we begin now, indicative estimated milestones are set out below:
- Early-2025: Cabinet approval to draft legislation
  - June 2025: LEG Cabinet Committee approve draft legislation
  - August 2025: The Bill is introduced into the Parliament. Bill's first reading in Parliament
  - Late 2025: Select Committee
  - Early 2026: Second reading in Parliament
  - Early/mid 2026: Committee of the Whole House
  - Mid 2026: Final reading in Parliament. Royal Assent follows
- 62 There are ways to try to streamline the process that we can explore. For example, we can seek Ministerial approval to shorten the select committee report back process – from the usual six months down to four months. We can also seek a high priority for the Bill (so that it is passed within a calendar year), given the implications that a delay could cause for successfully delivering the next census. However, there remains a risk that the Bill is held up in the legislative process and does not pass through Parliament as planned.

### Electoral boundary settings

- 63 Under the Electoral Act 1993, the Government Statistician must calculate the General and Māori electoral populations, using census and electoral roll data. This helps to determine the number of General and Māori electoral districts in New Zealand, as well as their size and boundaries.
- 64 The Electoral Act does not specify how the census should be run. A census approach where the population listing is primarily derived from administrative data would fulfil the Electoral Act requirements, provided it is able to produce the information required for boundary setting.
- 65 The two critical components for producing the information required for boundary setting are:
- population counts to low levels of geography that will support setting boundary definitions that fit within the required quota tolerance (that is, the extent to which an electorate size can vary from the average population in an electorate – the current tolerance is 5 percent)
  - population counts of Māori descent population by geography. These determine both the number of Māori electorate seats and the boundaries for the Māori electorate seats.
- 66 Option B is likely to produce data that will meet these two critical components by the time needed for the next update. Current administrative data counts for the general and Māori descent population are comparable to census before imputation. As with the current census approach, we are confident methods to adjust for coverage error in the population will provide the accuracy required for official population statistics.
- 67 In addition, the Representation Commission will adjust electorate boundaries for the 2026 and 2029 elections using 2023 Census data. Under Option B, full census data for the next census will be available in 2030 – providing sufficient time for the data to be provided to the Representation Commission in time for the 2032 election. We will continue to work with the Electoral Commission to ensure they are kept abreast of progress.
- 68 More broadly, we would prefer the Electoral Act not rely solely on census data to produce electoral populations. Providing flexibility on the statistics used for boundary reviews would ensure that we

can deliver the best possible population data to fulfil the Government Statistician’s role in the electoral process. The ability to use non-census data (i.e. quarterly population estimates) is already possible for determining local government electorates and was also recommended by the recent Independent Electoral Review. We are in discussion with the Ministry of Justice (the agency responsible for administering the Electoral Act) and Electoral Commission about this.

## Data system implications

- 69 To successfully shift to Option B, it is critical that there is support from the data system. We will need to build a reliable and high-quality pipeline of administrative data to inform census outputs. A robust administrative data pipeline also has benefits beyond census and will help progress other government priorities and expectations, such as data for social investment, digital government and other government priorities, as well as improving agency operations.
- 70 The census is important to all agencies. Option B provides the opportunity for the data system to take collective responsibility for the future quality of the census data that agencies depend on and provides for a more efficient system where data is collected at the best possible source. Collective responsibility includes addressing data gaps together, taking responsibility for providing clean and accurate data, implementing data standards, and treating data safely and ethically to maintain trust.
- 71 It is likely that the data system will need some assistance to mobilise, and agencies will look to us for support. The support sought may be expertise, advice, resource or funding. We will have to work with agencies to find solutions that are effective, practical and affordable. Some of the levers available are discussed in the ‘Implementation’ section later in the paper. Once the implementation plan is developed and data needs are clearer, we will have a better understanding of what is needed for different data system partners and how we can work with them. Other jurisdictions provide strong models for us to look to, where government agencies proactively share data to ensure government decisions are underpinned by good quality integrated data - including Singapore, New South Wales, and the United Arab Emirates.

## International obligations

- 72 There are international obligations that we meet by undertaking a census. These obligations are guided by the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (UN Principles).
- 73 The UN Principles define a population census as:
- “...the total process of planning, collecting, compiling, evaluating, disseminating and analysing demographic, economic and social data at the smallest geographic level pertaining, at a specific time, to all persons in a country... it is necessary to have reliable and detailed data on the size, distribution and composition of the population, covering not only the settled population but also homeless persons... data should allow presentation and analysis in terms of statistics on persons and households and for a wide variety of geographic units, ranging from the country as a whole to individual small localities or city blocks”.
- 74 The UN Principles define a housing census as:
- “the number and condition of housing units and facilities as available to the households pertaining, at a specified time, to all living quarters and occupants therefore in a country... the supply of housing units together with information on the structural characteristics and facilities... sufficient demographic, social and economic data concerning the occupants must

be collected to furnish a description of housing conditions and also to provide basic data for analysing the causes of housing deficiencies and for studying possibilities for remedial action”.

- 75 While the UN Principles do not prescribe the manner of taking the census, they provide the following expectations for the essential features of a census:
- Each individual and each set of living quarters is enumerated separately.
  - Census should cover a precisely defined territory over a specified point in time and should include every person and living quarters within its scope, depending on the type of population count required.
  - Census should be taken at regular intervals. It is recommended that countries should make all efforts to undertake a census in years ending “0”, to support comparison with other countries. However, national factors such as legal, administrative, financial and other considerations should be given greater weight when determining the timing of a census.
- 76 Based on the UN Principles, we are confident that we can still meet international obligations under Option B (at least in part by 2028 and in full by 2030). However, we expect data quality for some population and housing variables to be lower than previous censuses during the first cycle of using administrative data and data from the Census Attributes Survey. Over the next and subsequent cycles, we expect data quality to improve, as the new approach is embedded.

## Meeting your responsibilities to Māori

- 77 Before making a decision on the manner of taking the next census, you must be satisfied that your legislative and Te Tiriti responsibilities to Māori have been met. These include your responsibilities as set out in the following sections of the Data and Statistics Act 2022:
- Section 14:

*“The Statistician must,—*

    - (a) in performing the Statistician’s functions under this Act, recognise and respect the Crown’s responsibility to give effect to the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi by recognising the interests of Māori in—*
    - i. the collection of data, the production of statistics, and access to, and use of, data for research as tools for furthering the economic, social, cultural, and environmental well-being of Māori (including iwi and hapū); and*
    - ii. the way in which data is collected, managed, and used for the production of official statistics and for research.”*
  - Section 35:

*“Before determining the manner of taking, and the data to be collected in, a census of population and dwellings, the Statistician must engage with Māori in ways that the Statistician is satisfied will promote the fulfilment of the Statistician’s duty in section 14(a).”*
- 78 To give effect to section 35, we engaged with a range of iwi and Māori partners and groups to discuss plans for transforming data collection, including modernising the census. Our goal was to gather information and feedback on how we can better meet the data needs and aspirations of iwi and Māori. We engaged with 19 key partners (including 14 iwi) and extended our broader community outreach to an additional 170 iwi or Māori groups (of which 48 were iwi or iwi-affiliated groups). Further information on our engagement approach is attached as **Appendix 2**.

- 79 Following this engagement, a separate Māori and iwi engagement report was produced for the Evaluation Panel’s consideration. Responsibilities to Māori were part of the Panel’s evaluation criteria. This included a specific criterion: *‘Delivers for and with Māori, iwi and hapū’*. This criterion guided the Panel to consider whether the future census options:
- meet the data needs of Māori, iwi and hapū
  - recognise customs, rights and interests in the way data will be collected, managed, and used
  - foster Māori capability and capacity to collect, use and access data
  - provide value for Māori.
- 80 Development of these considerations were guided by the Government Statistician’s responsibilities under the Act and the recommendations of the External Data Quality Panel following the 2018 Census. Some elements of the Māori Data Governance model, as published by Te Kāhui Raraunga, were also considered.
- 81 Engagement with Māori and iwi is ongoing and will continue throughout the future census design phases.

### Meeting your consultation responsibilities

- 82 Before making a decision on the manner of taking the next Census, you must be satisfied that your consultation responsibilities under section 36 of the Act have been met.

- Section 36:

*“Before determining the manner of taking, and the data to be collected in, a census of population and dwellings, the Statistician must consult, in the manner that the Statistician thinks appropriate, —*

*(a) the public sector agencies and the Offices of Parliament that, in the opinion of the Statistician, have a particular interest in the census:*

*(b) the public generally:*

*(c) the individuals and organisations that, in the opinion of the Statistician, have a particular interest in the census.”*

- 83 To meet these responsibilities, we took a two-pronged approach to engagement:

- Targeted engagement with key stakeholders, including government agencies, key communities and groups, and academics. These engagements have focused on understanding our stakeholders’ context, data and information needs, communicating the case for change and understanding support for, and concerns about, the proposed shift to using an administrative data-first approach for census. A particular focus has been on engaging with government agencies that have signalled high interest in census data, such as population-focussed agencies and key data customers.

Between January and June 2024, our targeted outreach engagement involved approximately 140 respondents, which included public organisations, community leaders, and over 30 government agencies. Since June, we have continued to engage with stakeholders, including running technical information sessions for government agencies, and meeting with priority population-focussed agencies and civil society groups.

- Public consultation, supported by an online discussion document. The document was translated into a wide range of languages and accessible formats, and consultation was open

for six weeks between 8 May – 19 June 2024. We wanted to hear from New Zealanders about what matters to them and to understand their views about using more administrative data for census. We received a total of 467 written submissions responding to the discussion document. Overall, approximately two-thirds of respondents were supportive or neutral (50 percent supportive; 15 percent neutral/difficult to determine) of the proposed change. In addition, most submitters (58 percent) indicated they are okay with Stats NZ reusing the information that they have already provided to other agencies.

- 84 Responses varied across these processes. Some were supportive of the approach; others indicated their support would depend on whether their data needs or privacy concerns could be met. Some were not supportive, and others felt they did not have enough information from us to commit their support at this stage. The feedback and responses from both the targeted engagement and public consultation approaches fed into the Panel’s evaluation material and have been captured for the upcoming census design work through a Summary of Submissions document and an engagement repository for the targeted engagement.
- 85 Targeted engagement will continue throughout the future census design phases and a second round of public consultation about the census design is planned for 2025.

## Implementation of recommended option

- 86 If you agree to Option B, the implementation actions outlined below are critical to ensuring a successful census transformation.

### Develop an implementation plan and indicative costings

- 87 To ensure the organisation is planned and prepared, and to provide confidence to Ministers and key stakeholders about the preferred approach, we need to develop a high-level implementation plan that includes information on:
- the production of administrative data-based measures and underlying datasets that will be available for release in 2028 (including which data sets will be made available and when)
  - building the administrative data pipeline (such as the required technology infrastructure, data systems and processes, statistical methods, and survey design/sampling strategies)
  - the design and roll-out of the continuous Census Attributes Survey
  - the data that agencies will be expected to provide over time, and by when
  - governance and decision-making forums for overseeing the next census and Transformation Programme.
- 88 It is also important to note that further design work is still needed focussed on making small adjustments to our approach to fit within our funding envelope. We need to also be able to identify any financial impacts for other agencies.
- 89 It is important that this work begins as soon as possible, so that this information can be shared with the Minister of Statistics, Cabinet, and key stakeholders for the upcoming Cabinet paper process in early 2025. This information will be essential for building trust and confidence in the new approach and getting Cabinet’s endorsement.

### Establish levers required to help improve the administrative data pipeline

- 90 We will need to build a reliable and high-quality pipeline of administrative data to inform census outputs. An administrative data pipeline will support the process of sourcing the data we need to

deliver our core products and will require engaging with the data system to ensure high-quality, interoperable, and timely data is provided across the system.

- 91 Developing the administrative data pipeline will require system-wide support and building collective responsibility for census data. We need agencies to commit to:
- addressing critical data gaps – where administrative data is not of sufficient quality (e.g. disability data, iwi affiliation data and some housing and dwelling variables)
  - providing clean and accurate data – the flow of high-quality data is essential for realising the benefits of administrative data in the data system
  - consistently implementing data standards – greater interoperability will improve the quality and usability of data across the data system
  - collecting data ethically and within privacy and security frameworks to maintain trust – ethical and secure data flow across the data system is essential for maintaining trust and confidence and continued data supply.
- 92 To support mobilising the data system, there are a range of possible levers available to help improve the administrative data pipeline, including:
- the development and release of a Census Multi-Year Data and Statistical Plan (MYDSP) that specifies, under the Act, the datasets most needed for census
  - a Cabinet directive that would set timeframes for supplier agencies to enhance the administrative data needed, consistent with the MYDSP
  - establishment of an interdepartmental executive board to promote collective responsibility, remove barriers to progress, and drive the system towards supplying the necessary data
  - mandatory data requests – issued by the Government Statistician under section 23 of the Act and approved by the Minister of Statistics, whereby agencies will be required to provide data in the manner, form and date specified
  - building and updating existing system networks (i.e. refreshing the terms of reference for the Information Group) to focus on improving data flows to support government priorities
  - Cabinet endorsement of quality and interoperability standards, with an expectation that they are set as part of any system’s transformation programme, to drive data quality.
- 93 We can also enhance our roles and levers to support the system change and make data sharing easier, such as:
- an enhanced data broker service to provide a more coordinated effort for bringing data in from across the system
  - new data sharing agreements to set the quality standards and expectations
  - an improved data ingestion platform to support the free flow of data into our data systems
  - tailoring support for agencies.

## Social licence

- 94 Social licence is underpinned by ongoing conversations with New Zealanders that build trust, confidence and understanding, through transparency in the use of the data, by having ethical data practices, and by demonstrating benefit to New Zealanders. By addressing people’s concerns, we can create an environment where individuals and communities are willing to share their

information. Without maintaining the social licence to collect data, we risk low engagement rates, face public criticism, and will limit opportunities to maximise data for New Zealand.

- 95 Recently, through our public consultation on modernising the census, we asked New Zealanders how much they trust us with their information. 54 percent of submitters said they trust us to keep their data safe. Across submitters, privacy and security were a concern, with submitters wanting transparent processes for data sharing, and assurance that government cannot use their data to target them.
- 96 Submitters also want to know how their data will be used and prefer consent as part of the process of using more administrative data, visibility of how their data is being used, and an easy way to access and correct personal data held by government. Submitters want assurance that an administrative data-first approach will still provide high-quality data, and that we will continue to survey where administrative data is not available or of sufficient quality. This would make submitters more comfortable with the reuse of their data and in turn improve social license.
- 97 To maintain and improve our social licence, our new strategic engagement model is focussed on building trusted relationships with key partners, customers and communities. An example of this in practice is an upcoming social media campaign aimed at increasing public understanding on the value of data. This type of work must continue and be prioritised to ensure our key stakeholders and the public have trust and confidence in us throughout the census transformation journey and beyond.
- 98 It will be important that a comprehensive strategy is developed to build trust and confidence in the approach. This will need to draw on efforts from across Stats NZ including the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation and the Data Ethics Advisory Group, External Affairs, Strategic Engagement – Māori Partnerships and Outcomes, and Insights and Statistics.

### Impacts for wider our work

- 99 Due to the importance of census and the scale of change required, it is likely that much of our future focus will be delivering to this new approach. Option B is transformative for the organisation and will require a focussed effort developing our internal capability, resources, and infrastructure. It is likely this will have an impact on the prioritisation of a range of internal programmes and outputs, but this will be better known once an implementation plan is in place.
- 100 For example, the shift to Option B will, in the future, impact the scope and/or size of our other household surveys. The impact of this is currently not certain, but this will be an ongoing consideration for us under any approach that uses administrative data-first and/or surveys.
- 101 While there are impacts on our wider work, it is also important to acknowledge that this shift generates wider benefits, such as for our role in supporting improved data for social investment and our broader Transformation Programme objectives, through the focus on developing our administrative data capabilities.

### Reputational risks

- 102 It will be important to ensure that our positive reputation is maintained so there is continued support for census transformation. Understanding the reputational risks is important and below three key risks to our reputation are identified, with mitigation options, for your awareness and consideration.

#### *Delivery*

- 103 There is a risk that we will be unable to deliver the new approach as planned, which will have a negative reputational impact. The impact of the reputational damage will depend on the scale of

non-delivery (e.g. not delivering an element of the model versus not being able to deliver the whole approach). Further detailed design, implementation planning and costing, and strong governance will help mitigate this risk. Using the strengthened levers to drive data system change will also help mitigate the risk.

#### *Data quality*

- 104 There is risk that lower data quality, particularly within the first cycle of the new approach, leads to disappointment from customers, communities and stakeholders and receives high levels of scrutiny, particularly from the data user community. This risk is very likely, however, early communication about data quality will help manage expectations and reaction, as well as setting out the new data opportunities. We will also focus on the development of targeted or bespoke data collection approaches to help improve quality over time while identifying and realising new data sources to help limit the data quality impacts.

#### *Low trust and confidence*

- 105 A loss of trust and confidence could occur for a variety of reasons. The public may not understand the value of administrative data and form negative views which could have an impact on trust. Concerns may also arise if people do not trust the quality of administrative data, or do not understand the privacy and safety processes in place to ensure security and ethics.
- 106 There is also a risk to trust and confidence through the decision itself, particularly given the feedback from the panel, agencies, and public submissions, which has been split. There may be concerns or reservations because of this.
- 107 To mitigate these risks, we need to bring stakeholders on the journey through clear communications and messaging about the importance and potential of administrative data.
- 108 As this approach is new, we do not yet have concrete detail on timing and type of data to be released. It is hard for customers, communities, and stakeholders to trust the proposal without detail, and we could also be perceived as being not transparent about the approach. The implementation planning will be critical to mitigating this issue, as it will allow us to clearly communicate what data users can expect and by when. Using targeted surveys and bespoke solutions to collect census data provides an opportunity to work with communities to ensure the content is relevant to participants and to provide an opportunity to partner more on census data collection and other activities over several cycles.
- 109 It is important that activities around building social licence, communications and engagement continue to be prioritised to maintain and build trust and confidence.

## Next steps

110 Once you make your in-principle decision, we will begin a process of informing the Minister of Statistics and Cabinet and engaging with key agencies. The key milestones for this are below.

Date (TBC)	Milestone
4 Oct 2024	You make an in-principle decision on the manner of taking the census
18 Oct 2024	Briefing to the Minister informing him of the in-principle decision and seeking agreement to the next steps for the Cabinet process
Late Oct 2024	Minister of Statistics to forward a briefing to key Ministers informing them of the in-principle decision, outlining next steps for the Cabinet process, and providing the opportunity to engage further
Nov 2024	Engagement with opposition parties
Nov 2024	Targeted agency engagement to socialise your in-principle decision
9 Dec 2024	First draft of Cabinet paper seeking endorsement to the approach sent to the Minister's office
March 2025	Consideration of Cabinet paper at ECO Cabinet Committee

111 Over the October-December 2024 period, we will also undertake the key work required to deliver a successful Cabinet paper, which includes:

- implementation planning for Option B
- development of the cost profile (for Stats NZ and the data system)
- preparing for legislative change
- development of the case for change, narrative, policy proposals (including strengthened levers), and impact analysis.

112 As part of the implementation planning, we will also begin planning for a second round of public consultation on the data to be collected in the census (as required under the Data and Statistics Act). The timing of this consultation is subject to discussions with Crown Law, planning around which statistics and underlying datasets will be published and when, and the timing for legislative change.

## Appendices

Appendix 1: Assessment of Option A and Option B against key criteria

Appendix 2: Summary of the Approach to iwi and Māori engagement

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