



23 October 2025

Rt Hon Chris Hipkins
Leader of the Labour Party
Parliament Buildings

Dear Chris

Consultation on census modernisation and boundary review proposals

In May 2025, following more than a decade of design and policy work across three governments, and public consultation, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's preferred approach, and general direction of travel across various governments, to modernise the census through an administrative-data-first model.¹ The intent is that census statistics will be published annually from 2030.

Each census triggers the electoral boundary review process and, as a result, changes to the Electoral Act 1993 (including entrenched provisions) are necessary. We are seeking your support on necessary or desirable changes to the Electoral Act 1993. This includes changes to some of the entrenched provisions, which will require a 75 percent majority to pass.

We invite your feedback and seek cross-party support, by 14 November 2025, on three areas of proposed change relating to the census and boundary reviews:

- Part 1: the Government Statistician's approach to modernising the census. While the Government Statistician holds sole responsibility for technical aspects of the census, including data collection and statistical production, it is important census modernisation receives cross-party support to preserve public trust in official statistics. Further detail on this proposal is set out in **Appendix 1**.
- Part 2: proposed changes to the boundary review trigger. A change to the boundary review trigger is needed to avoid annual boundary reviews following census modernisation. We are communicating to you, in-confidence, that Cabinet has agreed in principle, subject to the outcomes of this consultation, to options for changes to boundary review provisions. Further detail is set out in **Appendix 2**.
- Part 3: the timing of the next boundary review. Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election. However, the Government Statistician has confirmed that census results would not be available soon enough after a 2028 census to enable a boundary review to be completed ahead of the 2029 election. The Government Statistician has confirmed that good progress is being made on an administrative-data-first census and that, consequently, a robust boundary review using alternative population data could be undertaken in 2028 if the law is changed to allow this. Further detail is set out in **Appendix 3**.

¹ New Zealand Government "Sharpened focus on quality economic, population stats" (press release, 18 June 2025, available at beehive.govt.nz/release/sharpened-focus-quality-economic-population-stats).

Context for change

Census data supports a range of critical government functions, including infrastructure and transport planning, population-based funding models, and economic reporting. Currently, Stats NZ must take a census every five years and has historically done so by a survey of the whole population, delivered through a large, temporary workforce. In 2018 and 2023, the census survey was supplemented by administrative data, as part of a combined census model.

You may be aware that the 2023 Census programme had a survey response rate that fell short of its 90 percent target. It is no longer feasible to achieve the response rates required to maintain census data quality at a reasonable cost—the 2023 Census programme cost approximately \$326 million over five years, a significant increase from the 2018 Census (\$126 million) and 2013 Census (\$104 million). In addition, the traditional survey-led approach no longer delivers data to the public as quickly as it is needed.

Currently, each time a census occurs it automatically triggers an electoral boundary review. Adopting an administrative data-first approach to the census would, unless concurrent changes are made to the Electoral Act, result in annual electoral boundary reviews. Annual electoral boundary reviews would be unnecessary, add additional expense to taxpayers, and would not be useful as it would not align with the election cycle. We consider that changes to the Electoral Act are not only necessary, but central to ensuring the boundary review process is sustainable and enduring. The alternative would be a highly uncertain and confusing boundary review system, which could undermine trust in New Zealand's electoral system.

Proposed next steps

We seek your feedback on these matters by 14 November 2025. If you agree to these proposals, following this consultation process:

- the Minister of Justice, with the Minister of Statistics as needed, will confirm final policy decisions for changes to the Electoral Act ahead of drafting a bill;
- the Government will introduce a Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and an Electoral Amendment Bill to Parliament in early 2026;
- the Government will also be seeking your support in the Business Committee to associate the Bills so that they progress through Parliament simultaneously before the 2026 election.

If you would like to discuss these matters or would like to arrange a briefing with officials to seek further information on any of the more technical aspects of these proposals, please contact Hamish Fraser (Office of Minister of Justice) or Jonathan Franklin (Office of Minister of Statistics).

We look forward to hearing from you regarding your preferred approach on these matters, to progress an approach that is in line with cross-party support.

Yours sincerely



Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice



Hon Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Statistics

Appendix 1: Census modernisation

The issue

Census data and statistics inform policy and research, resource allocation, and investment in health, education, and infrastructure. Some census statistics also have a constitutional function, as they are used for setting electoral boundaries.

The traditional census model is no longer sustainable in the face of growing public resistance to completing census forms and rising costs to maintain survey data quality. Other countries are facing similar declines in survey response rates. This is driving an international shift away from traditional census survey delivery models, toward administrative data.

The Government Statistician's preferred approach to modernising the census

On 12 May 2025, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's decision to replace the traditional five-yearly census survey of the population, with an annual administrative data-first census of the population from 2030.

An administrative data-first census responds to the declining affordability and data quality associated with the traditional survey-led model. It places the census on a more sustainable footing, while also driving broader data system improvements and ensuring a census that:

- provides greater flexibility to collect different data to better meet needs, and providing important data faster and more often;
- improves efficiency across government by making better use of data government has already collected, enabling more accurate, timely, and efficient decision-making;
- increases resilience, with greater flexibility to recover from disruptions (such as severe weather events) as it is not reliant on a short collection window;
- improves long-term cost sustainability, as opposed to the rising costs of maintaining adequate response rates in a survey-first approach.

The census is evolving, not being abolished. The administrative data-first census is an important and logical next step. Its key components are:

- increased use of administrative data: this forms the foundation of the new model, reducing the need for everyone to complete a survey and enabling faster, more efficient statistical production;
- a new annual sample survey (Census Attribute Survey): a flexible survey that will run year-round, completed by a small percentage of the population (around 60,000 households per year). This survey will help verify the accuracy of administrative data and collect additional information that administrative data alone cannot provide;
- tailored solutions: such as targeted surveys, data standards, and community collections, developed with iwi Māori and smaller population groups, to help meet their data needs.

The Minister of Statistics intends to update the Government Statistician's statutory census obligations from five-yearly data collection to annual publication of statistics from the census. By the end of each financial year, the Government Statistician would publish statistics from the census relating to the previous financial year. This change provides certainty that census statistics are published each year, and up-to-date measures of the population that reflect shifts in the population for the purposes of activities such as electoral boundary setting.

This shift would not affect the Government Statistician's obligations under electoral law to report the results of the census for electoral purposes. However, because the shift would mean census results being reported annually, changes to the Electoral Act are required to avoid each annual census triggering an annual boundary review (refer **Appendix 2**).

The Government plans to hold the next census in 2030

Designing and delivering the initial administrative data-first census is a considerable undertaking and it is critical to get it right. The new model also depends on the pooling of sample data over several years of the new annual census survey (Census Attribute Survey). Given these points, Cabinet has agreed to reschedule the next census from 2028 to 2030, to allow time for cross-agency improvements to administrative data, and to collect the necessary data through the new census survey.

Over the next five years, Stats NZ will release population and dwellings data in stages as the administrative data-first approach is introduced. From late 2026, Stats NZ will publish preliminary population data for some measures (such as age, sex, location, and ethnicity) using administrative data only. These releases will become official key population measures from 2028 that can support critical government planning functions; however these releases will not cover the full range of variables normally associated with a census. Stats NZ will also release official dwellings data in 2028.

Stats NZ is legally required to proceed with a census in 2028 if the law does not change. Such a census would be a minimum viable statistical product, with significant data quality and delivery risks. To avoid the costs of preparing for a census in 2028, law changes enabling at least the delay of a census in 2028 must pass before the 2026 General Election.

Further public consultation on census topics and approach is planned

The design of the new census model has followed over a decade of work, including public consultation in 2024, prior to the Government Statistician's decision to adopt an admin data-first approach. Further, under the Data and Statistics Act 2022, the Government Statistician is required, prior to each census, to consult the public and engage iwi Māori on the data to be collected and the manner of collection.

The Government Statistician plans for further public consultation on the next census. Public consultation is scheduled to begin on 3 November 2025 and will run for 7 weeks. Following consultation, the Government Statistician will take a final decision on content to be included in next census and how the data will be collected. A report setting out the decision will be published in July 2026.

There are no significant changes proposed to the census topics that New Zealanders and data users are familiar with. Consultation materials outline several new and enhanced measures and provide greater detail how data will be collected.

The new approach to the census has the flexibility to reflect topics or population features of emerging interest. If you have areas of particular concern, these could be considered by Stats NZ when taking its final content and design decisions, noting that the Government Statistician makes final decisions on census approach and content. As such, we invite you to submit to this process if you wish.

The consultation will also include an opportunity to feedback on how the data needs of smaller population groups can be met. Stats NZ will work with partners and priority communities to develop tailored solutions for iwi Māori, Pacific peoples, LGBTIQ+, disabled, ethnic minority communities, and transient and homeless populations. These communities are an initial focus until 2030, as they are likely to experience data loss or reduced data granularity through shifting to the admin data-first model.

Requirements to keep census data private, secure, and confidential remain the same

Stats NZ is required by law to ensure individuals are not identifiable in published data and will maintain strict legal protections. For example, all staff and researchers working with data continuing to be required to sign a lifetime certificate of confidentiality.

Stats NZ will continue to apply strong privacy and security safeguards and comply with all legal protections in the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

Appendix 2: Boundary review process from 2030 under modernised census

The issue

The census is a longstanding component to setting the size, number, and boundaries of electorates (the boundary review process). It provides the statutory trigger for this process, and population data as shown in the last census forms the basis for how both the general and Māori electoral populations are calculated in New Zealand. The outcome of these calculations determines the number of electorate seats in Parliament.

The shift towards an annual census raises the issue of how frequently boundary reviews should be triggered. To avoid annual boundary reviews, the Electoral Act 1993 will need to be amended to identify a new 'trigger' for a boundary review.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle

Currently, there is a disconnect between the timing of boundary reviews (triggered by the five-yearly census) and the three-yearly electoral cycles to which they relate. The Minister of Justice's preferred option is for the Electoral Act to provide a trigger for a regular boundary review process that is more directly connected to the electoral system.

The proposal is that a boundary review takes place every second electoral cycle, with boundaries being in place for two elections.

To achieve this, the Electoral Act would prescribe a statutory deadline in every second electoral cycle by which the Representation Commission must complete each boundary review. There is a choice in relation to the specified statutory deadline of either 12 or 15 months in advance of the expiry of the relevant term of Parliament. We are seeking views on your preferred timing under this approach:

- a 12-month deadline is most likely to allow for the most up to date census data to be used to inform the boundary review, but the boundaries would be confirmed closer to when the next general election may be held. This therefore provides less time for stakeholders, like the Electoral Commission and political parties, to prepare for each election;
- with a 15-month deadline, the census data used in each boundary review could, in some circumstances, be from a year earlier than under a 12-month deadline. However, it would give longer for electoral stakeholders to prepare for each election.

Other timing aspects of the boundary review process, such as specified meetings of the Representation Commission, would also be aligned with this deadline.

Boundary reviews would still use census data

Under this approach, we propose to confirm that the boundary review process will continue to use census data. The Electoral Act would specify that the calculations of both the general and Māori electoral populations should be based on the most recent census results available to the Government Statistician, which would enable the Representation Commission to complete the boundary review within its deadline. As such, the choice of deadline above may affect which year census data will likely be drawn from.

Illustrative example A general election takes place in the second half of 2035. The parliamentary term following that election is set to expire on 28 October 2038 .	12-month deadline	15-month deadline
- the Surveyor-General calls the first meeting of the Representation Commission to appoint the Chair - Stats NZ provides population data to the Surveyor-General and the Representation Commission	by 28 October 2036	by 28 October 2036
the second meeting of the Representation Commission is called for the purpose of considering provisional boundary maps and calling public submissions	no later than February 2037 (census and roll data likely both relating to 30 June 2036)	no later than October 2036 (census data likely relating to 30 June 2035; however, electoral roll data would relate to a separate electoral or post-election date, see below explanation)
The boundary review is completed	by 28 April 2037 at the latest	by 28 January 2037 at the latest
	by 28 October 2037	by 28 July 2037

Timing for calculating the Māori electoral population (MEP)

Currently the calculation of the MEP is based on data related to Māori population and electoral roll data as 'on counting day'. This generally means 'on census day' unless the census and a general election are held in the same year, in which case 'counting day' is 1 April the following year.

As part of the census modernisation work, it is expected that the Data and Statistics Act 2022 will be amended to require the Government Statistician, by notice in the *Gazette*, to specify a 'reference date' for each annual census publication (or it will default to 30 June). Similar to 'census day', this reference date specifies the date about which the population and dwellings data is calculated.

Under this proposal, 'counting day' would be the same as the reference date for the census data being used in that boundary review. If, however, the relevant census reference date is in an election year and precedes a general election, then the 'counting day' for electoral roll data would be later in that year, i.e. a post-election date that ensures the most recent Māori enrolment data is used.

An alternative option is to retain a five-yearly boundary review tied to a census

This alternative approach would largely retain the existing boundary review settings as much as practicable, with only necessary amendments made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census. Under this approach, every fifth annual census would trigger the boundary review process, i.e. every five years.

This option is very similar to the status quo so would retain existing boundary review settings as much as possible. As now, the date on which the boundaries are known ahead of a general election will vary. Depending on the timing between census data being available and the election, in some years this could result in boundaries being finalised in early to mid-way through an election year.

Under this option, for the purpose of calculating the MEP, 'counting day' will be the same date as the 'reference date' used for that fifth annual census publication. The exception would be where that reference date falls in the same year as a general election, in which case the counting day would be 1 April the following year. This follows the existing approach taken in the Electoral Act and ensures the most up-to-date Māori enrolment data is used to calculate the MEP.

We seek your views on your preferred approach for a new boundary review trigger

Either of the above options would support census modernisation.

As noted above, the Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle, given this approach is more directly connected to the electoral system.

However, as the boundary review process is important to all New Zealanders and all political parties, we are interested in your view on these proposed changes. If ultimately there is a stronger preference to retain boundary review settings as close as possible to current settings, with only necessary changes made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census, we are open to progressing the latter approach.

Appendix 3: Timing of the next boundary review

The issue

Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election.

The Government Statistician has confirmed that, due to the length of time it would have taken to finalise results for a 2028 Census under the previous combined census approach, there would not have been enough time to redraw electoral boundaries before the 2029 General Election.

While there are historical examples (e.g. 2001, 2013) of a census happening in the year before an election and boundaries being redrawn before the election, these are not comparable to the present situation because:

- the census model in use at those times had fewer and less complex statistical steps, relying only on survey data
- census survey response rates have since declined too much for that model to now deliver reliable census statistics in time, and at a reasonable cost.

We understand that there may still be an expectation that a boundary review would have been completed in advance of the 2029 General Election.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option would leave electoral boundaries fixed until 2032, as provided by current law

As you will be aware, the Representation Commission recently refixed New Zealand's electoral boundaries as part of Boundary Review 2025. Electoral boundaries remain valid until they are next reviewed and refixed by the Representation Commission.

The Minister of Justice's preference is that electoral boundaries fixed in Boundary Review 2025 remain fixed until the 2029–2032 parliamentary term. This ensures clarity to electorates and stakeholders—including political parties—about what the electoral boundaries will be ahead of the 2029 General Election.

It is not unusual for one set of census data to be used to determine the boundaries for two elections. Most of New Zealand's boundary reviews in recent years have drawn on one set of census data to inform the electoral districts for two electoral cycles.

However, we acknowledge that there may be various views on this matter. If there is a strong preference for some form of 'transitional' boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, then there is potential for the Electoral Act 1993 to be amended to enable this. Officials have advised that a 'transitional' boundary review would require identifying an:

- alternative trigger for such a boundary review—a date specified in legislation, e.g. sometime between mid-2027 and early 2028;
- alternative up-to-date and accurate population data source (given census data will not be available)—which could be certified by the Government Statistician for this purpose (similar to existing provisions in the Local Electoral Act 2001); and
- an appropriate date for calculating the MEP in relation to the specified data source.

There are risks to any 'transitional' boundary review. Because census data will not be available, using alternative data may draw public concern about whether the underlying data can be trusted. Equally, given the potential expectation of a boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, not undertaking a 'transitional' boundary review may raise similar concerns about whether electorates are representative.



23 October 2025

Hon Marama Davidson and Chlöe Swarbrick
Leaders of the Green Party
Parliament Buildings

Dear Marama and Chlöe

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Hon Dr Shane Reti
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Illustrative example	12-month deadline	15-month deadline
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the second meeting of the Representation Commission is called for the purpose of considering provisional boundary maps and calling public submissions	by 28 April 2037 at the latest	by 28 January 2037 at the latest
The boundary review is completed	by 28 October 2037	by 28 July 2037

Timing for calculating the Māori electoral population (MEP)

Currently the calculation of the MEP is based on data related to Māori population and electoral roll data as 'on counting day'. This generally means 'on census day' unless the census and a general election are held in the same year, in which case 'counting day' is 1 April the following year.

As part of the census modernisation work, it is expected that the Data and Statistics Act 2022 will be amended to require the Government Statistician, by notice in the *Gazette*, to specify a 'reference date' for each annual census publication (or it will default to 30 June). Similar to 'census day', this reference date specifies the date about which the population and dwellings data is calculated.

Under this proposal, 'counting day' would be the same as the reference date for the census data being used in that boundary review. If, however, the relevant census reference date is in an election year and precedes a general election, then the 'counting day' for electoral roll data would be later in that year, i.e. a post-election date that ensures the most recent Māori enrolment data is used.

An alternative option is to retain a five-yearly boundary review tied to a census

This alternative approach would largely retain the existing boundary review settings as much as practicable, with only necessary amendments made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census. Under this approach, every fifth annual census would trigger the boundary review process, i.e. every five years.

This option is very similar to the status quo so would retain existing boundary review settings as much as possible. As now, the date on which the boundaries are known ahead of a general election will vary. Depending on the timing between census data being available and the election, in some years this could result in boundaries being finalised in early to mid-way through an election year.

Under this option, for the purpose of calculating the MEP, 'counting day' will be the same date as the 'reference date' used for that fifth annual census publication. The exception would be where that reference date falls in the same year as a general election, in which case the counting day would be 1 April the following year. This follows the existing approach taken in the Electoral Act and ensures the most up-to-date Māori enrolment data is used to calculate the MEP.

We seek your views on your preferred approach for a new boundary review trigger

Either of the above options would support census modernisation.

As noted above, the Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle, given this approach is more directly connected to the electoral system.

However, as the boundary review process is important to all New Zealanders and all political parties, we are interested in your view on these proposed changes. If ultimately there is a stronger preference to retain boundary review settings as close as possible to current settings, with only necessary changes made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census, we are open to progressing the latter approach.

Appendix 3: Timing of the next boundary review

The issue

Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election.

The Government Statistician has confirmed that, due to the length of time it would have taken to finalise results for a 2028 Census under the previous combined census approach, there would not have been enough time to redraw electoral boundaries before the 2029 General Election.

While there are historical examples (e.g. 2001, 2013) of a census happening in the year before an election and boundaries being redrawn before the election, these are not comparable to the present situation because:

- the census model in use at those times had fewer and less complex statistical steps, relying only on survey data
- census survey response rates have since declined too much for that model to now deliver reliable census statistics in time, and at a reasonable cost.

We understand that there may still be an expectation that a boundary review would have been completed in advance of the 2029 General Election.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option would leave electoral boundaries fixed until 2032, as provided by current law

As you will be aware, the Representation Commission recently refixed New Zealand's electoral boundaries as part of Boundary Review 2025. Electoral boundaries remain valid until they are next reviewed and refixed by the Representation Commission.

The Minister of Justice's preference is that electoral boundaries fixed in Boundary Review 2025 remain fixed until the 2029–2032 parliamentary term. This ensures clarity to electorates and stakeholders—including political parties—about what the electoral boundaries will be ahead of the 2029 General Election.

It is not unusual for one set of census data to be used to determine the boundaries for two elections. Most of New Zealand's boundary reviews in recent years have drawn on one set of census data to inform the electoral districts for two electoral cycles.

However, we acknowledge that there may be various views on this matter. If there is a strong preference for some form of 'transitional' boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, then there is potential for the Electoral Act 1993 to be amended to enable this. Officials have advised that a 'transitional' boundary review would require identifying an:

- alternative trigger for such a boundary review—a date specified in legislation, e.g. sometime between mid-2027 and early 2028;
- alternative up-to-date and accurate population data source (given census data will not be available)—which could be certified by the Government Statistician for this purpose (similar to existing provisions in the Local Electoral Act 2001); and
- an appropriate date for calculating the MEP in relation to the specified data source.

There are risks to any 'transitional' boundary review. Because census data will not be available, using alternative data may draw public concern about whether the underlying data can be trusted. Equally, given the potential expectation of a boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, not undertaking a 'transitional' boundary review may raise similar concerns about whether electorates are representative.



23 October 2025

Hon David Seymour
Leader of the ACT New Zealand
Parliament Buildings

Dear David

Consultation on census modernisation and boundary review proposals

In May 2025, following more than a decade of design and policy work across three governments, and public consultation, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's preferred approach, and general direction of travel across various governments, to modernise the census through an administrative-data-first model.¹ The intent is that census statistics will be published annually from 2030.

Each census triggers the electoral boundary review process and, as a result, changes to the Electoral Act 1993 (including entrenched provisions) are necessary. We are seeking your support on necessary or desirable changes to the Electoral Act 1993. This includes changes to some of the entrenched provisions, which will require a 75 percent majority to pass.

We invite your feedback and seek cross-party support, by 14 November 2025, on three areas of proposed change relating to the census and boundary reviews:

- Part 1: the Government Statistician's approach to modernising the census. While the Government Statistician holds sole responsibility for technical aspects of the census, including data collection and statistical production, it is important census modernisation receives cross-party support to preserve public trust in official statistics. Further detail on this proposal is set out in **Appendix 1**.
- Part 2: proposed changes to the boundary review trigger. A change to the boundary review trigger is needed to avoid annual boundary reviews following census modernisation. We are communicating to you, in-confidence, that Cabinet has agreed in principle, subject to the outcomes of this consultation, to options for changes to boundary review provisions. Further detail is set out in **Appendix 2**.
- Part 3: the timing of the next boundary review. Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election. However, the Government Statistician has confirmed that census results would not be available soon enough after a 2028 census to enable a boundary review to be completed ahead of the 2029 election. The Government Statistician has confirmed that good progress is being made on an administrative-data-first census and that, consequently, a robust boundary review using alternative population data could be undertaken in 2028 if the law is changed to allow this. Further detail is set out in **Appendix 3**.

¹ New Zealand Government "Sharpened focus on quality economic, population stats" (press release, 18 June 2025, available at beehive.govt.nz/release/sharpened-focus-quality-economic-population-stats).

Context for change

Census data supports a range of critical government functions, including infrastructure and transport planning, population-based funding models, and economic reporting. Currently, Stats NZ must take a census every five years and has historically done so by a survey of the whole population, delivered through a large, temporary workforce. In 2018 and 2023, the census survey was supplemented by administrative data, as part of a combined census model.

You may be aware that the 2023 Census programme had a survey response rate that fell short of its 90 percent target. It is no longer feasible to achieve the response rates required to maintain census data quality at a reasonable cost—the 2023 Census programme cost approximately \$326 million over five years, a significant increase from the 2018 Census (\$126 million) and 2013 Census (\$104 million). In addition, the traditional survey-led approach no longer delivers data to the public as quickly as it is needed.

Currently, each time a census occurs it automatically triggers an electoral boundary review. Adopting an administrative data-first approach to the census would, unless concurrent changes are made to the Electoral Act, result in annual electoral boundary reviews. Annual electoral boundary reviews would be unnecessary, add additional expense to taxpayers, and would not be useful as it would not align with the election cycle. We consider that changes to the Electoral Act are not only necessary, but central to ensuring the boundary review process is sustainable and enduring. The alternative would be a highly uncertain and confusing boundary review system, which could undermine trust in New Zealand's electoral system.

Proposed next steps

We seek your feedback on these matters by 14 November 2025. If you agree to these proposals, following this consultation process:

- the Minister of Justice, with the Minister of Statistics as needed, will confirm final policy decisions for changes to the Electoral Act ahead of drafting a bill;
- the Government will introduce a Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and an Electoral Amendment Bill to Parliament in early 2026;
- the Government will also be seeking your support in the Business Committee to associate the Bills so that they progress through Parliament simultaneously before the 2026 election.

If you would like to discuss these matters or would like to arrange a briefing with officials to seek further information on any of the more technical aspects of these proposals, please contact Hamish Fraser (Office of Minister of Justice) or Jonathan Franklin (Office of Minister of Statistics).

We look forward to hearing from you regarding your preferred approach on these matters, to progress an approach that is in line with cross-party support.

Yours sincerely



Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice



Hon Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Statistics

Appendix 1: Census modernisation

The issue

Census data and statistics inform policy and research, resource allocation, and investment in health, education, and infrastructure. Some census statistics also have a constitutional function, as they are used for setting electoral boundaries.

The traditional census model is no longer sustainable in the face of growing public resistance to completing census forms and rising costs to maintain survey data quality. Other countries are facing similar declines in survey response rates. This is driving an international shift away from traditional census survey delivery models, toward administrative data.

The Government Statistician's preferred approach to modernising the census

On 12 May 2025, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's decision to replace the traditional five-yearly census survey of the population, with an annual administrative data-first census of the population from 2030.

An administrative data-first census responds to the declining affordability and data quality associated with the traditional survey-led model. It places the census on a more sustainable footing, while also driving broader data system improvements and ensuring a census that:

- provides greater flexibility to collect different data to better meet needs, and providing important data faster and more often;
- improves efficiency across government by making better use of data government has already collected, enabling more accurate, timely, and efficient decision-making;
- increases resilience, with greater flexibility to recover from disruptions (such as severe weather events) as it is not reliant on a short collection window;
- improves long-term cost sustainability, as opposed to the rising costs of maintaining adequate response rates in a survey-first approach.

The census is evolving, not being abolished. The administrative data-first census is an important and logical next step. Its key components are:

- increased use of administrative data: this forms the foundation of the new model, reducing the need for everyone to complete a survey and enabling faster, more efficient statistical production;
- a new annual sample survey (Census Attribute Survey): a flexible survey that will run year-round, completed by a small percentage of the population (around 60,000 households per year). This survey will help verify the accuracy of administrative data and collect additional information that administrative data alone cannot provide;
- tailored solutions: such as targeted surveys, data standards, and community collections, developed with iwi Māori and smaller population groups, to help meet their data needs.

The Minister of Statistics intends to update the Government Statistician's statutory census obligations from five-yearly data collection to annual publication of statistics from the census. By the end of each financial year, the Government Statistician would publish statistics from the census relating to the previous financial year. This change provides certainty that census statistics are published each year, and up-to-date measures of the population that reflect shifts in the population for the purposes of activities such as electoral boundary setting.

This shift would not affect the Government Statistician's obligations under electoral law to report the results of the census for electoral purposes. However, because the shift would mean census results being reported annually, changes to the Electoral Act are required to avoid each annual census triggering an annual boundary review (refer **Appendix 2**).

The Government plans to hold the next census in 2030

Designing and delivering the initial administrative data-first census is a considerable undertaking and it is critical to get it right. The new model also depends on the pooling of sample data over several years of the new annual census survey (Census Attribute Survey). Given these points, Cabinet has agreed to reschedule the next census from 2028 to 2030, to allow time for cross-agency improvements to administrative data, and to collect the necessary data through the new census survey.

Over the next five years, Stats NZ will release population and dwellings data in stages as the administrative data-first approach is introduced. From late 2026, Stats NZ will publish preliminary population data for some measures (such as age, sex, location, and ethnicity) using administrative data only. These releases will become official key population measures from 2028 that can support critical government planning functions; however these releases will not cover the full range of variables normally associated with a census. Stats NZ will also release official dwellings data in 2028.

Stats NZ is legally required to proceed with a census in 2028 if the law does not change. Such a census would be a minimum viable statistical product, with significant data quality and delivery risks. To avoid the costs of preparing for a census in 2028, law changes enabling at least the delay of a census in 2028 must pass before the 2026 General Election.

Further public consultation on census topics and approach is planned

The design of the new census model has followed over a decade of work, including public consultation in 2024, prior to the Government Statistician's decision to adopt an admin data-first approach. Further, under the Data and Statistics Act 2022, the Government Statistician is required, prior to each census, to consult the public and engage iwi Māori on the data to be collected and the manner of collection.

The Government Statistician plans for further public consultation on the next census. Public consultation is scheduled to begin on 3 November 2025 and will run for 7 weeks. Following consultation, the Government Statistician will take a final decision on content to be included in next census and how the data will be collected. A report setting out the decision will be published in July 2026.

There are no significant changes proposed to the census topics that New Zealanders and data users are familiar with. Consultation materials outline several new and enhanced measures and provide greater detail how data will be collected.

The new approach to the census has the flexibility to reflect topics or population features of emerging interest. If you have areas of particular concern, these could be considered by Stats NZ when taking its final content and design decisions, noting that the Government Statistician makes final decisions on census approach and content. As such, we invite you to submit to this process if you wish.

The consultation will also include an opportunity to feedback on how the data needs of smaller population groups can be met. Stats NZ will work with partners and priority communities to develop tailored solutions for iwi Māori, Pacific peoples, LGBTIQ+, disabled, ethnic minority communities, and transient and homeless populations. These communities are an initial focus until 2030, as they are likely to experience data loss or reduced data granularity through shifting to the admin data-first model.

Requirements to keep census data private, secure, and confidential remain the same

Stats NZ is required by law to ensure individuals are not identifiable in published data and will maintain strict legal protections. For example, all staff and researchers working with data continuing to be required to sign a lifetime certificate of confidentiality.

Stats NZ will continue to apply strong privacy and security safeguards and comply with all legal protections in the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

Appendix 2: Boundary review process from 2030 under modernised census

The issue

The census is a longstanding component to setting the size, number, and boundaries of electorates (the boundary review process). It provides the statutory trigger for this process, and population data as shown in the last census forms the basis for how both the general and Māori electoral populations are calculated in New Zealand. The outcome of these calculations determines the number of electorate seats in Parliament.

The shift towards an annual census raises the issue of how frequently boundary reviews should be triggered. To avoid annual boundary reviews, the Electoral Act 1993 will need to be amended to identify a new 'trigger' for a boundary review.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle

Currently, there is a disconnect between the timing of boundary reviews (triggered by the five-yearly census) and the three-yearly electoral cycles to which they relate. The Minister of Justice's preferred option is for the Electoral Act to provide a trigger for a regular boundary review process that is more directly connected to the electoral system.

The proposal is that a boundary review takes place every second electoral cycle, with boundaries being in place for two elections.

To achieve this, the Electoral Act would prescribe a statutory deadline in every second electoral cycle by which the Representation Commission must complete each boundary review. There is a choice in relation to the specified statutory deadline of either 12 or 15 months in advance of the expiry of the relevant term of Parliament. We are seeking views on your preferred timing under this approach:

- a 12-month deadline is most likely to allow for the most up to date census data to be used to inform the boundary review, but the boundaries would be confirmed closer to when the next general election may be held. This therefore provides less time for stakeholders, like the Electoral Commission and political parties, to prepare for each election;
- with a 15-month deadline, the census data used in each boundary review could, in some circumstances, be from a year earlier than under a 12-month deadline. However, it would give longer for electoral stakeholders to prepare for each election.

Other timing aspects of the boundary review process, such as specified meetings of the Representation Commission, would also be aligned with this deadline.

Boundary reviews would still use census data

Under this approach, we propose to confirm that the boundary review process will continue to use census data. The Electoral Act would specify that the calculations of both the general and Māori electoral populations should be based on the most recent census results available to the Government Statistician, which would enable the Representation Commission to complete the boundary review within its deadline. As such, the choice of deadline above may affect which year census data will likely be drawn from.

Illustrative example A general election takes place in the second half of 2035. The parliamentary term following that election is set to expire on 28 October 2038 .	12-month deadline	15-month deadline
- the Surveyor-General calls the first meeting of the Representation Commission to appoint the Chair - Stats NZ provides population data to the Surveyor-General and the Representation Commission	by 28 October 2036 no later than February 2037 (census and roll data likely both relating to 30 June 2036)	by 28 October 2036 no later than October 2036 (census data likely relating to 30 June 2035; however, electoral roll data would relate to a separate electoral or post-election date, see below explanation)
the second meeting of the Representation Commission is called for the purpose of considering provisional boundary maps and calling public submissions	by 28 April 2037 at the latest	by 28 January 2037 at the latest
The boundary review is completed	by 28 October 2037	by 28 July 2037

Timing for calculating the Māori electoral population (MEP)

Currently the calculation of the MEP is based on data related to Māori population and electoral roll data as 'on counting day'. This generally means 'on census day' unless the census and a general election are held in the same year, in which case 'counting day' is 1 April the following year.

As part of the census modernisation work, it is expected that the Data and Statistics Act 2022 will be amended to require the Government Statistician, by notice in the *Gazette*, to specify a 'reference date' for each annual census publication (or it will default to 30 June). Similar to 'census day', this reference date specifies the date about which the population and dwellings data is calculated.

Under this proposal, 'counting day' would be the same as the reference date for the census data being used in that boundary review. If, however, the relevant census reference date is in an election year and precedes a general election, then the 'counting day' for electoral roll data would be later in that year, i.e. a post-election date that ensures the most recent Māori enrolment data is used.

An alternative option is to retain a five-yearly boundary review tied to a census

This alternative approach would largely retain the existing boundary review settings as much as practicable, with only necessary amendments made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census. Under this approach, every fifth annual census would trigger the boundary review process, i.e. every five years.

This option is very similar to the status quo so would retain existing boundary review settings as much as possible. As now, the date on which the boundaries are known ahead of a general election will vary. Depending on the timing between census data being available and the election, in some years this could result in boundaries being finalised in early to mid-way through an election year.

Under this option, for the purpose of calculating the MEP, 'counting day' will be the same date as the 'reference date' used for that fifth annual census publication. The exception would be where that reference date falls in the same year as a general election, in which case the counting day would be 1 April the following year. This follows the existing approach taken in the Electoral Act and ensures the most up-to-date Māori enrolment data is used to calculate the MEP.

We seek your views on your preferred approach for a new boundary review trigger

Either of the above options would support census modernisation.

As noted above, the Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle, given this approach is more directly connected to the electoral system.

However, as the boundary review process is important to all New Zealanders and all political parties, we are interested in your view on these proposed changes. If ultimately there is a stronger preference to retain boundary review settings as close as possible to current settings, with only necessary changes made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census, we are open to progressing the latter approach.

Appendix 3: Timing of the next boundary review

The issue

Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election.

The Government Statistician has confirmed that, due to the length of time it would have taken to finalise results for a 2028 Census under the previous combined census approach, there would not have been enough time to redraw electoral boundaries before the 2029 General Election.

While there are historical examples (e.g. 2001, 2013) of a census happening in the year before an election and boundaries being redrawn before the election, these are not comparable to the present situation because:

- the census model in use at those times had fewer and less complex statistical steps, relying only on survey data
- census survey response rates have since declined too much for that model to now deliver reliable census statistics in time, and at a reasonable cost.

We understand that there may still be an expectation that a boundary review would have been completed in advance of the 2029 General Election.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option would leave electoral boundaries fixed until 2032, as provided by current law

As you will be aware, the Representation Commission recently refixed New Zealand's electoral boundaries as part of Boundary Review 2025. Electoral boundaries remain valid until they are next reviewed and refixed by the Representation Commission.

The Minister of Justice's preference is that electoral boundaries fixed in Boundary Review 2025 remain fixed until the 2029–2032 parliamentary term. This ensures clarity to electorates and stakeholders—including political parties—about what the electoral boundaries will be ahead of the 2029 General Election.

It is not unusual for one set of census data to be used to determine the boundaries for two elections. Most of New Zealand's boundary reviews in recent years have drawn on one set of census data to inform the electoral districts for two electoral cycles.

However, we acknowledge that there may be various views on this matter. If there is a strong preference for some form of 'transitional' boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, then there is potential for the Electoral Act 1993 to be amended to enable this. Officials have advised that a 'transitional' boundary review would require identifying an:

- alternative trigger for such a boundary review—a date specified in legislation, e.g. sometime between mid-2027 and early 2028;
- alternative up-to-date and accurate population data source (given census data will not be available)—which could be certified by the Government Statistician for this purpose (similar to existing provisions in the Local Electoral Act 2001); and
- an appropriate date for calculating the MEP in relation to the specified data source.

There are risks to any 'transitional' boundary review. Because census data will not be available, using alternative data may draw public concern about whether the underlying data can be trusted. Equally, given the potential expectation of a boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, not undertaking a 'transitional' boundary review may raise similar concerns about whether electorates are representative.



23 October 2025

Rt Hon Winston Peters
Leader of New Zealand First
Parliament Buildings

Dear Winston

Consultation on census modernisation and boundary review proposals

In May 2025, following more than a decade of design and policy work across three governments, and public consultation, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's preferred approach, and general direction of travel across various governments, to modernise the census through an administrative-data-first model.¹ The intent is that census statistics will be published annually from 2030.

Each census triggers the electoral boundary review process and, as a result, changes to the Electoral Act 1993 (including entrenched provisions) are necessary. We are seeking your support on necessary or desirable changes to the Electoral Act 1993. This includes changes to some of the entrenched provisions, which will require a 75 percent majority to pass.

We invite your feedback and seek cross-party support, by 14 November 2025, on three areas of proposed change relating to the census and boundary reviews:

- **Part 1: the Government Statistician's approach to modernising the census.** While the Government Statistician holds sole responsibility for technical aspects of the census, including data collection and statistical production, it is important census modernisation receives cross-party support to preserve public trust in official statistics. Further detail on this proposal is set out in **Appendix 1**.
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Context for change

Census data supports a range of critical government functions, including infrastructure and transport planning, population-based funding models, and economic reporting. Currently, Stats NZ must take a census every five years and has historically done so by a survey of the whole population, delivered through a large, temporary workforce. In 2018 and 2023, the census survey was supplemented by administrative data, as part of a combined census model.

You may be aware that the 2023 Census programme had a survey response rate that fell short of its 90 percent target. It is no longer feasible to achieve the response rates required to maintain census data quality at a reasonable cost—the 2023 Census programme cost approximately \$326 million over five years, a significant increase from the 2018 Census (\$126 million) and 2013 Census (\$104 million). In addition, the traditional survey-led approach no longer delivers data to the public as quickly as it is needed.

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Proposed next steps

We seek your feedback on these matters by 14 November 2025. If you agree to these proposals, following this consultation process:

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- the Government will also be seeking your support in the Business Committee to associate the Bills so that they progress through Parliament simultaneously before the 2026 election.

If you would like to discuss these matters or would like to arrange a briefing with officials to seek further information on any of the more technical aspects of these proposals, please contact Hamish Fraser (Office of Minister of Justice) or Jonathan Franklin (Office of Minister of Statistics).

We look forward to hearing from you regarding your preferred approach on these matters, to progress an approach that is in line with cross-party support.

Yours sincerely



Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice



Hon Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Statistics

Appendix 1: Census modernisation

The issue

Census data and statistics inform policy and research, resource allocation, and investment in health, education, and infrastructure. Some census statistics also have a constitutional function, as they are used for setting electoral boundaries.

The traditional census model is no longer sustainable in the face of growing public resistance to completing census forms and rising costs to maintain survey data quality. Other countries are facing similar declines in survey response rates. This is driving an international shift away from traditional census survey delivery models, toward administrative data.

The Government Statistician's preferred approach to modernising the census

On 12 May 2025, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's decision to replace the traditional five-yearly census survey of the population, with an annual administrative data-first census of the population from 2030.

An administrative data-first census responds to the declining affordability and data quality associated with the traditional survey-led model. It places the census on a more sustainable footing, while also driving broader data system improvements and ensuring a census that:

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The census is evolving, not being abolished. The administrative data-first census is an important and logical next step. Its key components are:

- increased use of administrative data: this forms the foundation of the new model, reducing the need for everyone to complete a survey and enabling faster, more efficient statistical production;
- a new annual sample survey (Census Attribute Survey): a flexible survey that will run year-round, completed by a small percentage of the population (around 60,000 households per year). This survey will help verify the accuracy of administrative data and collect additional information that administrative data alone cannot provide;
- tailored solutions: such as targeted surveys, data standards, and community collections, developed with iwi Māori and smaller population groups, to help meet their data needs.

The Minister of Statistics intends to update the Government Statistician's statutory census obligations from five-yearly data collection to annual publication of statistics from the census. By the end of each financial year, the Government Statistician would publish statistics from the census relating to the previous financial year. This change provides certainty that census statistics are published each year, and up-to-date measures of the population that reflect shifts in the population for the purposes of activities such as electoral boundary setting.

This shift would not affect the Government Statistician's obligations under electoral law to report the results of the census for electoral purposes. However, because the shift would mean census results being reported annually, changes to the Electoral Act are required to avoid each annual census triggering an annual boundary review (refer **Appendix 2**).

The Government plans to hold the next census in 2030

Designing and delivering the initial administrative data-first census is a considerable undertaking and it is critical to get it right. The new model also depends on the pooling of sample data over several years of the new annual census survey (Census Attribute Survey). Given these points, Cabinet has agreed to reschedule the next census from 2028 to 2030, to allow time for cross-agency improvements to administrative data, and to collect the necessary data through the new census survey.

Over the next five years, Stats NZ will release population and dwellings data in stages as the administrative data-first approach is introduced. From late 2026, Stats NZ will publish preliminary population data for some measures (such as age, sex, location, and ethnicity) using administrative data only. These releases will become official key population measures from 2028 that can support critical government planning functions; however these releases will not cover the full range of variables normally associated with a census. Stats NZ will also release official dwellings data in 2028.

Stats NZ is legally required to proceed with a census in 2028 if the law does not change. Such a census would be a minimum viable statistical product, with significant data quality and delivery risks. To avoid the costs of preparing for a census in 2028, law changes enabling at least the delay of a census in 2028 must pass before the 2026 General Election.

Further public consultation on census topics and approach is planned

The design of the new census model has followed over a decade of work, including public consultation in 2024, prior to the Government Statistician's decision to adopt an admin data-first approach. Further, under the Data and Statistics Act 2022, the Government Statistician is required, prior to each census, to consult the public and engage iwi Māori on the data to be collected and the manner of collection.

The Government Statistician plans for further public consultation on the next census. Public consultation is scheduled to begin on 3 November 2025 and will run for 7 weeks. Following consultation, the Government Statistician will take a final decision on content to be included in next census and how the data will be collected. A report setting out the decision will be published in July 2026.

There are no significant changes proposed to the census topics that New Zealanders and data users are familiar with. Consultation materials outline several new and enhanced measures and provide greater detail how data will be collected.

The new approach to the census has the flexibility to reflect topics or population features of emerging interest. If you have areas of particular concern, these could be considered by Stats NZ when taking its final content and design decisions, noting that the Government Statistician makes final decisions on census approach and content. As such, we invite you to submit to this process if you wish.

The consultation will also include an opportunity to feedback on how the data needs of smaller population groups can be met. Stats NZ will work with partners and priority communities to develop tailored solutions for iwi Māori, Pacific peoples, LGBTIQ+, disabled, ethnic minority communities, and transient and homeless populations. These communities are an initial focus until 2030, as they are likely to experience data loss or reduced data granularity through shifting to the admin data-first model.

Requirements to keep census data private, secure, and confidential remain the same

Stats NZ is required by law to ensure individuals are not identifiable in published data and will maintain strict legal protections. For example, all staff and researchers working with data continuing to be required to sign a lifetime certificate of confidentiality.

Stats NZ will continue to apply strong privacy and security safeguards and comply with all legal protections in the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

Appendix 2: Boundary review process from 2030 under modernised census

The issue

The census is a longstanding component to setting the size, number, and boundaries of electorates (the boundary review process). It provides the statutory trigger for this process, and population data as shown in the last census forms the basis for how both the general and Māori electoral populations are calculated in New Zealand. The outcome of these calculations determines the number of electorate seats in Parliament.

The shift towards an annual census raises the issue of how frequently boundary reviews should be triggered. To avoid annual boundary reviews, the Electoral Act 1993 will need to be amended to identify a new 'trigger' for a boundary review.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle

Currently, there is a disconnect between the timing of boundary reviews (triggered by the five-yearly census) and the three-yearly electoral cycles to which they relate. The Minister of Justice's preferred option is for the Electoral Act to provide a trigger for a regular boundary review process that is more directly connected to the electoral system.

The proposal is that a boundary review takes place every second electoral cycle, with boundaries being in place for two elections.

To achieve this, the Electoral Act would prescribe a statutory deadline in every second electoral cycle by which the Representation Commission must complete each boundary review. There is a choice in relation to the specified statutory deadline of either 12 or 15 months in advance of the expiry of the relevant term of Parliament. We are seeking views on your preferred timing under this approach:

- a 12-month deadline is most likely to allow for the most up to date census data to be used to inform the boundary review, but the boundaries would be confirmed closer to when the next general election may be held. This therefore provides less time for stakeholders, like the Electoral Commission and political parties, to prepare for each election;
- with a 15-month deadline, the census data used in each boundary review could, in some circumstances, be from a year earlier than under a 12-month deadline. However, it would give longer for electoral stakeholders to prepare for each election.

Other timing aspects of the boundary review process, such as specified meetings of the Representation Commission, would also be aligned with this deadline.

Boundary reviews would still use census data

Under this approach, we propose to confirm that the boundary review process will continue to use census data. The Electoral Act would specify that the calculations of both the general and Māori electoral populations should be based on the most recent census results available to the Government Statistician, which would enable the Representation Commission to complete the boundary review within its deadline. As such, the choice of deadline above may affect which year census data will likely be drawn from.

Illustrative example A general election takes place in the second half of 2035. The parliamentary term following that election is set to expire on 28 October 2038 .	12-month deadline	15-month deadline
- the Surveyor-General calls the first meeting of the Representation Commission to appoint the Chair - Stats NZ provides population data to the Surveyor-General and the Representation Commission	by 28 October 2036 no later than February 2037 (census and roll data likely both relating to 30 June 2036)	by 28 October 2036 no later than October 2036 (census data likely relating to 30 June 2035; however, electoral roll data would relate to a separate electoral or post-election date, see below explanation)
the second meeting of the Representation Commission is called for the purpose of considering provisional boundary maps and calling public submissions	by 28 April 2037 at the latest	by 28 January 2037 at the latest
The boundary review is completed	by 28 October 2037	by 28 July 2037

Timing for calculating the Māori electoral population (MEP)

Currently the calculation of the MEP is based on data related to Māori population and electoral roll data as 'on counting day'. This generally means 'on census day' unless the census and a general election are held in the same year, in which case 'counting day' is 1 April the following year.

As part of the census modernisation work, it is expected that the Data and Statistics Act 2022 will be amended to require the Government Statistician, by notice in the *Gazette*, to specify a 'reference date' for each annual census publication (or it will default to 30 June). Similar to 'census day', this reference date specifies the date about which the population and dwellings data is calculated.

Under this proposal, 'counting day' would be the same as the reference date for the census data being used in that boundary review. If, however, the relevant census reference date is in an election year and precedes a general election, then the 'counting day' for electoral roll data would be later in that year, i.e. a post-election date that ensures the most recent Māori enrolment data is used.

An alternative option is to retain a five-yearly boundary review tied to a census

This alternative approach would largely retain the existing boundary review settings as much as practicable, with only necessary amendments made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census. Under this approach, every fifth annual census would trigger the boundary review process, i.e. every five years.

This option is very similar to the status quo so would retain existing boundary review settings as much as possible. As now, the date on which the boundaries are known ahead of a general election will vary. Depending on the timing between census data being available and the election, in some years this could result in boundaries being finalised in early to mid-way through an election year.

Under this option, for the purpose of calculating the MEP, 'counting day' will be the same date as the 'reference date' used for that fifth annual census publication. The exception would be where that reference date falls in the same year as a general election, in which case the counting day would be 1 April the following year. This follows the existing approach taken in the Electoral Act and ensures the most up-to-date Māori enrolment data is used to calculate the MEP.

We seek your views on your preferred approach for a new boundary review trigger

Either of the above options would support census modernisation.

As noted above, the Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle, given this approach is more directly connected to the electoral system.

However, as the boundary review process is important to all New Zealanders and all political parties, we are interested in your view on these proposed changes. If ultimately there is a stronger preference to retain boundary review settings as close as possible to current settings, with only necessary changes made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census, we are open to progressing the latter approach.

Appendix 3: Timing of the next boundary review

The issue

Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election.

The Government Statistician has confirmed that, due to the length of time it would have taken to finalise results for a 2028 Census under the previous combined census approach, there would not have been enough time to redraw electoral boundaries before the 2029 General Election.

While there are historical examples (e.g. 2001, 2013) of a census happening in the year before an election and boundaries being redrawn before the election, these are not comparable to the present situation because:

- the census model in use at those times had fewer and less complex statistical steps, relying only on survey data
- census survey response rates have since declined too much for that model to now deliver reliable census statistics in time, and at a reasonable cost.

We understand that there may still be an expectation that a boundary review would have been completed in advance of the 2029 General Election.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option would leave electoral boundaries fixed until 2032, as provided by current law

As you will be aware, the Representation Commission recently refixed New Zealand's electoral boundaries as part of Boundary Review 2025. Electoral boundaries remain valid until they are next reviewed and refixed by the Representation Commission.

The Minister of Justice's preference is that electoral boundaries fixed in Boundary Review 2025 remain fixed until the 2029–2032 parliamentary term. This ensures clarity to electorates and stakeholders—including political parties—about what the electoral boundaries will be ahead of the 2029 General Election.

It is not unusual for one set of census data to be used to determine the boundaries for two elections. Most of New Zealand's boundary reviews in recent years have drawn on one set of census data to inform the electoral districts for two electoral cycles.

However, we acknowledge that there may be various views on this matter. If there is a strong preference for some form of 'transitional' boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, then there is potential for the Electoral Act 1993 to be amended to enable this. Officials have advised that a 'transitional' boundary review would require identifying an:

- alternative trigger for such a boundary review—a date specified in legislation, e.g. sometime between mid-2027 and early 2028;
- alternative up-to-date and accurate population data source (given census data will not be available)—which could be certified by the Government Statistician for this purpose (similar to existing provisions in the Local Electoral Act 2001); and
- an appropriate date for calculating the MEP in relation to the specified data source.

There are risks to any 'transitional' boundary review. Because census data will not be available, using alternative data may draw public concern about whether the underlying data can be trusted. Equally, given the potential expectation of a boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, not undertaking a 'transitional' boundary review may raise similar concerns about whether electorates are representative.



23 October 2025

Debbie Ngarewa-Packer and Rawiri Waititi
Leaders of Te Pāti Māori
Parliament Buildings

Dear Debbie and Rawiri

Consultation on census modernisation and boundary review proposals

In May 2025, following more than a decade of design and policy work across three governments, and public consultation, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's preferred approach, and general direction of travel across various governments, to modernise the census through an administrative-data-first model.¹ The intent is that census statistics will be published annually from 2030.

Each census triggers the electoral boundary review process and, as a result, changes to the Electoral Act 1993 (including entrenched provisions) are necessary. We are seeking your support on necessary or desirable changes to the Electoral Act 1993. This includes changes to some of the entrenched provisions, which will require a 75 percent majority to pass.

We invite your feedback and seek cross-party support, by 14 November 2025, on three areas of proposed change relating to the census and boundary reviews:

- Part 1: the Government Statistician's approach to modernising the census. While the Government Statistician holds sole responsibility for technical aspects of the census, including data collection and statistical production, it is important census modernisation receives cross-party support to preserve public trust in official statistics. Further detail on this proposal is set out in **Appendix 1**.
- Part 2: proposed changes to the boundary review trigger. A change to the boundary review trigger is needed to avoid annual boundary reviews following census modernisation. We are communicating to you, in-confidence, that Cabinet has agreed in principle, subject to the outcomes of this consultation, to options for changes to boundary review provisions. Further detail is set out in **Appendix 2**.
- Part 3: the timing of the next boundary review. Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election. However, the Government Statistician has confirmed that census results would not be available soon enough after a 2028 census to enable a boundary review to be completed ahead of the 2029 election. The Government Statistician has confirmed that good progress is being made on an administrative-data-first census and that, consequently, a robust boundary review using alternative population data could be undertaken in 2028 if the law is changed to allow this. Further detail is set out in **Appendix 3**.

¹ New Zealand Government "Sharpened focus on quality economic, population stats" (press release, 18 June 2025, available at beehive.govt.nz/release/sharpened-focus-quality-economic-population-stats).

Context for change

Census data supports a range of critical government functions, including infrastructure and transport planning, population-based funding models, and economic reporting. Currently, Stats NZ must take a census every five years and has historically done so by a survey of the whole population, delivered through a large, temporary workforce. In 2018 and 2023, the census survey was supplemented by administrative data, as part of a combined census model.

You may be aware that the 2023 Census programme had a survey response rate that fell short of its 90 percent target. It is no longer feasible to achieve the response rates required to maintain census data quality at a reasonable cost—the 2023 Census programme cost approximately \$326 million over five years, a significant increase from the 2018 Census (\$126 million) and 2013 Census (\$104 million). In addition, the traditional survey-led approach no longer delivers data to the public as quickly as it is needed.

Currently, each time a census occurs it automatically triggers an electoral boundary review. Adopting an administrative data-first approach to the census would, unless concurrent changes are made to the Electoral Act, result in annual electoral boundary reviews. Annual electoral boundary reviews would be unnecessary, add additional expense to taxpayers, and would not be useful as it would not align with the election cycle. We consider that changes to the Electoral Act are not only necessary, but central to ensuring the boundary review process is sustainable and enduring. The alternative would be a highly uncertain and confusing boundary review system, which could undermine trust in New Zealand's electoral system.

Proposed next steps

We seek your feedback on these matters by 14 November 2025. If you agree to these proposals, following this consultation process:

- the Minister of Justice, with the Minister of Statistics as needed, will confirm final policy decisions for changes to the Electoral Act ahead of drafting a bill;
- the Government will introduce a Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and an Electoral Amendment Bill to Parliament in early 2026;
- the Government will also be seeking your support in the Business Committee to associate the Bills so that they progress through Parliament simultaneously before the 2026 election.

If you would like to discuss these matters or would like to arrange a briefing with officials to seek further information on any of the more technical aspects of these proposals, please contact Hamish Fraser (Office of Minister of Justice) or Jonathan Franklin (Office of Minister of Statistics).

We look forward to hearing from you regarding your preferred approach on these matters, to progress an approach that is in line with cross-party support.

Yours sincerely



Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice



Hon Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Statistics

Appendix 1: Census modernisation

The issue

Census data and statistics inform policy and research, resource allocation, and investment in health, education, and infrastructure. Some census statistics also have a constitutional function, as they are used for setting electoral boundaries.

The traditional census model is no longer sustainable in the face of growing public resistance to completing census forms and rising costs to maintain survey data quality. Other countries are facing similar declines in survey response rates. This is driving an international shift away from traditional census survey delivery models, toward administrative data.

The Government Statistician's preferred approach to modernising the census

On 12 May 2025, Cabinet endorsed the Government Statistician's decision to replace the traditional five-yearly census survey of the population, with an annual administrative data-first census of the population from 2030.

An administrative data-first census responds to the declining affordability and data quality associated with the traditional survey-led model. It places the census on a more sustainable footing, while also driving broader data system improvements and ensuring a census that:

- provides greater flexibility to collect different data to better meet needs, and providing important data faster and more often;
- improves efficiency across government by making better use of data government has already collected, enabling more accurate, timely, and efficient decision-making;
- increases resilience, with greater flexibility to recover from disruptions (such as severe weather events) as it is not reliant on a short collection window;
- improves long-term cost sustainability, as opposed to the rising costs of maintaining adequate response rates in a survey-first approach.

The census is evolving, not being abolished. The administrative data-first census is an important and logical next step. Its key components are:

- increased use of administrative data: this forms the foundation of the new model, reducing the need for everyone to complete a survey and enabling faster, more efficient statistical production;
- a new annual sample survey (Census Attribute Survey): a flexible survey that will run year-round, completed by a small percentage of the population (around 60,000 households per year). This survey will help verify the accuracy of administrative data and collect additional information that administrative data alone cannot provide;
- tailored solutions: such as targeted surveys, data standards, and community collections, developed with iwi Māori and smaller population groups, to help meet their data needs.

The Minister of Statistics intends to update the Government Statistician's statutory census obligations from five-yearly data collection to annual publication of statistics from the census. By the end of each financial year, the Government Statistician would publish statistics from the census relating to the previous financial year. This change provides certainty that census statistics are published each year, and up-to-date measures of the population that reflect shifts in the population for the purposes of activities such as electoral boundary setting.

This shift would not affect the Government Statistician's obligations under electoral law to report the results of the census for electoral purposes. However, because the shift would mean census results being reported annually, changes to the Electoral Act are required to avoid each annual census triggering an annual boundary review (refer **Appendix 2**).

The Government plans to hold the next census in 2030

Designing and delivering the initial administrative data-first census is a considerable undertaking and it is critical to get it right. The new model also depends on the pooling of sample data over several years of the new annual census survey (Census Attribute Survey). Given these points, Cabinet has agreed to reschedule the next census from 2028 to 2030, to allow time for cross-agency improvements to administrative data, and to collect the necessary data through the new census survey.

Over the next five years, Stats NZ will release population and dwellings data in stages as the administrative data-first approach is introduced. From late 2026, Stats NZ will publish preliminary population data for some measures (such as age, sex, location, and ethnicity) using administrative data only. These releases will become official key population measures from 2028 that can support critical government planning functions; however these releases will not cover the full range of variables normally associated with a census. Stats NZ will also release official dwellings data in 2028.

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Stats NZ is required by law to ensure individuals are not identifiable in published data and will maintain strict legal protections. For example, all staff and researchers working with data continuing to be required to sign a lifetime certificate of confidentiality.

Stats NZ will continue to apply strong privacy and security safeguards and comply with all legal protections in the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

Appendix 2: Boundary review process from 2030 under modernised census

The issue

The census is a longstanding component to setting the size, number, and boundaries of electorates (the boundary review process). It provides the statutory trigger for this process, and population data as shown in the last census forms the basis for how both the general and Māori electoral populations are calculated in New Zealand. The outcome of these calculations determines the number of electorate seats in Parliament.

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The Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle

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The proposal is that a boundary review takes place every second electoral cycle, with boundaries being in place for two elections.

To achieve this, the Electoral Act would prescribe a statutory deadline in every second electoral cycle by which the Representation Commission must complete each boundary review. There is a choice in relation to the specified statutory deadline of either 12 or 15 months in advance of the expiry of the relevant term of Parliament. We are seeking views on your preferred timing under this approach:

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- with a 15-month deadline, the census data used in each boundary review could, in some circumstances, be from a year earlier than under a 12-month deadline. However, it would give longer for electoral stakeholders to prepare for each election.

Other timing aspects of the boundary review process, such as specified meetings of the Representation Commission, would also be aligned with this deadline.

Boundary reviews would still use census data

Under this approach, we propose to confirm that the boundary review process will continue to use census data. The Electoral Act would specify that the calculations of both the general and Māori electoral populations should be based on the most recent census results available to the Government Statistician, which would enable the Representation Commission to complete the boundary review within its deadline. As such, the choice of deadline above may affect which year census data will likely be drawn from.

Illustrative example	12-month deadline	15-month deadline
A general election takes place in the second half of 2035. The parliamentary term following that election is set to expire on 28 October 2038 .		
- the Surveyor-General calls the first meeting of the Representation Commission to appoint the Chair - Stats NZ provides population data to the Surveyor-General and the Representation Commission	by 28 October 2036 no later than February 2037 (census and roll data likely both relating to 30 June 2036)	by 28 October 2036 no later than October 2036 (census data likely relating to 30 June 2035; however, electoral roll data would relate to a separate electoral or post-election date, see below explanation)
the second meeting of the Representation Commission is called for the purpose of considering provisional boundary maps and calling public submissions	by 28 April 2037 at the latest	by 28 January 2037 at the latest
The boundary review is completed	by 28 October 2037	by 28 July 2037

Timing for calculating the Māori electoral population (MEP)

Currently the calculation of the MEP is based on data related to Māori population and electoral roll data as 'on counting day'. This generally means 'on census day' unless the census and a general election are held in the same year, in which case 'counting day' is 1 April the following year.

As part of the census modernisation work, it is expected that the Data and Statistics Act 2022 will be amended to require the Government Statistician, by notice in the *Gazette*, to specify a 'reference date' for each annual census publication (or it will default to 30 June). Similar to 'census day', this reference date specifies the date about which the population and dwellings data is calculated.

Under this proposal, 'counting day' would be the same as the reference date for the census data being used in that boundary review. If, however, the relevant census reference date is in an election year and precedes a general election, then the 'counting day' for electoral roll data would be later in that year, i.e. a post-election date that ensures the most recent Māori enrolment data is used.

An alternative option is to retain a five-yearly boundary review tied to a census

This alternative approach would largely retain the existing boundary review settings as much as practicable, with only necessary amendments made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census. Under this approach, every fifth annual census would trigger the boundary review process, i.e. every five years.

This option is very similar to the status quo so would retain existing boundary review settings as much as possible. As now, the date on which the boundaries are known ahead of a general election will vary. Depending on the timing between census data being available and the election, in some years this could result in boundaries being finalised in early to mid-way through an election year.

Under this option, for the purpose of calculating the MEP, 'counting day' will be the same date as the 'reference date' used for that fifth annual census publication. The exception would be where that reference date falls in the same year as a general election, in which case the counting day would be 1 April the following year. This follows the existing approach taken in the Electoral Act and ensures the most up-to-date Māori enrolment data is used to calculate the MEP.

We seek your views on your preferred approach for a new boundary review trigger

Either of the above options would support census modernisation.

As noted above, the Minister of Justice's preferred option is to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle, given this approach is more directly connected to the electoral system.

However, as the boundary review process is important to all New Zealanders and all political parties, we are interested in your view on these proposed changes. If ultimately there is a stronger preference to retain boundary review settings as close as possible to current settings, with only necessary changes made to the Electoral Act to align with the modernised census, we are open to progressing the latter approach.

Appendix 3: Timing of the next boundary review

The issue

Under the five-yearly pattern of censuses and boundary reviews, a census in 2028 would have triggered a boundary review. This may have been expected to result in updated boundaries ahead of the 2029 General Election.

The Government Statistician has confirmed that, due to the length of time it would have taken to finalise results for a 2028 Census under the previous combined census approach, there would not have been enough time to redraw electoral boundaries before the 2029 General Election.

While there are historical examples (e.g. 2001, 2013) of a census happening in the year before an election and boundaries being redrawn before the election, these are not comparable to the present situation because:

- the census model in use at those times had fewer and less complex statistical steps, relying only on survey data
- census survey response rates have since declined too much for that model to now deliver reliable census statistics in time, and at a reasonable cost.

We understand that there may still be an expectation that a boundary review would have been completed in advance of the 2029 General Election.

The Minister of Justice's preferred option would leave electoral boundaries fixed until 2032, as provided by current law

As you will be aware, the Representation Commission recently refixed New Zealand's electoral boundaries as part of Boundary Review 2025. Electoral boundaries remain valid until they are next reviewed and refixed by the Representation Commission.

The Minister of Justice's preference is that electoral boundaries fixed in Boundary Review 2025 remain fixed until the 2029–2032 parliamentary term. This ensures clarity to electorates and stakeholders—including political parties—about what the electoral boundaries will be ahead of the 2029 General Election.

It is not unusual for one set of census data to be used to determine the boundaries for two elections. Most of New Zealand's boundary reviews in recent years have drawn on one set of census data to inform the electoral districts for two electoral cycles.

However, we acknowledge that there may be various views on this matter. If there is a strong preference for some form of 'transitional' boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, then there is potential for the Electoral Act 1993 to be amended to enable this. Officials have advised that a 'transitional' boundary review would require identifying an:

- alternative trigger for such a boundary review—a date specified in legislation, e.g. sometime between mid-2027 and early 2028;
- alternative up-to-date and accurate population data source (given census data will not be available)—which could be certified by the Government Statistician for this purpose (similar to existing provisions in the Local Electoral Act 2001); and
- an appropriate date for calculating the MEP in relation to the specified data source.

There are risks to any 'transitional' boundary review. Because census data will not be available, using alternative data may draw public concern about whether the underlying data can be trusted. Equally, given the potential expectation of a boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election, not undertaking a 'transitional' boundary review may raise similar concerns about whether electorates are representative.



Francisco Hernandez

Green Party List MP, based in Ōtepoti

Francisco Hernandez
Green Party Spokesperson for Statistics

14 November 2025

To:

Hon Paul Goldsmith, Minister of Justice

Hon Dr Shane Reti, Minister of Statistics

Re: Consultation on census modernisation and boundary review proposals

Tēnā korua, Hon Minister Goldsmith and Hon Minister Reti,

Thank you for your letter of 23 October 2025 addressed to Green Party co-leaders Hon Marama Davidson and Chlöe Swarbrick. As the Green Party's spokesperson for Statistics, I am responding to your letter on their behalf, and have outlined below the census and boundary review changes that the Greens would like to see supported.

Regarding Part 1: the Government Statistician's approach to modernising the census.

The Greens acknowledge the need for cross party support on the shape of the next census to enable public trust in gathering official data that is vital for informed policy making. However, we have concerns regarding the shift to an administration-first census which need to be addressed.

In particular, we are concerned that the driver of the shift to an administration first census is short term cost-cutting at the expense of quality and wider coverage, and that the Government statistician's recommendations have been made within a tight set of fiscal directives. We are particularly concerned about the impact of proposed changes on harder to reach communities such as Māori, Pasifika, ethnic minorities, and rainbow and disabled communities, and we are concerned that failing to sufficiently count these



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www.greens.org.nz



Francisco Hernandez

Green Party List MP, based in Ōtepoti

communities will lead to ill-informed decision-making and worse outcomes for these groups.

The Greens support for the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill will therefore be contingent on how well this bill provides for requisite planning and support, including financial resources, to ensure appropriate data collection from these communities.

Regarding Part 2: Proposed changes to the boundary review trigger

The proposed changes to the boundary review trigger and the timing of the next census review are now under consideration by our caucus.

The Greens would like to see any evidence or advice that can be provided on the option of an electoral boundary review being triggered every electoral cycle, rather than the Minister of Justice's preferred option to tie electoral boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle. We would like to understand the benefits and trade-offs between the most up to date and representative data informing electorate boundaries, versus maintaining electorate boundaries so that communities are less frequently disrupted by boundary changes.

Regarding Part 3: Timing of the next boundary review

The Greens would like to see further analysis and advice on the options for a transitional boundary review, as it has been raised in Appendix 3 that *'not undertaking a transitional boundary review may raise similar concerns about whether electorates are representative.'* Our indicative preference for the next boundary review is for a transitional boundary review to be developed, and for data to be collected that is most representative and up to date with how populations within Aotearoa are evolving over time. Not doing so risks the 2029 election occurring with unrepresentative boundaries.





Francisco Hernandez

Green Party List MP, based in Ōtepoti

We are also surprised that the Ministry of Statistics is unable to provide the figures in the timeframe required for the Representation Commission and would like more information on what the cost implications of being able to provide this is. We also question whether the Admin Population Model, which will be used to create official statistics in 2027, could provide up to date data to support the boundary reviews. This would mitigate the above risk of unrepresentative boundaries.

Thank you for considering the attached feedback, and I look forward to your response, providing any relevant additional information and outlining how the concerns we have raised will be addressed.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Francisco Hernandez', on a light blue background.

Francisco Hernandez

Green Party Spokesperson for Statistics



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www.greens.org.nz

Hon Paul Goldsmith

Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage
Minister of Justice
Minister for Media and Communications
Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations



27 NOV 2025

Francisco Hernandez
Green Party Spokesperson for Statistics
Parliament Buildings

Dear Francisco

Re: Consultation on census modernisation and boundary review proposals

Thank you for your 14 November 2025 letter responding on behalf of the Green Party to our 23 October 2025 request for cross-party support on census modernisation and the electoral boundary review process.

We provide responses to your queries below.

Part 1: The Government Statistician's approach to modernising the census

Drivers underpinning census decisions

You expressed concern that short term cost-cutting is the key reason for the Government Statistician's decision to modernise the census. This is incorrect, the Government Statistician's decision was primarily led by the traditional survey-led model no longer meeting performance expectations. Of note:

- The traditional survey-led census model relies on a large survey every five years. There is growing resistance to completing census forms leading to high non-response rates. Non-response puts the quality of some data at risk, particularly for smaller populations including Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, and rural communities.
- The fundamental data and methodological building blocks of an administrative data-first census have been put in place through the 2020–2024 population statistics research programme. A milestone feasibility study has found that population statistics produced from linked administrative data will be more up to date, timelier, and provide a richer ability to track demographic population shifts than a traditional census.¹ The strength of these technical findings means Stats NZ can orient survey-taking efforts towards populations traditionally not well covered in administrative data.
- The traditional survey-led census model costs more with every census, with this increasing spend delivering decreasing additional benefits to government data. Census 2023 was delivered at a cost of \$325 million, about \$200 million higher than Census 2018. The most significant cost increases were increased community engagement through community events to inform people of census and encourage participation and a significantly increased data collection field force. Despite this increased expenditure, response rates for Māori and Pacific Peoples did not increase markedly, and Stats NZ still did not meet its target response rates for some populations.
- The estimated cost of running the next census using the current approach is still higher: \$300 million to \$400 million, depending on target response rates and collection methods. It is appropriate that the decision to modernise the census be conscious of

¹ Stats NZ (2024) "Technical feasibility: Measuring population and dwellings using administrative data", accessible via Stats NZ. [\[Direct link\]](#).

likely future cost and whether additional spending is likely to deliver the required outcomes.

The Government Statistician's decision has been informed by extensive public consultation and targeted engagement with key partners and stakeholders (including government agencies, iwi and Māori, key communities and groups, and academics) throughout 2024. It is consistent with the direction of various governments since 2012, and over a decade of technical work.

Considering these drivers, and the extensive process taken to make an in-principle decision, Cabinet has endorsed the Government Statistician's decision. It is not our role, as Ministers, to direct the Government Statistician how best to take the census: as a matter of law, the Government Statistician has sole responsibility (after consultation and engagement) for determining the method of taking the census.²

This decision puts the census on a more sustainable footing, while also driving broader system improvements that will maintain data quality, heighten resilience against issues such as non-response and severe weather-related disruption, and deliver needed population insights at the pace required to support modern decision-making and expectations.

Addressing the implications for statistics about priority populations

We acknowledge your concerns about impacts on certain groups with the shift to an administrative data-first census. While many census variables are already well supported by high-quality administrative data, there are still gaps for variables that have not been captured in administrative data collections in the past, and gaps for population groups with fewer than 5,000–9,000 people.

Stats NZ has a robust programme to address these as part of the transition. For some variables, information gaps can be addressed through improvements in the quality of admin data and Stats NZ's methodology. We can advise in confidence that a cross-agency plan is near finalisation which will make specific requests for data collection and supply improvements from various public service agencies and Crown entities. In many cases this data will offer better information than would be gathered through a traditional survey-led census.

Other improvements will need to be supported by a survey programme. The flexibility built into the annual sample survey (Census Attribute Survey) is a key feature of the modernised census, which enables rotating content or one-off modules that reflect topics or population features of emerging interest.

Stats NZ's efforts are focussed on priority communities, such as iwi Māori, Pacific, ethnic, LGBTIQ+, disabled, and homeless/transient communities. Stats NZ is working closely with priority communities to design tailored solutions (e.g. targeted surveys, data frameworks etc.). This work is intended to either mitigate data limitations under the new census model or deliver alternative value for communities. The work is intended to be highly collaborative with communities, and as such, provides an opportunity for communities to define what is valuable to them.

Engagement on this work will scale up in 2026 with the establishment of mechanisms for collaborative design, such as community design groups. Arrangements for each group are likely to be different according to what is needed. The first group to be established will be a Crown-Māori Statistical Design Forum. Initially, the groups will contribute to the planning for the next census, but other key statistics programmes will also benefit from their advice and perspectives.

² Data and Statistics Act 2022, section 16.

In addition, Stats NZ is currently seeking feedback on the proposed data collection approach and content for the next census, including potential impacts for priority communities. Public consultation began on 3 November 2025 and closes on 19 December 2025.

Part 2: Proposed changes to the boundary review trigger

Relative benefits and trade-offs of more regular boundary reviews

You sought evidence or advice on a potential alternative: tying boundary reviews to every electoral cycle instead of every second electoral cycle. We understand that the Green Party would like to know more about the benefits and trade-offs of this option.

We have not instructed officials to consider or consult on tying boundary reviews to every electoral cycle, and, to that extent, we have not received any advice on this as an option.

However, we are advised that this option came up in the 2023 Report of the Independent Electoral Review Panel (the Panel) *Our recommendations for a fairer, clearer, and more accessible electoral system* (the Report).³ The Panel undertook an extensive public consultation process with a wide range of New Zealanders and received more than 7,500 submissions on the electoral system. Chapter 17 discusses New Zealand's boundary review system and the policy settings for the Representation Commission.

On the frequency of boundary reviews, while a few submitters to the Panel thought boundary reviews should occur less frequently, most thought it should be aligned with the parliamentary term. The Report noted the main benefits and trade-offs as follows:

- If boundary reviews are conducted less frequently, there would be fewer opportunities for boundaries to reflect any changes in population, which, we would add, means that some electorates might be outside the allowable five percent population quota for longer.⁴ The key trade-off with less frequent boundary reviews is more stability in the basic make-up of New Zealand's electoral boundaries. The Panel considered relationships between electorate candidates/political parties and electorates as important in this context.
- Tying the frequency of boundary reviews to every electoral cycle would mean that the electoral system is more responsive to any fluctuation in population at each election. However, it would likely result in many electors changing electorates at each election, which could be confusing and ultimately undermine trust. In some cases, this could inhibit MPs' ability to sustain relationships with frequently changing electorates. These challenges would be more pronounced in electorates which see greater levels of population change. We also note that the process of conducting boundary reviews is administratively complex and costly.

The Panel placed an emphasis on stability for electors and considered that retaining a five-yearly frequency for boundary reviews, albeit arbitrary in the context of an annual census, strikes the best balance between population growth, stability for electors, and accuracy. The Panel therefore recommended retaining the five-yearly frequency of boundary reviews.

You may also be interested in the Representation Commission's 2025 Report,⁵ and particularly its discussion of the projected population growth of each electorate through to 2026 and 2029 (see Schedule C).⁶ That report notes that, based on population projections, by the 2026 election (3 years following the 2023 census, on which the new boundaries are

³ Independent Electoral Review (2023) "Final Report: Our Recommendations for a Fairer, Clearer, and More Accessible Electoral System", accessible via the Ministry of Justice. [\[Direct link\]](#)

⁴ When fixing electoral districts, the Representation Commission must ensure each district is within five percent of the calculated allowable population quota (Electoral Act 1993, section 36).

⁵ Report of the Representation Commission 2025, accessible via the Electoral Commission. [\[Direct link\]](#)

⁶ Report of the Representation Commission 2025, at schedule C ("Tables of electorates and populations"), also accessible via the Electoral Commission. [\[Direct link\]](#)

based), 14 of New Zealand's 71 electoral districts (19 percent) could be outside the 5 percent quota and, by 2029 19 of those electorates (27 percent) could be outside quota.

Our preference for tying boundary reviews to every second electoral cycle is tied to the Government's view that the trigger for boundary reviews should be logically connected to the electoral cycles to which they relate, and our corresponding concern that redrawing boundaries at every triennial election does not strike an optimal balance between stability for electors and ensuring fair representation. We understand there may be political differences on this point but stress the need for political consensus on matters related to the representation of all New Zealanders.

Part 3: Timing of the next boundary review

We note the Green Party's initial preference for a transitional boundary review to be developed, based on data that is most representative and up to date.

Prospects of a boundary review after a 2028 Census ahead of a 2029 General Election under current law

You asked about the cost implications providing data after a 2028 Census in sufficient time to enable a boundary review to be completed ahead of a 2029 General Election. We confirm that it is a matter of time rather than cost.

The census model in use now requires increasing time to improve response rates, to combine survey results with administrative data, and to undertake significant data remediation to account for reduced responses. We are advised that, due to the additional steps required under the current census model, 2028 Census results would not be available before early- to mid-2029.

This is too late to enable a boundary review before a 2029 General Election: once census results are available, it takes a further eight months to conduct a boundary review.

General case for a transitional boundary review

You asked about the statement in our letter noting that not undertaking a transitional boundary review could give rise to concerns about whether electorates are representative at the 2029 General Election. The intent was to signal there are issues that could be raised for both options:

- If a 'transitional' boundary review is held ahead of the 2029 General Election, because census data will not be available, it will need to use alternative population data. Given that census data has been used for boundary review purposes since 1887, there is a risk that a 'transitional' boundary review's reliance on alternative population data will be perceived as less reliable and less trustworthy.
- Not undertaking a 'transitional' boundary review ahead of the 2029 General Election could raise similar public concerns. The now standard pattern of boundary reviews being triggered every five years means it is possible that members of the public would have expected a boundary review to be triggered in 2028, with new boundaries in force ahead of 2029. (We explain why that is not possible above.) While it is not possible to predict the outcome of future boundary reviews, it is always possible that the number of electoral districts – including the Māori electoral districts – could change if a boundary review were held ahead of 2029.

We see the issue as very finely balanced. Both options have risks for trust in our electoral system and it is important that parties take a considered approach to forming a position.

The boundaries set through the Boundary Review 2025 remain legally valid until they are next reviewed. As in our 23 October 2025 letter, the Government's preference is for electoral boundaries to remain fixed as they were following Boundary Review 2025. This would mean the next boundary review would be conducted ahead of the 2032 General Election.

It is not unusual for one set of census data (in this case the 2023 Census) to be used to determine the boundaries for two elections. Most of New Zealand's boundary reviews draw on one set of census data to inform the electoral districts for two electoral cycles. For example, the boundary review which was triggered following the 2018 Census applied to the 2020-2023 and the 2023-2026 electoral cycles and the boundary review triggered by the 2013 Census also applied to two electoral cycles: 2014-2017 and 2017-2020.

The Government's preferred option prioritises stability of the existing boundaries rather than taking a risk with an alternative source of population data.

Data to support a transitional boundary review if it were to proceed

Our expectation is that Stats NZ would continue to use only the best available data to support electoral boundary reviews. We have been explicitly advised that available alternative data will be sufficiently robust for electoral purposes. The most likely potential alternative sources of data would be 2027 annual population estimates or, as you suggest, 2027 administrative counts of the usually resident population.

Although both data sources are expected to be adequate for drawing electoral boundaries, they are not statistically identical, so we propose the Government Statistician would be required to certify which dataset is used, based on their independent assessment of which data is best suited to an electoral context.

We do not think it appropriate for Ministers or Parliament to determine what specific data would be used, as this would risk undermining the Government Statistician's sole statutory responsibility to produce official statistics, and could give rise to a perception of influence in electoral processes.

Closing comment

Thank you again for providing feedback on the Government's proposals. We look forward to hearing more about your preferred approach and continuing to work across the House on this matter.

Yours sincerely



Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice



Hon Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Statistics

2 December 2025

Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice

Dear Paul,

Thank you for the letter of 23 October 2025 from you and Dr Reti, seeking Labour's engagement on proposed changes to the Electoral Act 1993 following the Government's decisions on the census. Thank you also for arranging the meeting between officials and Labour Party caucus members.

You have sought our views on three matters, which I address in turn.

1. Modernising the census

You have asked for Labour's support for modernising the census process to maintain public trust in official statistics. We acknowledge that the broad direction of census modernisation is set and understand that the new approach will rely primarily on administrative data from government agencies supplemented by survey data.

However, we have several concerns:

- Comparable approaches have only succeeded in countries with comprehensive central population registers. We note that the UK has moved away from this model due to reliability concerns.
- There appears to have been no independent scrutiny or peer review from experts in census or population statistics.
- The age and reliability of the administrative data is uncertain; some datasets may be several years out of date.
- Shifting from habitation-based to individual-based data risks weakening the ability to inform geographically focused decisions, such as infrastructure planning, service delivery, and electoral boundaries.
- Many agencies supplying the data (such as IR) now update information only when there is a trigger event, leading to gaps in accuracy and currency.

While census methodology is rarely a headline issue, accurate and independent population data is fundamental to good government and to public trust. We are concerned that a census approach relying heavily on administrative data may not secure or maintain that trust.

At our meeting with officials, issues were also raised about the ability of administrative data to accurately reflect marginalised or remote communities, and to capture the nuance of small or transient populations.

Although we support modernising the census and recognise the shortcomings of recent censuses, we are not yet satisfied that the proposed replacement will deliver the quality and reliability improvements officials anticipate. Until we see detailed proposals that address the risks and uncertainties identified, we cannot commit to unqualified support.

2. Changes to the boundary review trigger

You have asked for Labour's support to amend the boundary review trigger. Section 35(2)(c) of the Electoral Act currently requires boundaries to be reviewed "after each subsequent periodical census and on no other occasion." As a reserved provision, any amendment requires 75 percent parliamentary support.

You have noted that annual provision of census data under the modernised model could, under the Act's current wording, imply annual boundary reviews, an outcome we do not consider workable.

Your proposal to decouple boundary reviews from the census and instead link them to the electoral cycle, with reviews occurring every second electoral cycle using the most recent census data, would effectively move boundary reviews to a six-yearly schedule. You have also indicated that a five-year cycle remains an option if required to secure support.

We are generally supportive of a six-yearly review cycle. It provides several benefits, including reducing the likelihood of reviews occurring close to an election and creating a more predictable interval between a boundary review and the subsequent election.

Regarding the timeframe for conducting representation reviews, we note that the 12-month model means data is supplied slightly later by Stats NZ but would reflect population information from two years before the next election rather than three. On this basis, the 12-month timeframe appears preferable, noting that both models allow six months between the Commission's second meeting and finalising the review.

3. Timing of the next boundary review

You have indicated a preference to leave existing electoral boundaries unchanged until 2032, meaning the 2026 and 2029 elections would proceed on current boundaries. We understand this reflects the fact that the systems supporting the modernised census will not be ready in time for a review ahead of the 2029 election.

Given our support for a six-yearly cycle, we agree it would be sensible to shift directly to that cycle, rather than attempting a review for 2029. As we were advised, the modernised census framework will not be ready for a 2028 review, and no traditional census will occur, meaning any such review would be based on data of lower quality than usual.

We also emphasise the importance of maintaining public confidence in the census. Public consultation must be taken seriously for both the census modernisation and boundary review processes. New Zealanders must be clearly informed about why changes are occurring, what they mean for them, what steps will be taken, and how implementation will work, including how any step changes may affect their communities.

Conclusion

You will appreciate that to date we have been briefed only on the high-level policy direction of these proposals. Given the significance of the issues involved, particularly in relation to the Electoral Act's reserved provisions, we would expect ongoing engagement as this work develops.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'CH', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rt Hon Chris Hipkins
Leader of the Opposition

Te Pāti Māori Feedback on Census Modernisation and Boundary Review Proposals

Introduction

Any changes to data collection and representation will intersect with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Te Pāti Māori urges that all proposed changes must be developed in partnership with tangata whenua, data sovereignty must be upheld, and iwi, hapū, and Māori organisations must be included and properly resourced to contribute to any new arrangements.

Census Modernisation

It is a well-established fact that administrative data has, and will continue to, undercount Māori. Many of our people do not engage with government services due to a lack of trust in these institutions. Even under current census arrangements, where there has been a concerted and conscious effort to reach our people, there is still a significant Māori data gap that exists. We are concerned that these Census reforms will widen this gap if there is not a deliberate and well-resourced effort to build trust with our people, to build relationships with iwi/hapū and Māori organisations, and to go above and beyond to ensure that we are not ignored and undercounted.

Boundary Review Proposals

Te Pāti Māori is strongly in favour of frequent and accurate boundary reviews.

The previous boundary review was informed by electoral data from 1 April 2024. This meant that the number of Māori Electorates was set at 7. However, if these boundaries were informed by electoral populations from 6 January 2025 onwards, there would have been 8 Māori Electorate seats (see Appendix 1).

Māori electorate voters will be significantly disadvantaged for all future elections that maintain these boundaries. The average Māori electorate will be made up of 74,367 voters, while the average General electorate will be made up of 69,916 voters, significantly reducing the voting power of every voter on the Māori roll.

It is our view that this is an unjust restriction of indigenous representation in Aotearoa, and a violation of articles two and three of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Please find our preferences below based on the options provided.

12-month or 15-month Deadline

Te Pāti Māori prefers a 12-month deadline for the boundary review process because this option would provide the most accurate and up-to-date boundaries, while also reducing the risk of artificially diluting Māori representation. To illustrate our point, a 12-month deadline for the previous boundary review would have resulted in an 8th Māori Electorate Seat at the 2026 election (see Appendix 1).

5-yearly boundary review or every second election-cycle

Our ultimate preference would be for there to be a boundary review before every election, especially considering the possibility that we will move to a 4-year election cycle. However, if the choice is between 5 years, or 6 (potentially 8) years, we would prefer the status quo. More frequent boundary reviews will ensure that Māori who choose to be on the Māori roll will not be disadvantaged for multiple election cycles, as they will be in 2026, and potentially 2029.

Boundary review in 2029 or 2032

We strongly recommend that a Boundary Review be conducted before the 2029 General Election. As we have stated multiple times throughout this document, Māori voters on the Māori roll are guaranteed to have their voting power diluted in the 2026 General Election, and this will only become more unjust if the current boundaries remain until 2032. To maintain the trust and goodwill of these voters, the government should conduct a Boundary Review before the 2029 General Election.

Appendix 1.

Māori Enrolment September 2022 - April 2025

Report Date	Māori Roll	General Roll	Total	Māori Roll %	Seats (2dp)	Seats Rounded
1-Sept-22	265,630	253,924	519,554	51.1%	7.37	7
1-Jan-23	261,492	250,734	512,226	51.1%	7.36	7
29-Mar-23	261,422	250,712	512,134	51.0%	7.36	7
30-Jun-23	258,551	246,445	504,996	51.2%	7.38	7
20-Jul-23	259,872	246,227	506,099	51.3%	7.40	7
1-Oct-23	262,365	253,232	515,597	50.9%	7.34	7
14-Oct-23	290,300	276,712	567,012	51.2%	7.38	7
1-Jan-24	291,459	275,831	567,290	51.4%	7.41	7
1-Apr-24	291,656	275,520	567,176	51.4%	7.41	7
1-Jul-24	291,581	275,190	566,771	51.4%	7.42	7
1-Oct-24	289,826	273,521	563,347	51.4%	7.42	7
6-Jan-25	295,627	269,331	564,958	52.3%	7.54	8
1-Apr-25	296,101	268,359	564,460	52.5%	7.56	8
1-Jul-25	297,050	266,893	563,943	52.7%	7.59	8
1-Oct-25	298,002	265,435	563,437	52.9%	7.62	8
1-Jan-26	298,957	263,985	562,942	53.1%	7.66	8
1-Apr-26	299,915	262,543	562,458	53.3%	7.69	8
1-Jul-26	300,876	261,109	561,985	53.5%	7.72	8
1-Oct-26	301,840	259,682	561,522	53.8%	7.75	8



09 February 2026

Rt Hon Chris Hipkins
Leader of the Labour Party
Parliament Buildings

Dear Chris

Re: Engagement on census modernisation proposals

In October and November 2025, the Minister of Justice and I consulted political party leaders on the Minister of Justice's proposal to change the electoral boundary review process, and the Government Statistician's decision to modernise the census. Our letter of 23 October 2025 provides more detail.

Thank you for your engagement to date. The Minister of Justice has responded in respect of electoral proposals, and I am writing to you regarding:

- the limitations of the traditional survey-based census approach
- questions raised by political parties
- work underway to transition to the modernised census
- planned Parliamentary procedure for census and boundary review changes, including association of two Bills in the House

I also offer you a further briefing from Stats NZ officials if desired.

Moving from survey-first to admin-data-first

Admin data, collected and updated continuously, will be the foundation of future annual censuses. This will be supplemented by a new annual survey reaching 60,000 households each year, to check the accuracy of admin data and gather more information. Tailored solutions will ensure the new census works for everyone. I **enclose** an information sheet providing more information.

Limitations of the traditional census approach

There appears to be a perception among some members of the public, research community, and other stakeholders that the full-field enumeration census approach is delivering well for all communities and will continue to do so with continued investment. Stats NZ has emphasised that this is a common misconception and acknowledge that ongoing clarification will be required.

The need to modernise the census (which has been recognised by successive governments) is due to ongoing limitations with the traditional survey-led approach. There is growing reluctance to complete census survey forms, leading to high non-response rates. New

Zealand is not unique,¹ other countries face this issue too. Non-response puts the quality of some data at risk, particularly for Māori, Pacific peoples, young people, and rural communities. Relatedly, the traditional census model costs more with every census, yet this increased spend has delivered negligible additional benefits.

Timeliness also needs to be managed. The five-yearly census cycle does not meet modern expectations for timely or relevant data. A long census cycle means that increasingly census data can be seen as stale by the time it is published. External events such as the Canterbury earthquakes, Cyclone Gabrielle, and COVID-19 have highlighted risks around our ability to produce high-quality data during emergencies.

Questions raised about technical feasibility of the new census approach

Political parties raised several questions about the technical feasibility of a census based primarily on data already held by government agencies. **Appendix 1** responds to these specific questions and Stats NZ's [Regulatory Impact Statement](#) provides more information about moving to the new approach.¹

The 2018 and 2023 Census both demonstrated the strengths and value of combining admin and survey data to produce population and social statistics.

The [Census transformation research programme](#) focused on the data and methodological building blocks of an admin data-first census. More information about this programme, including a [technical feasibility report](#), can be found on Stats NZ's website.²

Stats NZ is actively preparing for the transition to the modern census. Admin data can provide more than 95 percent coverage for the most essential census population data, with a high level of consistency between census responses and the information collected by agencies. In addition, an Admin Data Supply Plan is being finalised and will support an uplift in the collection, supply, and quality of admin data across agencies to agreed standards and timeframes.

Addressing needs of smaller and harder to measure population groups

While government data will provide better information than Stats NZ can collect through census surveys in many cases, I acknowledge some groups are concerned that the new census approach will not give them the data they need, nor adequately represent them. Of particular concern are groups that either are not well represented in admin data or have additional data needs beyond what can be met through the census, such as iwi Māori, Pacific, disabled, ethnic, rainbow, and homeless and transient communities. Several parties noted their support for census modernisation is qualified by the arrangements put in place to mitigate this risk.

I am committed to ensuring the census works for all New Zealand. Stats NZ has assured me of its programme to address this risk and to ensure a range of partners and groups contribute to the design and planning of the new census model, for example through the establishment of new [community-based collaborative design groups](#) like the Crown-Māori

¹ See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Corporate/Cabinet-papers/Modernising-our-approach-to-the-2028-Census/Regulatory-Impact-Statement-Modernising-the-census.pdf>

² See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/methods-and-standards/census-transformation-research-programme/>. For the technical feasibility report, see <https://www.stats.govt.nz/research/technical-feasibility-measuring-population-and-dwellings-using-administrative-data-2025-update/>

Statistical Design Forum.³ The Admin Data Supply Plan mentioned above is also an important part of addressing known data gaps.

The modern census approach will still need to collect some data directly from respondents and this will occur through a new annual census survey (Census Attribute Survey), completed by around 60,000 households per year. This survey programme will supplement the information provided by admin data. While there will be some loss of detail for those variables that have relied on surveying in the past, there are important opportunities to improve timeliness and to update census survey content more often through a more flexible design. Rotating census content is also an opportunity to collect data on new or emerging statistical priorities.

I also am assured that tailored solutions such as targeted surveys, new data standards, or community-led collections will be developed to reflect the experiences of these communities, help meet their data needs, and support better outcomes.

Request for comment regarding planned Parliamentary procedure

As advised in the 23 October 2025 letter, the Government will introduce two Bills⁴ to Parliament in early 2026. These Bills contain constitutional changes which, rightly, can only progress with the support of 75 percent of Parliament. I have also been advised that, for the Census Bill to work legally, changes to the connection between censuses and electoral boundary reviews must be enacted at the same time.

Although the Bills address distinct policy matters, the Government intends to seek the support of the House Business Committee to “associate” the Bills as they progress through Parliament, so that they may progress simultaneously this Parliamentary term.

Given the importance of following a well-supported process when making constitutional change, please advise my Senior Ministerial Advisor, Jonathan Franklin (Jonathan.Franklin@parliament.govt.nz), in writing by end of business on 18 February, indicating your party’s agreement to support the Government’s proposal at Business Committee.

Next steps

I have instructed my officials to be available to brief you further on plans to modernise the census should you request this. To arrange a briefing, please contact Kate Satterthwaite, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief of Staff, directly: kate.satterthwaite@stats.govt.nz.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on these proposals over the remainder of the Parliamentary term.

Yours sincerely



Hon Dr Shane Reti

Minister of Statistics

³ See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/about-us/what-we-do/community-design-groups/>

⁴ Formally titled the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and Electoral (District Boundaries) Amendment Bill.

Appendix 1: Questions about technical feasibility of a modern census

Census modernisation has been informed by public consultation and targeted engagement with key partners and stakeholders, especially since 2024, and consistent with the direction of various governments since 2012.

Political parties raised several questions about the technical feasibility of a census based primarily on data already held by government agencies. **Table 1**, prepared by Stats NZ, answers these in turn.

Table 1: Addressing the technical feasibility of an admin-data-first census

Issue	Response
Comparable approaches have only succeeded using a central population register	New Zealand differs from other countries because it has the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI): a large-scale, secure research database containing de-identified linked admin, survey and historical census data. This has enabled Stats NZ to show it can produce census information with admin data. Stats NZ is now developing the Integrated Statistical Data System (ISDS) for use in statistical production. While the ISDS is based on the internationally recognised Register-based Statistical System (RSS), it uses “spines” across three domains (businesses, people, and places) in place of administrative population registers used overseas. Consequently, census modernisation in New Zealand does not need a national identity number or similar arrangements to work.
There has been no independent scrutiny or peer review from experts in census or population statistics	Stats NZ routinely participates in international fora, including (for example) the International Census Forum, where plans for the modernised census attract considerable interest and scrutiny. The census’ core methodology has been internationally peer-reviewed and published (Graham et al, 2024). When advising on the approach to the next census, the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel made 83 recommendations for the next census model, several of which have already been accepted. Stats NZ is actively considering the remaining recommendations as it works through the design of the next census.
Age and reliability of administrative data is uncertain and may be several years out of date	Currently, by the time census results are published, the underlying data is usually one to two years old, and more than five years out of date by the time new census data is available. In this context, moving to annual publication of census data is a significant improvement in timeliness. Stats NZ’s experience preparing the administrative population census (APC) over the last three years has demonstrated significant progress towards a modern census: • For the variables currently included in the APC, admin concepts align closely with concepts defined in statistical standards. • APC admin variables are often formal records from authoritative sources and are more accurate and precise than can be expected from a survey questionnaire. While there is more work to do to improve admin data, Stats NZ has also been able to test tools for finding out the correct values when data sources do not agree. For example, usual residence address is selected using the most recently notified address at an individual level, and machine learning tools have been implemented for predicting household information. This process was reliable enough to use for the 2023 Census.

	Our awareness of the strengths and limitations of current admin data for census purposes has informed the design of the next census across all parts of the new model.
Moving from place-based to people-based census data will affect the quality of geographical insights and planning	There are no plans to move away from a model that attributes people to specific addresses and households, because information about where people live is key to understanding population structure and producing geographical insight. Comparisons with the 2023 Census show that we can already (prior to planned improvements) correctly identify usual residence address for 77 percent of the usually resident population. This level of consistency increases at larger geographic levels (for example, currently 97 percent consistency for regional councils). Rates of address consistency vary by age group and location, with patterns of lower consistency for the mobile population. There are plans to improve address data collection, for example for young people, between now and 2030. There will continue to be high-quality meshblock population data available to support the drawing of electoral boundaries.
Agencies supplying data only update data when there is an event, leading to gaps in accuracy and coverage	Admin data is typically collected when delivering a service (for example, health or education), or as a legal requirement to register events (for example, births, deaths, and marriages) or as a record of transactions or events (for example, tax payments and overseas travel journeys). While admin data generally only collects what is needed to deliver public services, this can be more detailed or more precise than survey responses. For example, admin-derived personal income is available in dollar amounts and by individual income sources. By recording actual events and transactions, admin sources can avoid issues like recall error, misinterpretation of questions, or reluctance to answer. The new approach relies on data from multiple sources where possible. Combining admin data across multiple datasets also can address issues with data quality or timeliness that are present in the datasets of individual agencies.
The census will not accurately reflect marginalised or remote communities or capture the nuance of small or transient populations	More work is required in the coming years to fill known data gaps. Stats NZ's efforts are focussed on communities and groups such as iwi Māori, Pacific, ethnic, LGBTIQ+, disabled, and homeless/ transient communities. Tailored solutions such as targeted surveys, new data standards, and community collections will be developed to reflect the experiences of these communities, help meet their data needs, and support better outcomes. Engagement on this work will scale up in 2026 with the establishment of mechanisms for collaborative design, such as community design groups. Arrangements for each group are likely to be different according to what is needed. The first group to be established will be a Crown-Māori Statistical Design Forum. Initially, the groups will contribute to the planning for the next census, but other key statistics programmes will also benefit from their advice and perspectives.
Administrative data has, and will continue to, undercount Māori	Undercounting Māori is likely to happen to some degree under the new approach, as it does now. The key areas of population undercount for Māori relate to younger people and Māori people who are born overseas. The Admin Data Supply Plan includes specific actions to address these gaps for Māori.

There is still a significant Māori data gap that exists.	Stats NZ agrees. It is important to ensure that data is available which meet Māori needs and which supports cross-sectional analysis for population subgroups. Two variables of additional interest are Māori descent and iwi affiliation. • The main gaps in admin data relating to Māori descent relate to Māori born overseas and Māori born prior to 1995 (after which point Māori descent information is routinely collected). Additional collection of Māori descent information in admin data would reduce reliance on DIA birth registrations and enrolments on the electoral roll, and the forthcoming Admin Data Supply Plan includes steps to improve Māori descent data. • The mix of census-based population information from the current census model and current social surveys does not deliver enough information about iwi affiliation. Iwi affiliation is currently collected through education and student loan and allowances admin data. Stats NZ is actively working on ways to improve collections. Stats NZ will ensure a range of iwi Māori partners and groups contribute to the planning of the next census, for example through the Crown-Māori Statistical Design Forum.
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09 February 2026

Hon Marama Davidson and Chloë Swarbrick
Leaders of the Green Party
Parliament Buildings

Dear Marama and Chloë

Re: Engagement on census modernisation proposals

In October and November 2025, the Minister of Justice and I consulted political party leaders on the Minister of Justice's proposal to change the electoral boundary review process, and the Government Statistician's decision to modernise the census. Our letter of 23 October 2025 provides more detail.

Thank you for your engagement to date. The Minister of Justice has responded in respect of electoral proposals, and I am writing to you regarding:

- the limitations of the traditional survey-based census approach
- questions raised by political parties
- work underway to transition to the modernised census
- planned Parliamentary procedure for census and boundary review changes, including association of two Bills in the House

I also offer you a further briefing from Stats NZ officials if desired.

Moving from survey-first to admin-data-first

Admin data, collected and updated continuously, will be the foundation of future annual censuses. This will be supplemented by a new annual survey reaching 60,000 households each year, to check the accuracy of admin data and gather more information. Tailored solutions will ensure the new census works for everyone. I **enclose** an information sheet providing more information.

Limitations of the traditional census approach

There appears to be a perception among some members of the public, research community, and other stakeholders that the full-field enumeration census approach is delivering well for all communities and will continue to do so with continued investment. Stats NZ has emphasised that this is a common misconception and acknowledge that ongoing clarification will be required.

The need to modernise the census (which has been recognised by successive governments) is due to ongoing limitations with the traditional survey-led approach. There is growing reluctance to complete census survey forms, leading to high non-response rates. New

Zealand is not unique; other countries face this issue too. Non-response puts the quality of some data at risk, particularly for Māori, Pacific peoples, young people, and rural communities. Relatedly, the traditional census model costs more with every census, yet this increased spend has delivered negligible additional benefits.

Timeliness also needs to be managed. The five-yearly census cycle does not meet modern expectations for timely or relevant data. A long census cycle means that increasingly census data can be seen as stale by the time it is published. External events such as the Canterbury earthquakes, Cyclone Gabrielle, and COVID-19 have highlighted risks around our ability to produce high-quality data during emergencies.

Questions raised about technical feasibility of the new census approach

Political parties raised several questions about the technical feasibility of a census based primarily on data already held by government agencies. **Appendix 1** responds to these specific questions and Stats NZ's [Regulatory Impact Statement](#) provides more information about moving to the new approach.¹

The 2018 and 2023 Census both demonstrated the strengths and value of combining admin and survey data to produce population and social statistics.

The [Census transformation research programme](#) focused on the data and methodological building blocks of an admin data-first census. More information about this programme, including a [technical feasibility report](#), can be found on Stats NZ's website.²

Stats NZ is actively preparing for the transition to the modern census. Admin data can provide more than 95 percent coverage for the most essential census population data, with a high level of consistency between census responses and the information collected by agencies. In addition, an Admin Data Supply Plan is being finalised and will support an uplift in the collection, supply, and quality of admin data across agencies to agreed standards and timeframes.

Addressing needs of smaller and harder to measure population groups

While government data will provide better information than Stats NZ can collect through census surveys in many cases, I acknowledge some groups are concerned that the new census approach will not give them the data they need, nor adequately represent them. Of particular concern are groups that either are not well represented in admin data or have additional data needs beyond what can be met through the census, such as iwi Māori, Pacific, disabled, ethnic, rainbow, and homeless and transient communities. Several parties noted their support for census modernisation is qualified by the arrangements put in place to mitigate this risk.

I am committed to ensuring the census works for all New Zealand. Stats NZ has assured me of its programme to address this risk and to ensure a range of partners and groups contribute to the design and planning of the new census model, for example through the establishment of new [community-based collaborative design groups](#) like the Crown-Māori

¹ See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Corporate/Cabinet-papers/Modernising-our-approach-to-the-2028-Census/Regulatory-Impact-Statement-Modernising-the-census.pdf>

² See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/methods-and-standards/census-transformation-research-programme/>. For the technical feasibility report, see <https://www.stats.govt.nz/research/technical-feasibility-measuring-population-and-dwellings-using-administrative-data-2025-update/>

Statistical Design Forum.³ The Admin Data Supply Plan mentioned above is also an important part of addressing known data gaps.

The modern census approach will still need to collect some data directly from respondents and this will occur through a new annual census survey (Census Attribute Survey), completed by around 60,000 households per year. This survey programme will supplement the information provided by admin data. While there will be some loss of detail for those variables that have relied on surveying in the past, there are important opportunities to improve timeliness and to update census survey content more often through a more flexible design. Rotating census content is also an opportunity to collect data on new or emerging statistical priorities.

I also am assured that tailored solutions such as targeted surveys, new data standards, or community-led collections will be developed to reflect the experiences of these communities, help meet their data needs, and support better outcomes.

Request for comment regarding planned Parliamentary procedure

As advised in the 23 October 2025 letter, the Government will introduce two Bills⁴ to Parliament in early 2026. These Bills contain constitutional changes which, rightly, can only progress with the support of 75 percent of Parliament. I have also been advised that, for the Census Bill to work legally, changes to the connection between censuses and electoral boundary reviews must be enacted at the same time.

Although the Bills address distinct policy matters, the Government intends to seek the support of the House Business Committee to “associate” the Bills as they progress through Parliament, so that they may progress simultaneously this Parliamentary term.

Given the importance of following a well-supported process when making constitutional change, please advise my Senior Ministerial Advisor, Jonathan Franklin (Jonathan.Franklin@parliament.govt.nz), in writing by end of business on 18 February, indicating your party’s agreement to support the Government’s proposal at Business Committee.

Next steps

I have instructed my officials to be available to brief you further on plans to modernise the census should you request this. To arrange a briefing, please contact Kate Satterthwaite, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief of Staff, directly: kate.satterthwaite@stats.govt.nz.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on these proposals over the remainder of the Parliamentary term.

Yours sincerely



Hon Dr Shane Reti

Minister of Statistics

³ See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/about-us/what-we-do/community-design-groups/>

⁴ Formally titled the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and Electoral (District Boundaries) Amendment Bill.

Appendix 1: Questions about technical feasibility of a modern census

Census modernisation has been informed by public consultation and targeted engagement with key partners and stakeholders, especially since 2024, and consistent with the direction of various governments since 2012.

Political parties raised several questions about the technical feasibility of a census based primarily on data already held by government agencies. **Table 1**, prepared by Stats NZ, answers these in turn.

Table 1: Addressing the technical feasibility of an admin-data-first census

Issue	Response
Comparable approaches have only succeeded using a central population register	New Zealand differs from other countries because it has the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI): a large-scale, secure research database containing de-identified linked admin, survey and historical census data. This has enabled Stats NZ to show it can produce census information with admin data. Stats NZ is now developing the Integrated Statistical Data System (ISDS) for use in statistical production. While the ISDS is based on the internationally recognised Register-based Statistical System (RSS), it uses “spines” across three domains (businesses, people, and places) in place of administrative population registers used overseas. Consequently, census modernisation in New Zealand does not need a national identity number or similar arrangements to work.
There has been no independent scrutiny or peer review from experts in census or population statistics	Stats NZ routinely participates in international fora, including (for example) the International Census Forum, where plans for the modernised census attract considerable interest and scrutiny. The census’ core methodology has been internationally peer-reviewed and published (Graham et al, 2024). When advising on the approach to the next census, the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel made 83 recommendations for the next census model, several of which have already been accepted. Stats NZ is actively considering the remaining recommendations as it works through the design of the next census.
Age and reliability of administrative data is uncertain and may be several years out of date	Currently, by the time census results are published, the underlying data is usually one to two years old, and more than five years out of date by the time new census data is available. In this context, moving to annual publication of census data is a significant improvement in timeliness. Stats NZ’s experience preparing the administrative population census (APC) over the last three years has demonstrated significant progress towards a modern census: • For the variables currently included in the APC, admin concepts align closely with concepts defined in statistical standards. • APC admin variables are often formal records from authoritative sources and are more accurate and precise than can be expected from a survey questionnaire. While there is more work to do to improve admin data, Stats NZ has also been able to test tools for finding out the correct values when data sources do not agree. For example, usual residence address is selected using the most recently notified address at an individual level, and machine learning tools have been implemented for predicting household information. This process was reliable enough to use for the 2023 Census.

	Our awareness of the strengths and limitations of current admin data for census purposes has informed the design of the next census across all parts of the new model.
Moving from place-based to people-based census data will affect the quality of geographical insights and planning	There are no plans to move away from a model that attributes people to specific addresses and households, because information about where people live is key to understanding population structure and producing geographical insight. Comparisons with the 2023 Census show that we can already (prior to planned improvements) correctly identify usual residence address for 77 percent of the usually resident population. This level of consistency increases at larger geographic levels (for example, currently 97 percent consistency for regional councils). Rates of address consistency vary by age group and location, with patterns of lower consistency for the mobile population. There are plans to improve address data collection, for example for young people, between now and 2030. There will continue to be high-quality meshblock population data available to support the drawing of electoral boundaries.
Agencies supplying data only update data when there is an event, leading to gaps in accuracy and coverage	Admin data is typically collected when delivering a service (for example, health or education), or as a legal requirement to register events (for example, births, deaths, and marriages) or as a record of transactions or events (for example, tax payments and overseas travel journeys). While admin data generally only collects what is needed to deliver public services, this can be more detailed or more precise than survey responses. For example, admin-derived personal income is available in dollar amounts and by individual income sources. By recording actual events and transactions, admin sources can avoid issues like recall error, misinterpretation of questions, or reluctance to answer. The new approach relies on data from multiple sources where possible. Combining admin data across multiple datasets also can address issues with data quality or timeliness that are present in the datasets of individual agencies.
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There is still a significant Māori data gap that exists.	Stats NZ agrees. It is important to ensure that data is available which meet Māori needs and which supports cross-sectional analysis for population subgroups. Two variables of additional interest are Māori descent and iwi affiliation. • The main gaps in admin data relating to Māori descent relate to Māori born overseas and Māori born prior to 1995 (after which point Māori descent information is routinely collected). Additional collection of Māori descent information in admin data would reduce reliance on DIA birth registrations and enrolments on the electoral roll, and the forthcoming Admin Data Supply Plan includes steps to improve Māori descent data. • The mix of census-based population information from the current census model and current social surveys does not deliver enough information about iwi affiliation. Iwi affiliation is currently collected through education and student loan and allowances admin data. Stats NZ is actively working on ways to improve collections. Stats NZ will ensure a range of iwi Māori partners and groups contribute to the planning of the next census, for example through the Crown-Māori Statistical Design Forum.
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09 February 2026

Debbie Ngarewa-Packer and Rawiri Waititi
Leaders of Te Pāti Māori
Parliament Buildings

Dear Debbie and Rawiri

Re: Engagement on census modernisation proposals

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I also offer you a further briefing from Stats NZ officials if desired.

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Zealand is not unique; other countries face this issue too. Non-response puts the quality of some data at risk, particularly for Māori, Pacific peoples, young people, and rural communities. Relatedly, the traditional census model costs more with every census, yet this increased spend has delivered negligible additional benefits.

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I am committed to ensuring the census works for all New Zealand. Stats NZ has assured me of its programme to address this risk and to ensure a range of partners and groups contribute to the design and planning of the new census model, for example through the establishment of new [community-based collaborative design groups](#) like the Crown-Māori

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I look forward to continuing to work with you on these proposals over the remainder of the Parliamentary term.

Yours sincerely



Hon Dr Shane Reti

Minister of Statistics

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