Regulatory Impact Statement: Modernising the census

[N.B: The Ministry for Regulation gave permission to use this template in Dec 2024].

Purpose of Document	
Decision sought:	Analysis produced for the purpose of informing Cabinet decisions relating to a new approach to delivering the next census.
Advising agencies:	Stats NZ
Proposing Ministers:	Minister of Statistics
Date finalised:	28 April 2025

Problem Definition

The current approach to census involves a combined model, drawing on government-held administrative (admin) data and conducting a large-scale (full enumeration) survey of the population every five years, delivered through a large, temporary field workforce. Stats NZ has identified four inter-related problems and opportunities driving the case for change modernising the census:

a. *Declining census survey response rates, data quality and escalating costs.* In New Zealand and other comparable countries, there is growing public resistance to complete census forms and rising costs to maintain survey data quality. The short data collection window for a traditional census also makes it vulnerable to external events, such as natural disasters, which risk disruption, delays and additional cost.

b. *Growing demand for faster, more timely and relevant data and statistics.* Public expectations for more timely and relevant social statistics have increased. A census model that relies on individual responses to questions every five years is not well-placed to respond to new or emerging data needs.

c. *Improvements in access and use of government-held administrative data.* Over the last decade, there have been significant advancements in access and use of admin data to meet multiple purposes, including the census. There are opportunities to build on these developments to drive social investment, future census and more effective public services.

d. *Development of new more efficient approaches to survey data collection.* As more information needs can be met from admin data, and population estimation techniques have become more advanced, there are alternatives to a five-yearly large-scale census survey of the entire population.

The 2023 Census cost approximately $326 million over five years – a significant increase from the 2018 Census ($126m) and the 2013 Census ($104m). For the next census, due to be undertaken in 2028, the funding appropriated is around $100m less than the budget for the 2023 Census.

Executive Summary

In March 2024, Cabinet noted the current approach to the census is unsustainable and the census needs to be modernised and transformed. Cabinet agreed that the Government Statistician would publicly consult on an admin data-first approach to the census and report back to Cabinet on a final decision.

Future census options

Stats NZ undertook extensive public consultation and targeted engagement throughout 2024 to inform the Government Statistician's in-principle decision. This found support for a modernised approach to the census, but differing views on the speed of transition. This feedback has informed Stats NZ's thinking on key components of the preferred option, and approach to implementation, including changing the initial view on the feasibility of implementation in 2028.

This RIS sets out three options for the next and future census:

a. *Option One: A comprehensive combined model 2028 Census (counterfactual).* Option one is based on the approach developed and implemented for the 2023 Census. This involved the use of admin data and full enumeration survey, with significant investment in follow up activities to bolster survey response rates. This model is not feasible within available baseline funding.

b. *Option Two: A combined model 2028 Census within baseline funding.* Option two would collect census data from admin sources, supplemented by a full enumeration census survey, but with very limited targeted follow up to bolster survey response rates. This option is expected to deliver low survey response rates, creating high risks to data quality, with disproportionate negative impacts on data for and about Māori, Pacific peoples and young adults.

c. *Option Three: An administrative data-first census delivered in 2030 (preferred option).* Option three would involve three components:

   - Ongoing admin data collection of key census variables.
   - An annual sample survey (Census Attribute Survey) – surveying up to five percent of the population throughout the year, every year.
   - Partnership-based solutions (for example targeted surveys) – designed with key partners to address remaining data gaps and unmet information needs.

Option Three is the Government Statistician's preferred option on the basis that it is best placed to position Stats NZ to deliver a sustainable and resilient census programme to address current and future information needs. Under this option, admin data would cover most of the population and census variables currently collected, while the Census Attribute Survey (CAS) and other partnership-based solutions will provide for additional checks on the accuracy of, and fill gaps in, admin data.

The official census count would be released in 2030, rather than 2028 as currently required under the Data and Statistics Act 2022, to give Stats NZ and other government agencies time to lift the quality of admin data, implement an annual sample survey and adapt to the new delivery schedule. Stats NZ plans to release some key data (such as population counts and population structure – for example age, sex, location, ethnicity) using only admin data sources from 2026. This means users will have access to official, up-to-date data before the full 2030 Census release.

The preferred option would start to future-proof the census. Once systems and infrastructure are in place, the cost to deliver core census data is expected to reduce over

time due to efficiency gains and less impact from current drivers of escalating costs. By improving the quality of admin data and the government's admin data capabilities the preferred option is also expected to generate significant wider benefits by providing a foundation for a more integrated, adaptable and robust government data system.

It will take time to fully transition to a new approach over the next five to ten years, and to produce the level of quality that people expect from census data. The preferred option has some significant trade-offs across different dimensions of data quality. It would progressively deliver key statistics faster, more frequently, with increasing accuracy and greater efficiency. The annual CAS also provides greater flexibility to collect different data to meet new or emerging information needs.

The preferred option would also result in some reductions in data accuracy, detail and coverage, especially initially, and for population groups and variables that are not well represented in admin data, including data for and about disabled people, rainbow communities and small ethnic communities. It will be critical that Census Attribute Survey sample sizes are large enough and sufficiently targeted to reflect Māori and Pacific populations.

Over time, the partnership-based component would provide further opportunities to develop new models for data collection, analysis and management to better meet the wider needs and aspirations of iwi Māori as well as population groups such as Pacific peoples whose interests or values are not always well-represented in admin data.

Stakeholder views on the preferred option

Following the Government's Statistician's in-principle decision, Stats NZ has continued to engage with government agencies and technical experts. Many government agencies understand the need to modernise the census and recognise the opportunity that admin data presents. However, concerns were raised about:

- the scale and pace of change
- the technical and financial ability of agencies to deliver the data needed
- data quality, especially in the short-term and its potential impact on policy, planning and service delivery – mainly relating to reduced coverage of key population groups and household and dwelling data.

The Government Statistician also shared the in-principle decision with Te Kāhui Raraunga (the operational arm of Data Iwi Leaders Group). A key issue for Te Kāhui Raraunga is reduced accuracy, detail and coverage of key variables, such as Māori descent, iwi affiliation, te reo Māori prevalence, disability data, and data loss particularly for smaller iwi. Te Kāhui Raraunga want Stats NZ to invest in iwi Māori data capability – including working with Māori on the plan to collect iwi affiliation data, and to provide a clear path to address short-term data deficits.

Approach to implementation

The views of government agencies, Treaty partners and other stakeholders have shaped Stats NZ's proposed next steps and approach to implementation. This is a transformational work programme which Stats NZ intends to implement through a phased approach, allowing Stats NZ to navigate uncertainty by progressively refining plans, testing assumptions, and adapting the design as new insights emerge.

The most significant risk that has been identified through engagement and consultation to date relates to uncertainty regarding the potential quality and completeness of future census data on population and dwellings, especially for the 2030 Census. There are a

small number of essential variables where improvements to the supply, collection or quality of admin data are required. These include usual resident address, detailed ethnicity, Māori descent, iwi affiliation, and gender.

A priority area of focus for Stats NZ is to continue to improve its understanding of admin data about dwellings and to develop a longitudinal Dwelling Register as part of the Places Index (to connect address data to properties, buildings, and dwellings). This is critical to support forecasting, planning, and investing in housing and urban development at place. Stats NZ will publish a dwelling strategy in mid-2025 that outlines a path to high-quality data about dwellings in the next census.

Key data supply agencies have advised that they do not expect to be able to make changes to admin data within their baselines to meet required timeframes for the next census. In some cases, such as in health and education, changes will need to be made across many service providers, which will require updates to legacy data systems.

Stats NZ will continue to work with the affected admin data suppliers to assess costs, constraints, and the scale of change for individual organisations over the coming months. This will inform the development of a proposed Cabinet directive and a statutory directive under section 107 of the Crown Entities Act 2004 to direct key agencies and entities to supply specific data variables to set standards and timeframes.

Stats NZ plans to set up a Chief Executive group to drive work to deliver collective improvements to admin data to support census, social investment, and other government priorities. This will ensure that trade-offs between data quality, feasibility, and costs to specific admin data suppliers over the next five to ten years are explicit. 9(2)(f)(iv)

The preferred option in the Cabinet paper is the same as the RIS

The accompanying Cabinet paper from the Minister of Statistics is seeking Cabinet endorsement of the Government Statistician's in-principle decision. This includes seeking approval for drafting amendments to the Data and Statistics Act 2022 to allow for a census to be taken in 2030, rather than in 2028 as currently required, clarify the timing of data collection and publishing under the preferred approach, and simplify the notification process for data collection. Stats NZ understand that the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill been given a priority four category on the 2025 Legislative Programme so that it can be passed by the end of 2025 if possible.

Limitations and Constraints on Analysis

The fiscal context and government direction to improve public service efficiency

The scope of options for future census was developed within a context of the Government's fiscal priorities and direction for public services to become efficient and effective within baseline funding. Five earlier admin data-first census options were considered by an independent panel of ten experts, convened to review and evaluate options for modernising the census. In August 2024, the Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel recommended taking a staged approach, with one last large-scale census survey in 2028 (Option 1), moving to an approach using a Continuous Attribute Survey in 2033 (Option 4), before transitioning to an approach where census data collection is integrated into other household surveys (Option 5).

Following costing, the five options were found to significantly exceed the available funding. This meant the Panel's preferred option for 2028 Census cannot be implemented

as it was originally proposed. Additional funding is unlikely in the current fiscal context, so Stats NZ developed two refined options (presented in this RIS) to fit within the available budget.

Stats NZ also considered and ultimately discarded options that would require planning and delivering another full enumeration census survey in 2028 alongside the substantive work required to further develop a new model for the census in 2033 and beyond. Implementing a dual census work programme was not considered feasible within available baseline funding.

An updated RIS will be prepared to support the introduction of the proposed Bill

This interim RIS presents a high-level options analysis and a qualitative assessment of the costs, benefits, and impacts of the preferred option. Stats NZ is confident in the comparative assessment of the three high-level options and in the qualitative judgements about the costs and benefits of the preferred option. Stats NZ is also confident that by transitioning to a new census model over five to ten years, higher quality and more comprehensive population and dwellings data and statistics will be produced in 2035, relative to 2030.

However, the potential *scale* of distributional impacts across population groups and *detailed* costs and benefits for census customers will be subject to some uncertainty until more detailed design and implementation work has progressed. The level of data quality (accuracy, detail, and coverage) that will be delivered in the 2030 Census for variables that are not currently well-represented in admin data will depend on future decisions. These include the prioritisation and phasing of admin data improvements, the detailed design of the annual Census Attribute Survey, and partnering to design tailored solutions to deliver value for iwi Māori and underserved communities.

This interim RIS is not able to provide a quantitative assessment of the financial costs of admin data improvements to specific government agencies and Crown entities at this time. An updated RIS will be prepared to support Cabinet decisions on the introduction of the proposed Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill. The final RIS will include information about costs to government agencies and Crown entities of implementing the preferred option, drawing on work to develop the Cabinet and statutory directives.

Responsible Manager(s) (completed by relevant manager)
Tennille Maxey
General Manager, Policy, Statistics NZ
28/04/25

Quality Assurance (completed by QA panel)	
Reviewing Agency:	Stats NZ, with an independent panel chair and including external panel members from the Ministry of Health and the Social Investment Agency.
Panel Assessment & Comment:	The independent RIS QA panel has reviewed the interim RIS. The panel has concluded that it partially meets the quality assurance criteria.

The panel notes that the RIS does not yet contain any monetised costs, although it is expected that the work to be undertaken will enable monetised costings to be included with the final RIS later this year. The absence of quantified costs, risks and wider benefits makes it hard to assess the true difference between options 2 and 3. The panel anticipates that more complete information in the final RIS will make these choices clearer. While the RIS is lengthy, the material in the RIS is accessible and clear.

Section 1: Diagnosing the policy problem

What is the context behind the policy problem and how is the status quo expected to develop?

The census generates significant value for New Zealand

1. In New Zealand and across the world, census data is used to gain insights about people and communities. The census provides some of the highest-quality and comprehensive information we have on how households and families are structured, how people live, and changes to cultural diversity, housing quality, educational qualifications, and work. Over the years the census has been adapted to reflect societal changes and respond to the changing information needs of New Zealanders.

2. Population and social statistics provide essential data for informed decisions, enabling governments, iwi Māori, community groups, and businesses to allocate resources efficiently, undertake service design, plan workforce development, and target investments in education, health, and infrastructure. In 2021, data from census delivered an estimated value of $2.8 billion to New Zealand.[1]

Table 1: Examples of how census information is used

Health and wellbeing	Census information is used by government to plan health services such as hospitals, and by health and social service providers to make the case for health and social services where they are needed.
Community services	Councils use census data to decide where to put community services such as libraries and parks.
	Community groups and organisations use census information to support funding applications and make the case for improvements within their communities.
	Local clubs use census population counts to understand whether there are enough people to form sports teams.
Transport, internet and other infrastructure	Government and councils use census data to understand where public transport, roads, power, internet, water, and sewerage services are needed and how many people will be using them.
Housing	Councils and government use census data to understand whether homes in New Zealand are big enough for our families, where we need to build new housing, and what condition people's homes are in.
Iwi	Iwi use census data to understand more about their people, where they are living, and how they are faring. This helps to plan for future generations, and may influence funding, services, or other initiatives.
Businesses	Businesses use census data to make investment decisions and determine how they can meet demand for their products and services.
Research	Researchers use census data to understand things like: • how mouldy and damp housing affects communities • how many people do not have good access to clean water, schools, or hospitals • how ethnic communities are growing and changing over time and what services they use and need.

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[1] Bakker, C (2021). Value of the New Zealand Census: August 2021. Retrieved from www.stats.govt.nz

…but the traditional census is facing major challenges

3. The current census model relies on conducting a large-scale (full enumeration) survey of the population every five years, delivered through a large field workforce. This traditional delivery model is facing significant challenges in New Zealand and other comparable countries. There are growing concerns about declining census survey response rates, increasing costs to government and challenges in ensuring the census continues to supply data of adequate quality to meet customer needs.

4. Decisions about the content and manner of taking the census fall within the statutory responsibility of the Government Statistician. The Data and Statistics Act 2022 (the Act) includes specific requirements for the census that the Government Statistician must meet. These include requirements that a census of population and dwellings must be undertaken every five years, and obligations to consult Māori, interested parties, and the public on the content and manner of taking and the next census. Following each census, a review of census operations must be conducted, with a report presented to the responsible Minister.

5. The Act provides a wider legislative framework for the Government Statistician to collect data, set data standards, request data from an individual, public sector agency or organisation, and authorise a public sector agency to collect data on their behalf. The Government Statistician is also required under the Act to give effect to the Te Tiriti o Waitangi / The Treaty of Waitangi through the collection of data, production of statistics, and access to and use of data for furthering the well-being of Māori, and through the way in which data is collected, managed, and used to produce official statistics and research.

6. The next census is required under the Act to be conducted in 2028. Any change to requirements that the Government Statistician must meet relating to the timing of the census requires Cabinet approval and legislative amendment to the Act. There are related references to census or the use of census data in a range of legislation and regulations including the Electoral Act 1993, the Local Electoral Act 2001, the Waste Minimisation Act 2008, Wellington Regional Water Board Act 1972 and the Local Government (Remuneration Authority Levies) Regulations 2005.

Cabinet has recognised a need to modernise the approach to census

7. Stats NZ has been testing and exploring the potential for alternative approaches to undertaking the census and producing official statistics since 2012.

8. The census programme has run on a five-year cycle, where planning, testing, and trials are run in the lead up to the next census almost immediately after the previous census concludes. Over the last year, Stats NZ has been ramping up efforts to transform how it delivers the census and working towards the possibility of taking a new approach to the next census. This has included targeted engagement with data system partners and key stakeholders, technical and census design work, and testing thinking with international census experts and a Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel.

9. In March 2024, Cabinet made some initial decisions on a proposed direction of travel for the next and future census. Cabinet:

    a. noted the current approach to the census is unsustainable and the census needs to be modernised and transformed

    b. noted the Minister of Statistics directed Stats NZ to develop options for 2028 Census and beyond, based on an administrative (admin) data-first approach

    c. agreed that the Government Statistician would publicly consult on an admin data-first approach to the census, supported by tailored surveys, and report back to Cabinet on a final decision [CAB-24-MIN-0101].

There has been significant public consultation and engagement on future census

10. Early targeted engagement and public consultation in the first half of 2024 helped Stats NZ to identify a fuller picture of the key uses of census data to meet different customer needs and stakeholder perspectives on priorities for future census. Annex 1 provides a summary of the approach to this public consultation and targeted engagement. Post-public consultation, Stats NZ has continued to engage with government agency partners to discuss critical data needs, admin data priorities, and technical design matters.

11. Submissions to the public consultation showed that approximately two-thirds of respondents were supportive (50 per cent) or neutral (15 per cent) of a change to the manner of taking the census. Of those who did not support the proposed change in direction, some respondents wanted more information from us about what the future census would look like and deliver. Other respondents indicated that their support for change would depend on whether their privacy or security concerns could be adequately addressed. Stats NZ heard that accuracy, accessibility, timeliness, and frequency of census data were most important to people.

12. Public consultation and targeted engagement have informed Stats NZ's understanding of the issues and problems under the current census approach. It has shaped thinking about the key design elements of a new model to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the census, while positioning Stats NZ to better address unmet, emerging and new information needs. Stakeholder feedback also highlighted specific data quality risks and implementation challenges that will need to be mitigated as much as possible, through Stats NZ's approach to detailed census design decisions and implementation.

13. Stats NZ has engaged with its international colleagues to learn from and share lessons from international developments. Stats NZ attends and contributes to 'Census Week', an event organised and coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (Statistics Division). Stats NZ also engages regularly with the International Census Forum and national statistics offices from Canada, Australia, United States, Scotland, and the United Kingdom on census matters.

What is the policy problem or opportunity?

14. Stats NZ has identified four interrelated policy problems or opportunities driving the case for changes to the model for delivering future census:

Declining census survey response rates, data quality and escalating costs

Census data quality and declining survey response rates

15. Conducting a large-scale five-yearly census survey with high response rates to ensure adequate data quality is costly and time-consuming. The costs to government are continuing to increase, driven by population growth and reluctance from a growing segment of the population to fill in census forms. The return on this increased investment is subject to diminishing returns at a time of fiscal constraint.

16. The short collection window in a traditional census model also makes it vulnerable to external events, which risk disruption and delays to data collection. For example, the 2011 Census was delayed by the Christchurch earthquake, while the 2023 Census had

to deal with significant disruption in the form of Covid-19, the Northland and Auckland floods, and Cyclone Gabrielle, which impacted the ability to collect survey responses. These disruptions were combated at significant additional cost. Cyclone Gabrielle alone cost an additional $36 million in collection activity.

17. Across Stats NZ's social survey programme, there is a growing section of the population that is hard to count. This requires directing increased effort and resources to follow up with non-responders and ensure representative population coverage. Stats NZ currently visits homes up to 10 times to achieve high enough response rates in its household surveys, compared to up to 3 times at the time of the 2006 Census.

18. Declining census survey response rates reduce the amount of information the census can supply about population attributes or characteristics that are currently only available from the census survey, especially for smaller population groups. These reductions in data quality have a disproportionate impact on data for and about population groups with lower survey response rates, particularly Māori, Pacific people, and young adults.

19. Table 2 (overleaf) illustrates the scale of declining national and population group survey response rates since the 2013 Census. This shows a very significant decline in response rates for the 2018 Census, the first census to shift from a paper-based to a primarily online data collection model. The drop in 2018 Census survey response rates delayed the release of initial census outputs and saw a reduction of public trust and confidence in the accuracy of census results to inform decision-making. Stats NZ sought to mitigate critical data quality and coverage gaps by drawing on admin data held by government agencies to supplement census survey data.

20. By combining admin data with 2018 Census survey data, Stats NZ was able to significantly improve the accuracy of population counts. In total, it is estimated that the new census model developed for the 2018 Census counted 98.6 percent of the population. However, there was a reduction in the scope and quality of information available from the 2018 Census, with a disproportionate impact on population groups such as Māori, who had lower response rates to the census survey. For example, admin data could not address information gaps relating to important population characteristics such as iwi affiliation, family and household structure, housing quality and tenure, or activity limitations (disability).

21. Lessons from the 2018 Census informed the approach Stats NZ took to the 2023 Census. The 2023 Census used a combined census model by design to achieve higher coverage and more representative population data and statistics. This included a significant technical and analytic work programme to supplement survey responses with admin data across a wider range of census attributes. The combined model was supported by a significant increase in the level of government funding.

22. As shown by Table 2, the 2023 Census results represent a small improvement to the overall survey response rates achieved in the 2018 Census but remain much lower than response rates from earlier censuses, including 2013. Stats NZ did not meet its target response rates for Māori, Pacific peoples, or younger adults in the 2023 Census.

Table 2: National and population sub-group census survey response rates, over time

	2013 Census	2018 Census	2023 Census
National response rate	93.2%	85.8%	87.6%
Subgroup response rates			
Māori descent	N/A[1]	72.8%[2]	77.6%
Māori ethnic group	89.7%[3]	73.4%	76.5%
Pacific ethnic group	90.8%[3]	72.0%	79.2%
Asian ethnic group	93.3%[3]	85.6%	89.3%
15–29-year-olds	90.3%	79.5%	84.2%

1. Māori descent information was not captured in the post-enumeration survey prior to 2018, and therefore a 2013 Census response rate is not available for Māori descent.
2. The 2018 Māori descent response rate is calculated using Māori descent (electoral) census data which is used to determine electoral populations. Responses of 'Don't Know' have been imputed to 'Māori descent' and 'No Māori descent'.
3. Ethnicity was not imputed in 2013 Census data. These collection response rates are estimates based on imputation of level 1 ethnicity indicators for population estimates published in NZ.Stat / ADE. These assume that ethnic imputation is applied at the same rate for all records requiring imputation.

23. Across OECD countries, many international National Statistics Offices have faced similar patterns of declining census response rates. This has led to a shift away from reliance only on traditional data collection approaches and towards greater use of admin data. For example, across the EU, in 2021, just six of 27 countries were undertaking a traditional census model. In 2023, the United Kingdom consulted on plans to move towards a towards an admin only census.

Escalating costs to government

24. The 2023 Census programme cost approximately $326 million over five years – a significant increase from the 2018 Census ($126m) and the 2013 Census ($104m). Increase costs supported major field work operation, working with partners and community groups before and after data collection to boost response rates and remove barriers to people completing census forms. The cost of running the census in this way will continue to rise.

Census Spend Profile ($)
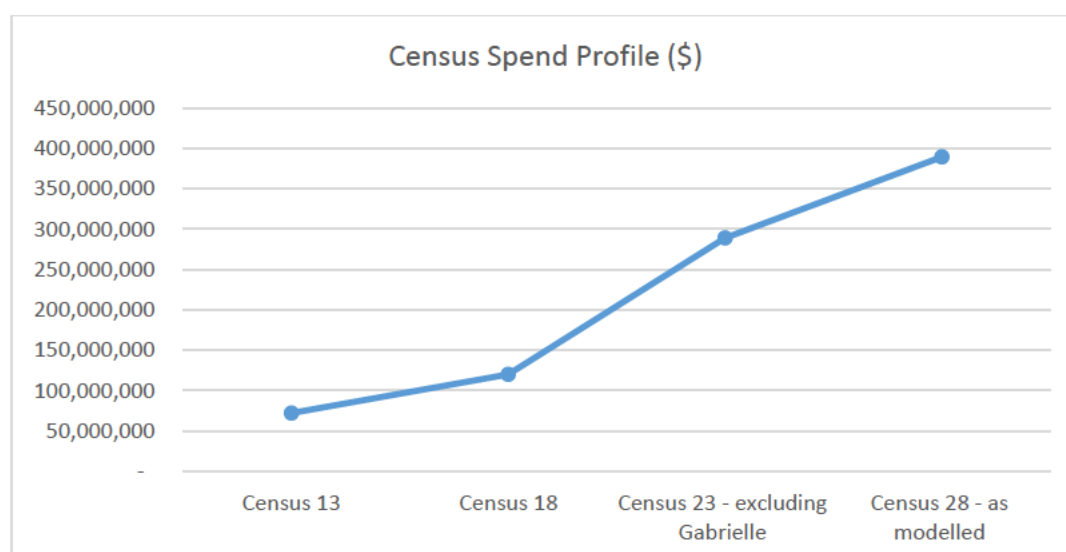
25. For the next census, the funding appropriated is around $100m less than the budget for the 2023 Census. There is a pressing need to modernise the census programme to

secure the future supply of high-quality data about New Zealand's population while controlling costs and improving financial sustainability.

Growing demand for faster, more timely and relevant data and statistics

26. Public expectations and stakeholder demand for more timely social statistics have increased. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, having information on how people were faring in a range of domains such as employment and unemployment, working from home, health, mental health, wellbeing, income adequacy, housing adequacy, social cohesion, and loneliness became more important, with people wanting real time information.

27. A census model that relies heavily on individual responses to questions every five years is not well-placed to respond to emerging data needs. Delays between data collection, publication, and updates limit the timeliness of data and statistics. A wide range of stakeholders have told us they would like Stats NZ to provide New Zealanders with important data faster and more often. Local government and business stakeholders have indicated that improving access to timely, up to date data is a priority for them.

28. Our Treaty partners, Pacific and disabled communities have called for new and different types of population data, better data governance, and new approaches to data collection to address unmet needs and values. While the census and social surveys provide vital information for many communities, they often fail to meet all information needs, and data quality is inequitable across different groups.

29. The recent long-term insights briefing from the Ministry for Pacific Peoples[2] provides further context for understanding unmet needs and sources of data inequity for Pacific populations. Te Kāhui Raraunga[3] has provided an overview of the value, need, and uses of iwi data to exercise Treaty rights and responsibilities, including influencing and monitoring Māori outcomes, and progressing Māori wellbeing in line with aspirations.

Improvements in access and use of government-held admin data

30. A shift to an admin data-first approach is a natural evolution toward more efficient, accurate, and cost-effective census data collection. Admin data collected by government organisations for operational purposes can often provide a good picture of what people do, what they need, and how they access (or do not access) different services. The Statutory Review of the 2023 Census noted that New Zealand is more advanced than many other major statistical agencies in its access to and use of admin data held by government agencies.

31. Over the last ten years, the development of the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) has provided an important foundation for linking admin data across multiple datasets. This provides opportunities to reduce, or eliminate coverage gaps or bias, including under- or over-representation of specific population groups that may be found in admin data held by a single agency. The development of the IDI has been accompanied by significant technical advances in Stats NZ's ability to generate insights from admin data for census purposes.

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[2] Ministry for Pacific Peoples — Long-term Insights Briefing
[3] Iwi Data Needs | Te Kāhui Raraunga

32. Stats NZ has relied on admin data to provide accurate population counts since the 2018 Census. From 2021 onwards, Stats NZ has released an experimental Administrative Population Census (APC), that includes an assessment of data quality for a growing number of census variables based on admin data. The APC shows admin data can provide similar- or better- quality data for approximately half of the current census variables. These include core demographic variables such as age, location, birthplace, and number of years in New Zealand (for migrants). There is also good admin data on personal income, work, and education.

33. However, admin data is much less accurate and complete for a range of other high value census variables or attributes. For example, there is a high level of population coverage, and a relatively high level of consistency between the ethnicity data supplied by the 2023 Census and admin data. However, to provide accurate population data for small ethnic communities, including smaller groups of Pacific populations such as Kiribati or Pitcairn Islanders, government agencies would need to consistently collect more detailed ethnicity data.[4]

34. Annex 2 provides a summary of the quality of variables available from existing admin data, including ethnicity data, based on the most recent analysis of admin data at different levels of aggregation relative to the 2023 Census.[5]

35. Further admin data gaps[6] it is critical to mitigate or progress include:

   a. poor coverage of iwi affiliation and to a lesser extent Māori descent, two variables that are highly valued by iwi Māori, and used by the Crown to inform electoral boundaries and Treaty settlements respectively

   b. a lack of admin data identifying people in rainbow communities and providing information on disability – used to monitor outcomes and underpin effective policies and services to address needs across the population

   c. the development of the admin infrastructure to support a high-quality listing of dwellings, and linking of combined information about people, dwellings, and places which is critical to forecast, plan, and invest in housing and urban development at place.

36. There is substantial opportunity to expand the coverage and quality of admin data across government to support future census, social investment, and other government priorities. This would require:

   a. accelerating cross-government efforts to improve the quality of census-relevant admin data held by government organisations

   b. progressing technical work to identify new data sources and develop data infrastructure and methods to generate further insights from admin data.

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[4] Stats NZ's standard for ethnicity data involves a hierarchy with level 1 being the highest level of aggregation (6 categories), level two (21 categories) through to level 4 (180 categories) the most detailed. For example, Level 1 ethnicity data records all Pacific peoples; Level 2 disaggregates this classification into groups such as Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, and Niuean; while Level 4 records smaller populations such as Kiribati or Pitcairn Islander.

[5] For a discussion of the complexities of measuring ethnicity from admin sources and an earlier assessment of the quality of ethnicity admin data relative to the 2018 Census, see: Dixon, R, Batts, T, and Diener, H (2024).

[6] Stats NZ (2024). Technical feasibility: Measuring population and dwellings using administrative data. Retrieved from www.stats.govt.nz.

37. Over time, these efforts could significantly improve the quality and use of admin data to address information needs currently met by the census. Public consultation and targeted engagement with data system partners and key stakeholders has found significant interest in making better use of admin data government already holds and the potential for a new census approach to produce more timely, frequent, and relevant statistics. However, government organisations that hold or supply census-relevant admin data have reinforced that improving admin data involves costs, reinforcing a need for prioritisation of the highest-value data needs, prior costing, and a staged approach to future implementation. This feedback has informed the development of Stats NZ's proposed next steps, set out in Section Three.

Development of new, more efficient approaches to survey data collection

38. Public consultation and engagement feedback reinforced Stats NZ's views on the importance of a future census approach that combines admin data with surveying. However, as more information needs can be met from admin data, and population estimation techniques have become more sophisticated, Stats NZ considers there are alternatives to a five-yearly full enumeration survey to address these outstanding data gaps. A more regular survey of a smaller proportion of the population could, over time, meet critical information needs that cannot be addressed by admin data alone.

39. There would be trade-offs for some aspects of data quality. In particular, a shift away from surveying the whole population would result in a reduction in the granularity (detail) available about individual census variables, and reductions in population and geographic coverage for information needs that cannot be met from admin data. The nature, scale, and distributional impacts of loss of data accuracy, detail, and coverage was a significant concern for data system partners, iwi Māori, and key stakeholders. Sections Two and Three of this RIS outline how Stats NZ proposes to respond to these concerns through the high-level design and implementation of a future approach to census.

40. Public consultation and targeted engagement feedback emphasised that surveying will be necessary to collect some information relating to subjective measures or personal experience. Stats NZ recognises that it is unlikely to be possible, appropriate, or publicly acceptable for government organisations to collect certain personal data when it is unrelated to service delivery. This understanding has been built into the high-level design of a future approach to census. Examples include sexual identity, languages spoken (including te reo Māori), religious affiliation, and unpaid activities.

41. Stats NZ recognises that admin data collected and held by government agencies for service delivery may not reflect individuals' perspectives and that the context of data collection can influence self-reported responses and willingness to share personal data. For example, people may respond with different ethnicities in different contexts where they may feel pressure to report, or not report, particular ethnic groups. This is evident among the lower reporting of multiple ethnicities in hospital admin collections compared with those who identify themselves as having multiple ethnicities in the census.[7]

42. Survey data will continue to be important in areas where admin data alone may never be of sufficient quality to produce accurate statistics. For example, admin data provides

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[7] Dixon, R, Batts, T, and Diener, H (2024). Reviewing the quality of ethnicity data from admin sources: Comparison with the census. Retrieved from www.stats.govt.nz.

very limited information on housing quality, travel arrangements, or occupation. Housing quality and travel arrangements provide valuable information to support housing and transport planning, policy, and investment at national and local levels, while occupational data from the census is used to assess labour-market demand and skill shortages.

43. Engagement with iwi Māori, NGOs, and government population agencies has reinforced that neither admin data nor a one-size-fits-all census survey is well-placed to reflect the values and interests of Treaty partners, or those of Pacific peoples, disabled, or rainbow communities. These groups have a strong interest in working with Stats NZ to develop tailored solutions to address unmet information needs of their communities. A new approach to census also provides significant opportunities to support iwi-led data collection, capability building, and governance.

What objectives are sought in relation to the policy problem?

44. Stats NZ has identified the following high-level objectives:

   a. To ensure an ongoing supply of data and statistics about population and dwellings that conforms with international standards and best practice.

   b. To provide customers with timely and equitable access to rich and statistically sound data to support nationally and locally significant decisions.

   c. To meet Crown responsibilities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi / The Treaty of Waitangi to recognise customs, rights and interests in the way data will be collected, managed, and used; foster Māori capability and capacity to collect, use and access data; and provide value for Māori.

   d. To position Stats NZ to deliver a sustainable and resilient census programme to address current and future information needs.

45. These objectives are based on the primary purpose of census, the current Government's stated priorities for future census, and the obligations on the Government Statistician under the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

Section 2: Deciding upon an option to address the policy problem

What criteria will be used to compare options to the status quo?

46. Stats NZ has identified the following criteria to assess which options are most likely to meet the objectives:

    a. **Produces high-quality data:** supplying population and dwellings data that is reliable, consistent, and error-free, with sufficient population and geographic coverage and granularity to meet critical national and local information needs.

    b. **Meets new and emerging customer information needs:** providing timely, frequent access to important data and population statistics, with flexibility to collect and publish different data over time.

    c. **Drives efficient public services:** making better use of data government has already collected, while protecting data security and lowering the cost of interacting with government.

    d. **Increases resilience:** to avoid disruption by external factors such as earthquakes, severe weather events, or pandemics by avoiding reliance on surveying within a short collection window.

    e. **Manages delivery risks and is feasible to implement**: to enable successful delivery at reasonable cost, quality, and timeframes.

    f. **Is fiscally sustainable:** ensuring long-term cost sustainability of the census, in the context of rising costs to maintain adequate response rates to a large-scale survey.

47. Criteria a. and b. focus on the potential outputs of future census to meet user information needs across different dimensions of data quality: accuracy, scope, granularity, coverage, relevance, and timeliness. Criteria d., e., and f. focus on census efficiency, resilience, and long-term sustainability.

48. The key used to compare options and provide qualitative judgements against these criteria is set out below.

Key for qualitative judgements:

++   much better than doing nothing/the status quo/counterfactual

+   better than doing nothing/the status quo/counterfactual

0   about the same as doing nothing/the status quo/counterfactual

-   worse than doing nothing/the status quo/counterfactual

- -   much worse than doing nothing/the status quo/counterfactual

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What scope will options be considered within?

The scope of options was informed by public consultation and engagement

49. Stats NZ's development and assessment of options has been informed by public consultation and ongoing targeted engagement with key stakeholders on a potential shift towards an admin data-first census. Public consultation and targeted engagement found support for a modernised approach to the census but differing views on the

speed of implementation. Data system partners, iwi Māori, and key stakeholders were clear that admin data cannot fulfil all the critical information needs that the census currently meets and concerned that greater reliance on admin data would result in loss of data accuracy detail or coverage, especially in the short term, and for information about dwellings and household characteristics, and underserved communities such as Māori, Pacific peoples, and disabled people.

50. Stats NZ recognises and has sought to respond to these challenges throughout the high-level design of a new admin data-first census approach. The new approach would combine admin data with regular surveying of a proportion of the population, as well as more tailored, partnership-based solutions to address information needs of Treaty partners and underserved communities that cannot be met by admin data alone. Further census design and implementation work seeks to mitigate potential negative impacts on census customers wherever possible.

51. Stats NZ has also sought to reduce the uncertainty faced by census users and admin data suppliers during the transition to a new census approach. This includes developing for plans for phasing information releases over the next few years to ensure census users have access to core census data in advance of official census results, clarifying accountability arrangements to drive collective improvements to admin data across government, and confirming how and when requirements for admin data improvements will be finalised.

52. Key data supply agencies have indicated that they do not consider it feasible to implement improvements to admin data in the required timeframes for the next census within their baseline funding. Stats NZ has responded by developing an implementation approach to ensure that trade-offs between data quality, feasibility, and costs to admin data suppliers are explicit prior to final decisions on the prioritisation and phasing of admin data improvements. This will include a focus on aligning the timing of admin data improvements with data system upgrades of legacy systems funded within baselines wherever possible.

53. Once a high-level direction is confirmed, more detailed work to progress the design and implementation of the approach to the next census may progress. These detailed decisions would be subject to further evidence-gathering and analysis, and engagement and consultation with key partners and stakeholders. The preferred option includes a proposed public consultation in late 2025 to test potential census content, and ongoing engagement with government agencies, iwi Māori partners, and key stakeholders as the model for future census develops.

Census transformation has been influenced by international developments

54. The development and assessment of census options has been informed by changes in census taking internationally. There is an international trend of countries moving away from relying solely on traditional data collection approaches and towards approaches that increasingly make greater use of admin data, either as part of a combined model or as admin-only. Stats NZ's approach to census transformation has been significantly influenced by the experiences of countries with established register based statistical systems.[8]

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[8] A summary of the experiences of these countries is summarised in Wallgren, A., and Wallgren, B. (eds) *Register-based Statistics: Registers and the National Statistical System*. Wiley online books. First published:25 March 2022

55. Similar to New Zealand, a number of countries without a population register are pursuing the benefits of a statistical register system to support population measurement. Stats NZ has strong connections with the United Kingdon (ONS), Statistics Canada, Australian Bureau of Statistics, and Ireland (Central Statistics Office). Key areas of collaboration include aspects such as data integration, methods for population estimation, and approaches for managing the impact of linkage error that becomes more prominent without the use of a National Identification Number.

56. In New Zealand, a connected set of linked datasets (Statistical Business Register, Places Index, and Administrative Population Model) are a step toward a register-based statistical system (Stats NZ is calling this the Integrated Statistical Data System). This provides a foundation for enhanced processing of admin data for statistical purposes. Through use of these linked datasets, Stats NZ will be better set up to use integrated admin and survey data for the delivery of essential statistics, including census.

57. Census data is of greater value if it can be compared with the results of censuses of other counties taken at approximately the same time. United Nations recommendations are that countries should make all efforts to undertake a census in years ending in '0' or '1', or at a time as near to those years as possible. This has influenced Stats NZ's thinking on the timing of future census.

Final options were refined to align to available baseline funding

58. Following the public consultation, the Government Statistician convened an independent panel of ten experts to review and evaluate five options for future census.[9] The Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel generally supported Stats NZ's intention to shift to a more transformative admin data-first census approach, recognising the potential benefits of delivering robust, timely, targeted, and adaptable information in a sustainable way. However, they did express concern that the government's data and statistics system would not be ready to move to, and successfully implement, a more transformative approach by 2028 (when the next census is due to be taken). This is similar to the view provided in the Report of the Statutory Review of the 2023 Census.

59. For these reasons, in August 2024, the Panel recommended taking a staged approach. This involved proceeding with one last large-scale census survey in 2028 (Option 1), moving to an approach using a Continuous Attributes Survey in 2033 (Option 4), before transitioning to an approach where census data collection is integrated into other household surveys (Option 5). Following costing, the five options considered by the Panel were found to significantly exceed the available funding. This meant the Panel's preferred option for 2028 Census cannot be implemented as originally proposed.

60. The scope of high-level options in this RIS were developed within a context of the Government's fiscal priorities and direction for public services to become efficient and effective within baseline funding. Additional funding is unlikely in the current fiscal context, so Stats NZ developed two refined options to fit within the available budget. The two final options presented in this RIS, including the proposed timing and phasing of the preferred option, were informed by this earlier advice on the feasibility of full implementation in 2028 and the need for further, more detailed consultation and

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[9] The Independent Evaluation Panel were selected to represent a diverse range of data user perspectives, including expertise from academia, commerce and technology, central government, disability, international perspectives, Rainbow, Pacific peoples, and iwi Māori. Future Census Independent Evaluation Panel | Stats NZ

engagement, implementation and technical design work to underpin the successful delivery of a new approach to census.

61.   The independent Report of the Statutory Review of New Zealand's 2023 Census concluded that it would be exceedingly difficult and expensive for Stats NZ or any other similar statistical agency to plan for both an admin data-first census model and a traditional or combined census in 2028. Stats NZ considered and ultimately discarded options that would require planning and delivering another large-scale census survey in 2028 alongside the substantive work required to further develop a new model for the census in 2033 and beyond. Implementing a dual census work programme was not considered feasible within available baseline funding.

Current requirements for data privacy, security, and confidentiality apply to all options

62.   Stats NZ has obligations under both the Privacy Act 2020, and the Data and Statistics Act 2022 to keep people's information private, secure, and confidential. These existing legal protections will apply regardless of whether future census data is sourced from survey(s) or admin datasets.

63.   Section 24(2) of the Privacy Act 2020 states that an action taken by an agency does not breach Information Privacy Principles 1 to 5, 7 to 10, or 13 if the action is authorised under New Zealand law. This includes the ability of the Government Statistician to authorise another agency to collect data on the Government Statistician's behalf under section 25 of the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

What options are being considered?

Option One – [Counterfactual] – Comprehensive 2028 Census combined model (large-scale survey)

64.   The counterfactual would involve retaining the 2023 Census model for conducting the 2028 Census. This option would involve continuing to deliver the census using a combined model: a full enumeration survey of population and dwellings every five years, supplemented by alternative data sources, including admin data. The counterfactual seeks to maintain high census survey response rates and comprehensive population coverage in line with that achieved in the 2023 Census.

65.   Under this option, in 2028, all people in New Zealand would be required to fill in a paper or online form for a census survey of population and dwellings in a specific time window. Significant effort and resources would be required to boost survey response rates among individuals and target population groups who are less likely to fill in census forms.

66.   This is a proven model that has been shown to provide a satisfactory level of data accuracy and population coverage to meet critical information needs. However, the current funding envelope for the next census is $100 million less than that received to deliver the 2023 Census. Declining initial census response rates mean the direct costs required to duplicate the 2023 Census model would be higher still for the next census, estimated at $400 million over five years.

Option Two – Combined model 2028 Census within baseline funding

67.   Option Two would also involve a combined model: census data would be collected from admin sources in the first instance, supplemented by a large-scale census survey of population and dwellings survey in 2028.

68. Under this option, a full enumeration survey of population and dwellings would be conducted in 2028 within existing baseline funding constraints. This would involve reusing the 2023 Census survey and processing systems wherever possible, and adoption of a digital-first approach to data collection similar to 2018, with limited or no use of paper forms. There would be very limited capacity to engage in targeted outreach or post-census day follow up to bolster response rates among under-represented population groups. This approach would not enable iwi-led data collection.

Data quality and supply

69. Option Two would require Stats NZ to adopt a much lower overall survey response rate target to that adopted for previous census, with an understanding that target population groups, such as Māori, Pacific peoples, and young adults would be very significantly under-represented in final census results. The projected quality score for specific census attributes for individuals, dwellings, and households would fall significantly for the total population, with even greater declines in data quality for and about population groups with lower response rates.

70. Based on experience in the 2023 Census, Stats NZ would anticipate a national response of between 75 to 80 percent, equivalent to what was achieved by week 2 of non-response follow-up in the 2023 Census. With a national response rate level of 75 per cent, the expected response achieved for under represented groups such as Māori and Pacific would be around 55 to 60 per cent.

71. This level of response is below that achieved in 2018. Under this scenario, a large change in the collection model would be required to direct greater collection effort towards under-represented groups. This may increase the level of response from prioritised populations and areas, but also result in a decline in the overall response achieved. We do not have good information on how effective this strategy would be, as the approach has not been successfully implemented in previous census collections or testing.

Roles and responsibilities

72. Under this option, Stats NZ would continue to draw on admin data supplied by government agencies to help mitigate census survey information gaps. However, ongoing agency efforts to improve the quality of admin data would be incremental, rather than transformative. There would be limited capacity to invest significant agency time and resources in improving the quality, access, and use of admin data to meet new or existing information needs.

Legislative implications

73. This option would not require changes to legislative or regulatory requirements for the census in the Data and Statistics Act 2022 or related legislation.

Option Three – [Preferred Option] Administrative data-first census delivered in 2030

74. The Government Statistician's preferred option involves an admin data-first census approach, supplemented by targeted surveys. The 2023 Census would be the last traditional five-yearly full enumeration census survey. Key design elements of the preferred option include:

   a. *Ongoing administrative data collection of key census variables.* This component involves prioritising the collection and use of population and dwelling data from admin sources where it is appropriate and feasible to do so**.** Admin data would

supply base population estimates to low-level geographies along with a range of population and household characteristics, with full official population counts using the new model released in 2030.

b. *An annual Census Attribute Survey (CAS) of up to 5 percent of the population to be undertaken each year from 2027.* The CAS would supply high priority census attributes not available from admin sources and provide quality measures for key data and statistics produced from admin datasets. The CAS would also provide a vehicle for meeting emerging or unmet data needs, and a new sampling frame for targeted surveys such as Te Kupenga – Māori Wellbeing Survey and the NZ Disability Survey.

c. *Other partnership-based solutions (for example targeted surveys), designed with key partners to address remaining data gaps,* such as those not well-represented in admin data**.** This component would offer opportunities to develop new models for data collection, analysis, and management that better meet the wider needs and aspirations of iwi Māori as well as small population groups whose interests or values are not well represented in admin data.

75. Under the preferred option, the official census count would be released in 2030, rather than 2028, to give Stats NZ and other government agencies the time required to lift the quality of admin data, implement an annual sample survey and adapt to the new delivery schedule. The shift to 2030 Census would also bring New Zealand back in alignment with census releases in other countries.

76. Stats NZ would release some key data (such as population counts and population structure – for example age, sex, location, ethnicity) using only admin data sources from 2026. This means users will have access to official, up-to-date data before the full 2030 Census release. This information will ensure government agencies continue to have the information they need to set electoral boundaries and determine the number of electorates for upcoming elections, undertake long-term planning on infrastructure and transport, and inform population funding models.

77. The preferred approach would require commitment from across government to help make improvements to admin data (the quality of the data, how it is processed, shared, and used) over the next five- to ten-year period, with an initial focus on enabling delivery of social investment and the next census. The proposed modular design would help to mitigate implementation and delivery risks for what would be a complex reform programme, while supporting stepped improvements to data quality and supply over time (see Section 3).

Roles and responsibilities

78. The preferred option represents a significant shift to the manner of conducting the census, with less reliance on survey data collected and managed by Stats NZ, and more on admin data collected and supplied by third party government agencies and Crown entities (affected parties).

79. Under this option, Stats NZ would work with a preliminary group of four government agencies and five Crown entities to improve the quality of admin data for a small number of essential variables. As shown by Annex 3, the potential scale of impact on individual government organisations would vary from supplying Stats NZ with additional admin data already held by the organisation, improving the quality of existing admin data supplied to Stats NZ, and/or exploring the potential for additional data collection.

80. A shift in the approach to census presents a unique set of opportunities, challenges, and risks that Stats NZ intends to work through with iwi Māori and other impacted population groups, and those who have voiced a strong interest in being involved in identifying population impacts and informing tailored solutions.

Data quality and supply

81. Detailed decisions on future census content would be subject to further public consultation, planned for late 2025, and ongoing targeted engagement with data system partners and key stakeholders. Stats NZ has provided an indicative table in Annex 4 to show which of the current census attributes might be collected from admin data, the CAS, or through other tailored surveying. Future supply of current census attributes that could not be sourced through admin data would need to be balanced with demand for new data collection in the CAS, or partnership-based solutions from 2031 onwards.

82. Under the preferred option, the collection and publication of core census data would occur more frequently, improving the timeliness and relevance dimensions of data quality. However, there would some reductions in some other aspects of data quality – especially initially. The new approach would see a reduction in the level of detail and coverage available for populations and attributes that could not be supplied from admin data. The initial decline in the detail and coverage of census results would be greatest for small population groups, with a disproportionate impact on census data for and about disabled people, rainbow communities, and small ethnic communities.

83. The use of admin data and the initial decline in coverage would also impact on the quality and completeness of census data for and about Māori and Pacific populations. It will be critical that CAS sample sizes are large enough and sufficiently targeted to reflect Māori and Pacific populations. If this cannot be achieved, Māori and Pacific populations will be significantly disadvantaged compared to other groups – impacting funding models, opportunities for self-determination, and limiting the ability for government to support, and for Māori and Pacific populations to pursue, equitable outcomes.

84. Table 3 overleaf provides an overview of the quality and availability of key census data to meet critical information needs based on the quality of *current* admin data and modelling using 2023 Census data. This shows the impacts of lower data quality is acute for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), who relies on census survey data to link individuals to families to households to dwellings to tenure to place – a chain crucial to HUD's ability to forecast, plan and invest in housing and urban development. Examples of the evidence gap this would leave if not adequately mitigated through the approach to implementation set out in Section Three include:

    a. measurement of severe housing deprivation

    b. calculation of changes in housing affordability

    c. enabling government and councils to develop 30-year plans for housing growth.

Table 3: Expected quality and availability of census data under the preferred approach (based on the quality of current admin data)

Key use(s)	Census data variables	Availability	Initial data quality
Justice (electoral)			
Setting the number of electorates and electoral boundaries	Usually resident population (most granular)	2023 - Available now, used for boundary review for 2026 and 2029 elections	Comparable or improved quality
	Māori descent usually resident population (most granular)	2031 - Data available for 2032 Election	Change in initial quality
Social sector (social investment, health, Te Tiriti and smaller communities)			
High-quality data on: • small population groups, geographic areas, and cross-tabulations • household and family living situations Used to inform evidence-based interventions such as: • access to health services, unmet need, and health outcome disparities • Treaty of Waitangi settlements • Evidence-based policy for population groups (for example disability issues, ethnic communities) *Note: Child poverty measurement will not be impacted and could be improved under the proposed change*	Usually resident population (most granular) – incl. age	2026 / 27- Early transitional measures (admin-based) 2028 - Official measures	Comparable or improved quality
	Māori descent	2026 - Annual population counts 2030 - Official population measures	Change in initial quality
	Iwi affiliation data	2030 - Population estimates and profiles (using historical census data)	Significant decrease in initial quality
	Ethnicity data	2028 - Broad ethnicity groups – official measures 2029 - Detailed ethnicity categories – estimates	Moderate decrease in initial quality
	Small population data	2030 - Population estimates and profiles (using historical census data)	Significant decrease in initial quality
	Deprivation index	2023 - Data available now (2023 Census)	Alternative measurement approach required
	Activity limitations	2029 - Estimates	Moderate decrease in initial quality
	Other demographics: • Household and family variables • Languages spoken • Gender and sexual identity	2029 - Estimates	Significant decrease in initial quality
Housing and infrastructure			
High-quality data on: • housing supply and demand • housing quality & tenure • nature and distribution of dwelling stock Used to inform evidence-based interventions such as: • infrastructure planning • local government long-term and transport planning • disaster recovery planning	Dwelling location (address) and type	2030/31 - Official estimates	Change in initial quality
	Dwelling type, tenure, household crowding, housing condition and access to amenities	2030/31 - Estimates	Significant decrease in initial quality
	Occupancy status	2030/2031 - Official estimates	Change in initial quality
	Combined information on people, dwellings & location	2030/2031 - Official measures and estimates	Significant decrease in initial quality
	Severe Housing Deprivation	2024 - Estimates using 2023 Census data 2030 - Estimates using survey-based outputs	Significant decrease in initial quality
Education and work			
Research and evaluation of education provision and initiatives	Highest qualifications	2028 - Non-official estimate 2029 - Official estimates	Moderate decrease in initial quality
School network forecasting, planning and prioritisation of school property	Hours of work and occupation	2030 - Estimates	
Forecasting for labour market supply and demand	Place of usual residence	2026 / 27 - Early transitional measures (admin-based) 2028 - Official measures	Comparable or improved quality

Key:	**Comparable or improved quality:** Similar or improved coverage, accuracy, granularity, and frequency	**Change in initial quality:** Slight decrease in coverage and accuracy but Improved granularity and frequency	**Moderate decrease in initial quality:** Decreased coverage and accuracy for small groups but increased frequency	**Significant decrease in initial quality:** Substantial reduction in quality.

Distributional impacts of the preferred option on population groups

85. During consultation on the accompanying Cabinet paper, many agencies recognised the opportunity that an admin data-first census presents. However, agencies also expressed concern about data quality, especially in the short-term, and potential impacts on funding allocation, targeting, and effectiveness of policies and services to meet the needs of underserved communities. In part, these impacts will depend on the timing and scope of high-value admin data improvements and the sample size and design of the CAS.

86. Table 4 overleaf, provides more information about the expected distributional impacts of the preferred option across population groups, with a focus on data quality challenges and opportunities, and how these would be managed in the new approach.

87. Under the preferred option, data accuracy, detail, and coverage would improve over time as improvements to admin data collection are implemented, annual CAS data is pooled across years, survey designs are refined, and technical work to derive more accurate and complete data and statistics progresses. For example:

     a. by combining admin data with three years of CAS survey data, Stats NZ expects to produce high quality census data and statistics for the full range of CAS variables to the level of territorial authorities in 2030

     b. with five cycles of CAS data, reporting could be extended to supporting analysis of populations between 3,000 and 5,000 in size.

88. For smaller populations, CAS data would be pooled across multiple years to improve precision. However, for population groups that are very small (for example fewer than 5,000 members) the quality of data from even a large sample survey like the CAS will remain poor in comparison to the counterfactual, especially when cross-tabulated with other variables. This highlights the role for tailored partnership-based solutions to meet the needs of small population groups, and to supplement admin and CAS data.

Table 4: Distributional impacts of the preferred option across the population

Population group	Comment	Opportunities	Data quality issues and challenges
Māori	The current mix of census-based population information and current social surveys does not meet iwi data needs. Iwi data falls broadly under two roles – to achieve the aspirations of iwi and to influence the outcomes of Māori, iwi, and hapū.	More frequent information about Māori populations. This timelier information would include some of the dimensions which are important for iwi to assess their state of wellbeing (i.e. basic demographics, location, income, education, and employment). Provides an opportunity to create a data system designed with iwi Māori to better support their information needs and aspirations, including by reducing barriers to enable iwi to design, collect and make use of data collected for their needs.	Admin data will not provide several variables that are important to understand characteristics and wellbeing of the Māori population, including: • Iwi affiliation • te reo Māori prevalence • disability measures • smoking rates • housing quality • household tenure. While the CAS will help, it will be unable to support cross-tabulation of non-admin-based variables in the same level of detail as a full enumeration census.
Rainbow communities	Information about rainbow communities was included in the 2023 Census for the first time.	There are a range of design choices for delivering for rainbow communities, which need to be designed in partnership. E.g. prioritising information collected in a CAS, the delivery of a rainbow module within the CAS, and/or developing new tailored survey solutions. CAS data would be pooled across multiple years to provide information for smaller populations such as binary and transgender populations, and to provide population counts broken down by different characteristics and/or geography.	The collection of representative and complete information to represent rainbow communities is limited in admin data settings, and may continue to be, because in many contexts it will not be necessary or appropriate to collect. The loss of a population level identifier from a full enumeration survey will reduce Stats NZ's ability to produce accurate population counts and to link admin and survey data to report on measures such as health, income and education outcomes. The CAS could provide support for producing population counts and measuring outcomes for rainbow communities, but it will not provide the same level of detail as a full enumeration census particularly for rainbow subgroups.
Pacific peoples	The biggest concern is that currently most agencies do not collect and code ethnicity data to level 4, as is required to provide disaggregated data for smaller Pacific ethnic groups. Many of these populations have fewer than 2000 people and, even with the scale of surveying intended, would not be well supported by the CAS.	The new approach to census provides greater opportunity to deliver content that is designed for and with Pacific communities. There are a range of options for delivering new content including the development of a Pacific Wellbeing Survey (similar to Te Kupenga) or addition of a Pacific Wellbeing module to be included in the CAS. Improving the collection of detailed ethnicity data in admin datasets is a priority. In the near-term, combining historic census data with admin data can reduce the impact of the lack of detailed ethnicity coding in admin data. Pooling CAS data over multiple years and ensuring adequate representation of Pacific peoples in the CAS will be critical to ensure the future supply of data and statistics about population dynamics, characteristics and outcomes that cannot be answered by admin data alone.	Consistent collection of detailed ethnicity admin data is required to ensure the visibility of smaller Pacific ethnic groups. The new census model will be unable to support cross-tabulation of non-admin-based variables in the same level of detail as a full enumeration census for Pacific peoples. This will decrease the quality and quantity of data available for and about smaller Pacific ethnic groups, especially for variables that would rely on the CAS (for example languages spoken, religion, the proportion of people living in a damp home, smoking etc.).
Ethnic communities	Data quality and coverage issues for Pacific peoples also apply to other ethnic communities.	For smaller ethnic communities, the quality and amount of data supplied by the new approach will depend on improved recording of detailed ethnicity data in admin datasets. Combining admin data and pooling CAS data over multiple years can help to mitigate data gaps and improve the quality of information provided over time.	Impacts will depend on the size of the ethnic community. The CAS is expected to support information for populations down to between 3,500 and 5000 people. For smaller ethnic groups, the quality and amount of information supplied will decrease relative to a full enumeration survey.
Disabled people	Surveys will continue to be necessary to estimate the prevalence of disability in NZ and to understand disabled people's experiences, the level and type of support they need, and what facilitates or hinders their participation in important aspects of everyday life.	In partnership with Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People, Stats NZ will lead the development of a national disability data framework to ensure appropriate, nationally consistent measures for the collection and public reporting of disaggregated data on the full range of obligations contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Developing this framework will help to prioritise information needs and help to inform the design of the future social survey programme.	There is limited data on disability currently available from admin datasets. Reliance on a CAS would reduce the level of detailed data that can be produced about disability and activity limitations. This will have a flow on impacts on the ability to supply intersectional data about disabled people.
Migrants and refugees	Data for and about immigrants living in NZ will be supplied by both admin data and the CAS. Related admin data improvements have potential to reduce current data gaps, while longer-term, targeted sampling could be used to provide more detailed information about smaller population groups.	The CAS will provide nationally representative data on immigrants living in NZ, however, detailed data about refugees or categories of migrants may be better supported by targeted sampling. Stats NZ is also exploring opportunities to mitigate admin data gaps relating to new migrants with relevant agencies.	Limitations of CAS data and detailed ethnicity data in admin datasets and proposed mitigations apply for smaller migrant and refugee populations. Recent immigrants also have higher levels of missing admin-data for attributes that typically have high coverage in admin data (for example ethnicity, field of study, highest qualification).
Homelessness	This includes people living rough without shelter, living in temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation with another household, and living in housing that lacks basic amenities.	It is likely that a range of strategies will be needed to measure different aspects of homelessness and housing deprivation. This is a complex and challenging area under any census model, and a lot of work will be required to do this well.	The enumeration census is currently central to producing estimates of severe housing deprivation. The census survey is supplemented by admin data to boost the completeness of some variables, but there is no admin data for other critical variables (for example access to basic amenities). While service provision (for example transitional housing) can provide useful specific information, homelessness and housing deprivation requires high-quality measurement, independent to service provision and access, to assess unmet need.

Legislative implications

The Data and Statistics Act 2022 would need updating to reflect the preferred approach

89.   Section 34(1) of the Data and Statistics Act 2022 (the Act) states that a census must take place every fifth year after 2023. Delaying the full census under the preferred option would require an amendment to the Act to allow for a census to be taken in 2030, rather than in 2028. Related amendments to better reflect the new approach to collecting and publishing data for future censuses would:

   a.   clarify the timing of data collection and publishing under the preferred approach to reflect that data collection will occur on a continuous basis rather than as a one-off event (for example a census day) as the Act currently implies, and that some census variables could be released more regularly

   b.   simplify the notification process for data collection and clarify the requirements of the Government Statistician under the new approach.

90.   The modernised approach to census will also require minor amendments to three pieces of legislation. These are the: Local Electoral Act 2001; Wellington Regional Water Board Act 1972, and; Waste Minimisation Act 2008. Stats NZ, with advice from PCO, anticipate these being consequential amendments to be included within the proposed Bill. These proposed amendments would not impact on the operation of the relevant provisions but will provide clarity and accuracy across the statute book.

Implications for the Electoral Act 1993, including electoral boundary setting

91.   The proposed amendments to the Act have implications for electoral matters as the Electoral Act 1993 presently envisages a regular, periodic census. The periodic census is a trigger for a number of processes, including the Surveyor-General calling the first meeting of the members of the Representation Commission. Under the Electoral Act, the Government Statistician must determine the number of General and Māori electoral districts, and the Representation Commission determines their size and boundaries.

92.   The statutory scheme for the conduct of regular boundary reviews envisages a periodic census being conducted every five years. If the next census is deferred to 2030, there will be no census to trigger a review process before the 2029 General Election. However, even if the 2028 Census proceeds as scheduled, there would not be enough time to redraw electoral boundaries before the 2029 election.

93.   The proposed changes to modernise the census provide an important opportunity to consider amendments to enable the most up to date population data to be used by the Representation Commission, instead of relying on census data.

94.   9(2)(f)(iv) ██

Treaty of Waitangi

Stats NZ's approach to meeting its obligations to te Tiriti o Waitangi

95. Stats NZ recognises that, to many Māori, data is a taonga. Under the Data and Statistics Act 2022, the Government Statistician has obligations to ensure that Māori interests, rights, and authority over the collection, management and use of data are actively protected and supported.

Māori Data Sovereignty and partnership commitments

96. Treating data as a taonga reflects its role in expressing identity, whakapapa, and whanaungatanga, while also serving as a tool for self-determined decision-making. Government, as a Treaty partner, has a responsibility to ensure that data systems support equitable outcomes, uphold self-determination, and deliver value for Māori.

97. Stats NZ has identified three key objectives to meet Māori, iwi, and hapū data needs through the design, development, and evaluation of the preferred census model:

    a. *Recognise customs, rights, and interests* in how data is collected, managed, and used.

    b. *Foster Māori capability and capacity* to collect, use, and access data.

    c. *Ensure data provides value for Māori* by delivering high-quality, fit-for-purpose information that supports the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Engagement and governance and partnership pathways

98. Stats NZ has engaged with 19 key partners (including 14 iwi) and reached out to an additional 170 iwi and Māori organisations (including 48 iwi or iwi-affiliated groups). Feedback highlighted concerns about achieving adequate sample sizes, gaps in admin data, and the potential erosion of key data points important to Māori wellbeing. As a result:

    a. the preferred approach includes the co-design of bespoke solutions, such as targeted surveys and data collection methods with iwi and hapū

    b. the Government Statistician engaged with Te Kāhui Raraunga (the operational arm of Data Iwi Leaders Group) to discuss implications and mitigation strategies

    c. Treaty impact assessment will be undertaken to inform the census design and will be repeated at key stages

    d. the Modernising Data and Statistics Programme, which the next census will be a part of will include iwi and Māori representation on the Programme Governance Board. Discussions with partners about this are already underway

    e. a Māori-Crown Design rōpū has also been proposed to ensure Tiriti partners are also involved in the more detailed design work.

99. Stats NZ is dedicated to enhancing its partnership with iwi Māori and hapū ensuring that iwi have a meaningful role in decision-making processes. While the details of this partnership are still being developed, including iwi Māori partners in the governance of

the Modernising Data and Statistics Programme is essential. This approach aims to make sure that decision-making aligns with Māori priorities and aspirations.

100. To support this, Stats NZ has indicated to Te Kāhui Raraunga and Te Rōpū Whaiti (a collective group of Stats NZ's iwi relationship partners) its willingness to build inclusive governance of the next census. There was success in this approach for the 2023 Census Programme and the intention is to build on this success and move closer to a Mana Ōrite model. Additionally, there is a strong commitment to implement a Māori-led design rōpū, which would provide a structured and iwi-led space for shaping data collection, methodologies, and governance approaches.

101. By embedding iwi participation in governance and decision-making, Stats NZ intends to ensure that Māori data interest is respected and upheld within the evolving data system. These discussions will continue to evolve in partnership with iwi, ensuring that the data governance aspirations of iwi Māori are actively realised through meaningful structural change.

102. Despite these efforts, Te Kāhui Raraunga expressed concern that Stats NZ's approach relies on trust rather than demonstrable evidence. A key issue is the potential loss of key variables, such as Māori descent, iwi affiliation, te reo Māori prevalence, and disability data – particularly for smaller iwi. The CAS alone will not provide the level of detail needed to see themselves in the data. Stats NZ acknowledges these concerns and commits to:

   a. investing in iwi Māori data capability and co-developing an iwi affiliation data strategy

   b. providing a pathway to strengthen data capability by working with iwi and hapū to meet their immediate data needs while also supporting system-level improvements at a collective level

   c. regularly publishing progress against the responsibility of Stats NZ to deliver for and with iwi Māori to track the impact of census changes on Māori data quality and assess the impact of census changes on Māori data quality and access.

Data sovereignty and active protection

103. Stats NZ recognises that the Crown may not be the best entity to collect iwi affiliation data and commits to working with iwi to explore alternative models for iwi-led data collection. The preferred census approach will support Crown obligations relating to active protection and development (Article 2) by ensuring that:

   a. Māori participation in governance structures influence the census design and implementation

   b. ongoing investment in Māori data capability-building is prioritised, with long-term vision supporting and mandating the collection of iwi-specific data variables

   c. continued data infrastructure support (to support self-sufficiency in the long-term and enhances self-determination and mana motuhake).

Ensuring equity, equal outcomes and access

104. While the preferred approach allows for more frequent updates on Māori population data, it is acknowledged that admin data alone cannot fully meet iwi and hapū needs. To uphold equity and participation (Article 3), Stats NZ will:

    a. work with Māori to address intersectional data gaps affecting smaller populations, including iwi, rainbow communities, and disabled Māori

    b. strengthen the quality of admin data by improving adherence to data standards and ensuring Māori interests are not sidelined

    c. ensure the transition to the new model provides equal opportunities for all iwi, including smaller iwi.

Electoral representation and data timing

105. Māori descent data plays a fundamental role in setting Māori electorates, directly impacting democratic representation. Stats NZ, the Ministry of Justice, and the Electoral Commission acknowledge that the misalignment between the 5-year census cycle and the 3-year election cycle is problematic. To uphold good governance (Article 1) and ensure accurate representation, Stats NZ is working with the Ministry of Justice to amend the Electoral Act 1993 to remove its dependence on census data.

Strengthening accountability

106. Stats NZ commits to:

    a. monitoring progress towards delivering for and with iwi and Māori at key decision points in census planning with findings made available and regularly updated

    b. embedding Māori governance mechanisms to ensure partnership in decision-making

    c. continuing to ensure tikanga-based protections for Māori data (for example Ngā Tikanga Paihere) are implemented (Article 4).

Stats NZ acknowledges that the new model poses challenges to some Māori population data

107. While the preferred census model represents an opportunity to improve the frequency and accessibility of Māori population data, Stats NZ acknowledges that it presents challenges in terms of data sovereignty, quality, and equitable access. To align with its Treaty obligations, Stats NZ will:

    a. strengthen evidence-based decision-making, addressing the trust concerns raised by iwi Māori partners which will see a much greater emphasis from Stats NZ on enhancing its data stewardship maturity and ensure ongoing measurement and monitoring of trust in it as an institution

    b. support Māori-led data collection and governance models, recognising that iwi and Māori organisations hold authority over the data they collect, while the Government Statistician is the steward of government data, collected through official channels such as the census and admin records managed under the current framework

    c. mitigate short-term data gaps, ensuring that Stats NZ fully understands the impacts on all iwi, particularly smaller iwi, and actively works with them to develop solutions that maintain their visibility in the data

108. Through these commitments, Stats NZ aims to uphold its responsibilities under the Data and Statistics Act 2022 and create a data system that genuinely serves Māori, iwi, and hapū aspirations.

How do the options compare to the status quo/counterfactual?

	Option One – [Counterfactual] Comprehensive Census 2028 combined model (large-scale survey)	Option Two – Combined model 2028 Census within baseline funding	Option three - [Preferred] Administrative data-first model implemented in 2030
Produces high-quality data	0	- - Loss of data accuracy for all survey-only variables and variables with limited admin data quality, due to lower expected survey response rates. Related decreases to data granularity and coverage, especially for and about priority population groups and smaller communities.	- - (2030 Census) - (2035 Census) **2030 Census:** mixed impacts on data accuracy, subject to improvements to admin data and successful implementation of the CAS, with some loss of data granularity and coverage for populations and attributes not well-measured through admin data. **Longer-term:** Data quality and scope of information provided would improve over time. However, this option cannot deliver the same level of detailed data and statistics on populations, dwellings, and attributes as a high-quality full enumeration census survey.
Meets new and emerging customer needs	0	- - A five-yearly census survey approach is not well-placed to deliver timely data and statistics to meet new and emerging information needs. To deliver this option within available budget, the 2023 Census survey and processing systems would need to be reused wherever possible, limiting opportunities to meet new information needs in Census 2028.	+ (2030 Census) ++ (2035 Census) Initial delay to the full release of official census results from 2028 to 2030, but significant increase in ability to meet demand for frequent and timely population data and statistics with greater flexibility to meet new and emerging information needs. Partnership-based solutions including tailored surveys provide further opportunities to respond to the data interests and aspirations of iwi Māori and to collect community-specific content for rainbow, Pacific people and small ethnic communities.
Drives efficient public services	0	0 Admin data would continue to supplement information from 5 yearly census survey responses. There would be limited capacity between now and 2028 to progress improvements to the quality or use of admin data for census purposes.	++ Significant increase in the quality of admin data, enabling greater use of admin data government has already collected, and lowering the cost of interacting with government. Improving take-up and use of admin data to support the census would also have wider benefits for related data system improvements to support digital government and social investment work programmes.
Increases resilience	0	0 Vulnerability to external factors such as pandemics, extreme weather events, and natural disasters would continue due to a narrow window for field-based data collection once every 5 years.	++ The resilience of the census to external events would improve significantly.
Manages delivery risks and is feasible		- - Stats NZ has significant experience in designing and delivering a traditional five-yearly census model. However, this option involves significant operational risks to quality, budget, and timeframes due to factors such as low public engagement and external events over which Stats NZ has low control.	- This is a major, complex and transformational reform work programme. The modular design and phased approach provide Stats NZ with moderate control over operational risks to implementation delivery, budget, and cost that can be addressed through effective governance, robust programme management, and prioritisation of effort within Stats NZ and across key government admin data suppliers. Future Cabinet decisions on scope and phasing of admin data improvements will include trade-offs between data quality and financial costs and feasibility for admin data suppliers.
Improves fiscal sustainability		0 This option would reduce the short-term direct costs to government of delivering the 2028 Census relative to the 2023 Census. However, it would not address the drivers of escalating costs or improve the fiscal sustainability of subsequent and future census.	+ (2030 Census) ++ (2035 Census) This option would help future-proof the census, disrupting the trajectory of escalating costs due to declining census survey response rates and vulnerability to external events. Direct financial costs to admin data suppliers cannot be quantified at this time. Stats NZ expect a core group of nine government organisations to face additional costs in the short- to medium-term to implement changes to the collection and supply of high-priority admin data (with related costs for services who may supply this data to government organisations).
Overall assessment	0	-6	+3 (2030 Census)

How does data quality compare over time relative to the counterfactual?

109. Stats NZ thinks of data accuracy being broadly two-dimensional: coverage (i.e. what proportion of the target population we have data about) and consistency (i.e. how good the data is for the people we have data for). Data accuracy in a given year will be a function of:

    a. the age of survey data

    b. the amount of survey data that is available

    c. the accuracy of admin data.

110. In a traditional census model, coverage and consistency decrease as time passes from 'census day'. For example, and very roughly, for the last one and a half decades there were about 100k people newly arriving in NZ each year. This is around 2 percent of the population. So even ignoring non-response, at the end of each census cycle for Options One and Two, it is expected to have at least 10 percent of the population for whom no census-survey information is available.

111. A key component of Option Three is the development of a Census Attribute Survey (CAS) that samples around 5 percent of the population each year. Spreading the surveying over the two-census cycle will provide a more consistent level of survey data accuracy. As indicated earlier, under the preferred option, data accuracy, detail, and coverage will improve over time, as more cycles of the annual CAS are completed, survey designs are refined, and admin data improvements are implemented.

What option is likely to best address the problem, meet the policy objectives, and deliver the highest net benefits?

112. Option One (the counterfactual, based on the Census 2023 approach) is not feasible as it could not be delivered within baseline funding available for the next census.

113. Option Two is not recommended. It is unlikely that a full enumeration census survey could be delivered successfully in 2028 within the current funding envelope, resulting in response rates at a level that would create significant data quality issues and reduce trust and confidence. This would reduce the return on the government's substantial investment in the census and generate high opportunity costs for the next and future censuses. Planning and delivery of another large-scale census survey would also divert agency effort and resources from improving the collection and use of admin data across government.

114. The Government Statistician's preferred option – an admin data-first census delivered in 2030 – is best placed to meet the policy objectives. In particular, Option Three would position Stats NZ to deliver a sustainable and resilient census programme to address current and future information needs. Option Three scores equally or more highly than Option Two against all six of the policy assessment criteria for the next census, and more highly still by 2035 and beyond.

115. The preferred option has a strong focus on fiscal sustainability, efficiency, and better use of admin data held by government. It is not possible to assess financial costs to admin data suppliers in advance of final decisions on the scope and timing of admin data improvements, however, it is clear that the cost of a traditional five-yearly full

enumeration census survey would continue to escalate over time. The new approach would start to future-proof the census, providing more resilience in the face of cost and quality risks due to declining survey response rates and disruptive external events. Related benefits include:

a. *reducing the cost to deliver core census data over time.* Once systems and infrastructure are in place, the cost to deliver core census data is expected to reduce over time – due to efficiency gains and reduced impact from the current drivers of escalating delivery costs. This provides opportunities to reduce future costs to government, or to meet additional information needs within baseline expenditure

b. *generating wider benefits to New Zealand* by improving the quality of admin data and the government's admin data capabilities. These advancements would support improved data for government priorities such as social investment, digital government, target-setting, as well as improving agency operations.

116. The preferred option does involve significant trade-offs across different dimensions of data quality. Admin data provides an opportunity to publish core census data much more frequently than the traditional five-yearly approach, providing end-users with access to more up-to-date population data and statistics to inform decision making. An annual CAS would also provide greater flexibility to collect and publish different data to meet new or emerging user needs, while partnership-based solutions offer new opportunities to meet the needs of Treaty partners and underserved communities.

117. Relative to the counterfactual, the preferred option would result in some reductions in data accuracy, detail, and coverage, especially initially, for small population groups, and variables that are not well-represented in admin data. However, data quality and coverage challenges affecting small population groups would also be an issue in Option Two, due to significant reductions in expected census response rates, especially among Māori and Pacific populations. Under the preferred option, data quality will improve over the next five to ten years as more information is collected, admin data quality improves, and survey designs are refined.

118. Shifting the full and official census count from 2028 to 2030 will help to mitigate stakeholder concerns about the speed of transition to a new model and provide additional time to work with government agencies to improve the quality and provision of admin data. The proposed timescale also provides more time to work with iwi Māori partners and key stakeholders to prioritise and address critical data gaps that cannot be met by admin data, mitigate short-term impacts of changes in data quality and coverage, and fully realise the opportunities of the new census model.

What are the marginal costs and benefits of the option?

Affected groups	Comment	Impact	Evidence Certainty
Additional costs of the preferred option compared to taking no action			
Regulators			
Stats NZ	Significant staffing resource will be directed towards designing and delivering a transformational census work programme.	Medium	High
Regulated parties			
Data suppliers	Stats NZ has identified a preliminary group of four government agencies and five Crown entities with the potential to supply, collect, and improve admin data for high-value variables for use in future census. The effort and resource required by each organisation will depend on the number of changes, the type of change, and approach to phasing.[10] Implementing admin data improvements will place pressure on baselines in an environment where digital and data functions face a number of challenges. This will be worse for some agencies where legacy systems present a significant barrier to collecting data differently and/or sharing that data. Some agencies have expressed concern about potential barriers to access by requesting additional data from clients that is not needed for service delivery. Clients may have security, privacy, or trust and confidence concerns about data access and use which could, in some cases, make service provision harder.	High-medium	High
Other (customers and user groups)			
Central Government	Government agencies have expressed concern that reductions in data accuracy, detail, and coverage for some variables, especially in the short-term, could have a negative impact on evidence-based policy making and services, especially for underserved population groups, and in domains that rely on combined data about people, locations and dwellings. Examples of central government policy that rely on high-quality data about the characteristics of NZ households include forecasting, planning and investing in housing and urban development, and the funding allocation, design and delivery of health and social services. It will be necessary to explore new data sources and approaches to replace information products that rely on census survey data including the NZ Deprivation Index and production of Severe Housing Deprivation Estimates. Many government agencies are concerned that vulnerable groups may become less visible in national statistics, especially in the short-term. If these concerns are not adequately mitigated,	High	High

[10] Engagement will initially focus on working with the following agencies: Ministry of Education, Department of Internal Affairs, Ministry for Social Development, and Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment; and Crown entities: Tertiary Education Commission, Te Whatu Ora / Health New Zealand, ACC, New Zealand Transport Agency, and the Electoral Commission.

	this could lead to unmet needs, unexpected cost pressures and less effective and efficient funding and targeting of services.		
Local Government	Local governments will be affected by any declines in data quality related to households and dwellings. Any significant reduction in data accuracy, detail, and coverage would impact local government long-term planning, service delivery, and ability to understand the needs of their communities.	Medium	High
Māori/treaty partners	Iwi data needs fall into two broad roles: to achieve aspirations of iwi and to influence outcomes of Māori, iwi, and hapu. Iwi Māori have expressed concern about the reduction in data accuracy, detail, and coverage for Māori variables (i.e. iwi affiliation, Maori descent, te reo Māori), and for variables about the Māori population that are not present in admin data (for example disability and sexuality), especially in the short-term. The future CAS will not support the detailed breakdowns for non-admin-based variables that the census currently produces. Declines in data quality, particularly in the short-term have the potential to negatively impact effective decision-making by Māori and the Crown, with wider impacts on funding, electoral boundary setting, and services by and for Māori. There will be a reduction in the accuracy of nation-wide iwi affiliation data while alternative solutions are explored. A sustained focus on new data sources, improvements in admin data, adequate CAS sample sizes and partnership opportunities will be critical to reducing possible negative impacts.	High	High
Priority populations	There will be reductions in data accuracy, coverage, and detail for and about disabled people, Pacific peoples, small ethnic communities, and rainbow communities, especially in the short-term (refer to Table 3 for further detail). This may have a significant negative impact, where small or marginalised communities are at risk of becoming further disadvantaged because of the lack of visibility in key data and statistics. Mitigating these reductions through improvements to admin data, use of the CAS, and/or new partnership-based data collection solutions will be a priority in the development of the new model.	High	High
Academics/ research community	There is concern from some within the research community about the extent to which a new model may deliver reduced data coverage, detail, and accuracy for research and modelling purposes.	Medium	High
Business and community organisations	Any impacts of reductions in data accuracy, detail, and coverage on individual business and NGOs will depend on how much they rely on census data for day-to-day operations or future planning and investment decisions.	Low	Low
Total monetised costs	N/A	N/A	N/A
Non-monetised costs		High-Medium	High-Medium

Additional benefits of the preferred option compared to taking no action

Regulator

Stats NZ	The new model will improve the feasibility and long-term sustainability of the census programme. In contrast, the cost of a traditional five-yearly full enumeration approach would continue to escalate over time. Once systems and infrastructure are in place, the cost to deliver census is expected to reduce over time, due to efficiency gains and less impact from the drivers that are increasing the costs of the current approach.	High	High

Regulated parties

Data suppliers	The new model will enable more efficient, sharing and access to consistent, high-quality admin data. Improvements to data systems and processes to support future census will also support data reliant initiatives across government, including improvements to the IDI, Digital Public Infrastructure, Digital Identity, Service Modernisation, Artificial Intelligence, Social Investment and outcomes-based contracting.	Medium	Medium

Other (customers and user groups)

Central Government	The new model will provide more up to date, timely population statistics with greater flexibility to respond to new and emerging information needs. Linking population statistics and admin data across multiple agencies provides a rich source of information about people's lives, their needs, and the effectiveness of public services. By driving collaborative efforts across government to improve the collection, supply, and quality of high-value admin data over the next five to ten years, the new model will support more effective public services and contribute to government priorities such as social investment, digital government, target-setting, as well as improving agency operations.	Medium	High
Local Government	Long-term and transport planning by councils is underpinned by population counts and estimates. There will be no delays to this data and accuracy and detail will improve over time.	Medium	High
Māori/treaty partners	For larger iwi, the new model will provide more frequent and timely information about the Māori population across many of the dimensions important to assess their state of wellbeing (demographics, location, income, education, and employment). The new approach provides opportunities for the development of new partnership-based data collection and management solutions in line with Māori and iwi information needs and data governance aspirations.	Medium	High
Priority populations	The new model will provide opportunities Stats NZ to work with population agencies and communities to create community-specific content and new data collection models.	Medium	High
Academics/ research community	Increased timeliness and frequency of census data releases. In the long-term, the ability to collect and publish different data to meet new or emerging user needs will support new and emerging areas of research.	Medium-Low	Medium

Business and community organisations	Increased timeliness and frequency of census data releases. Long-term increase in the reliability, feasibility and resilience of the census model to support planning and infrastructure needs. Impacts on individual businesses and NGOs will depend on the extent to which census data is used to support day to day operations or planning and investment decisions.	Low	Low
Total monetised benefits	N/A	N/A	N/A
Non-monetised benefits		Medium	High-Medium

119. This interim RIS is intended to support Cabinet decisions on whether or not to endorse the Government Statistician's in-principle decision on the manner of taking the next and future census. Cabinet policy approval is being sought for:

    a. drafting amendments to the Data and Statistics Act 2022 that would enable the Government Statistician to progress the development of a new model to deliver the next census

    b. an approach to mobilising collective efforts across a core group of government agencies and Crown entities to improve the quality of admin data to support census, social investment, and other government priorities.

120. Stats NZ is confident that by transitioning to a new census model over five to ten years, higher quality and more comprehensive population and dwellings data and statistics will be produced in 2035, relative to 2030. Stats NZ is also confident in its qualitative judgements about the costs and benefits of the preferred option. However, the potential scale of distributional impacts across population groups and detailed costs and benefits for census customers will be subject to some uncertainty until more detailed design and implementation work has progressed.

121. The level of data quality (accuracy, detail, and coverage) that will be delivered for census variables and attributes that are not currently well-represented in admin data in the 2030 Census will depend, in part, on future decisions. These include the prioritisation and phasing of admin data improvements, the detailed design of the annual Census Attribute Survey, and partnering to design tailored solutions to deliver value for iwi Māori and underserved communities. Public consultation on census content is planned for late 2025.

122. Stats NZ plans to set up a Chief Executive group to drive work to deliver collective improvements to admin data across government. This will ensure that trade-offs between data quality, feasibility, and costs to specific admin data suppliers over the next five to ten years are explicit. 9(2)(f)(iv) ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (see Section 3).

123. An updated RIS will be prepared to support Cabinet decisions on the introduction of the proposed Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill. The final RIS will include information about financial costs to admin data suppliers of implementing the preferred option, drawing on work to develop the directives set out above.

Section 3: Delivering an option

How will the new arrangements be implemented?

Key milestones

124. Subject to Cabinet approval to the proposed approach, Stats NZ will move to Phase 2 of the programme, which is focused on the detailed design of the new model.

125. The Government Statistician will then take decisions in late 2025 on the content of 2030 Census, and the specific manner of collecting information on particular topics or areas. This includes confirming what variables will be produced via admin data only, what will be collected via surveying, and where data needs and aspirations will be met through other tailored or bespoke methods.

126. This will be informed by further census design work, as well as targeted engagement and public consultation (building on previous and ongoing consultation). We will also introduce amendments to the Data and Statistics Act 2022 and a range of supporting levers to give effect to the new approach in the coming year.

127. This will enable Stats NZ to take a graduated approach of census data releases to provide time for an uplift in admin data quality:

    a. From late 2026, preliminary population data will be made available for some measures (for example age, sex, location, and ethnicity) using only admin data to familiarise customers with the new approach. Preliminary dwelling data will be made available using a combination of 2023 census data, admin data, and other data sources.

    b. From 2028, official key population measures using only admin data will be published. This will enable population insights and support critical functions such as population funding models and Treasury's Long-Term Fiscal Model but will not be an official census release. Official dwellings data will be released that is further supported by field canvassing.

    c. In 2030, the first full set of census data (population, dwellings, and relationships/households) will be published that uses combined admin data and survey estimates, and will be available annually on an ongoing basis. This data can support electoral boundary setting for the 2032 election.

    d. From 2031 onwards, additional data not previously available (as it is not well represented in admin data) will be released annually, as it becomes available through targeted surveys.

128. To achieve these milestones, the census implementation plan has been built around several significant design and testing phases, which prioritises improvements to key census variables. This allows Stats NZ to navigate uncertainty by progressively refining its plans, testing assumptions, and adapting as new insights emerge, ensuring a well-managed and effective transition. It also addresses some key implementation risks around data quality and delivery.

129. A summary of the high-level approach to implementation, mapped across key workstreams, is set out in Annex 5. Further information on key components of the implementation plan is set out below.

Driving admin data improvements across government

Improving admin data quality for essential variables

130. Stats NZ has identified two counts (population and dwelling counts) and 11 variables that are essential to the delivery of the census. These counts and variables also align with those listed as highest priority in the 2023 Census. These are important as they are essential for maintaining accurate population and dwelling estimates, are consistent with internationally recognised census core variables, provide key demographic data that describes population characteristics, and support government priorities, such as social investment.

131. For these counts and variables, Stats NZ compared 2023 Census data to admin data and assessed how consistent the data is between these two sources (see Annex 2 for more details on each variable). The assessment indicates that there is high-quality admin data available for 5 of the 11 variables (as a conservative estimate). There is also good admin data for 16 other variables that are less essential.

Enhancing statistical techniques and methodologies to improve admin data quality

132. Enhanced statistical techniques and methodologies being explored by Stats NZ includes statistical imputation to address missing data, applying latent class models for variables with multiple admin sources (for example ethnicity), and expanding Bayesian approaches to better estimate population under-coverage. It also includes refining statistical models to adjust for biases, integrating survey data where needed, and further developing the Dempster-Shafer Theory for assessing data quality. Additionally, Stats NZ will advance machine learning methods (for example gradient boosting) for address selection and explore alternative data sources to strengthen statistical outputs.

133. These advancements will vary in their impact on data quality but can expect to bring gains in both coverage and accuracy. For example, including statistical imputation will increase coverage across a range of variables, and can help to reduce any bias that comes from admin data representing only a subset of the population. Estimation approaches will be valuable in improving data quality for small areas. Other improvements, such as latent class modelling, may have smaller impacts, but can provide quality gains for essential variables.

134. We will also continue to collaborate with other national statistical offices, academia, and other organisations will help to refine and develop these methodologies further.

Identifying essential variables where coverage and/or quality of the data could be improved

135. The changes that would deliver the greatest benefits to the census and the wider government data system are improvements to admin data collected about usual residence address, ethnicity, Māori descent, iwi affiliation, and gender. In addition to being essential census variables, improvements would support key government priorities for economic growth, social investment, and more efficient public services, as

these variables help us to understand key demographics and target intervention programmes accordingly.

136. Improving this data will require support and collective responsibility from across government, as well as work to refine methods. Stats NZ has communicated to key data supply agencies the specific changes requested and are continuing to work with them to address critical data gaps and ensure data is collected in consistent ways.

Phasing admin data improvements to balance data quality, cost and feasibility to admin data suppliers

137. Stats NZ knows agencies face constraints in making these changes. Agencies often prioritise collecting only the data that is required for the purpose of service delivery and can be reluctant to make changes to what data they collect or how they collect it. Another challenge is the context for data collection. For example, in the health sector, comparisons of health admin data against census data show significant variation between attributes provided to health to those disclosed in the census.

138. As part of ongoing consultation, key data supply agencies have advised us that while they support the intent to move to a census that makes greater use of admin data, they do not expect to be able to make these changes within their baselines and in the timeframes. In some cases, such as in education and health, changes will need to be made across a number of providers, which will require updates to legacy data systems.

139. To address these concerns, Stats NZ is working closely with data supply agencies to support them to provide this information. This includes developing standardised data supply agreements (set to be in place by June 2026) and setting up tailored support for data suppliers. Many agencies are considering upgrades to their data infrastructure in the future, which will provide opportunities for Stats NZ to provide customised support on improvements to data collection.

140. Prior to requesting any new data or entering into a new data sharing agreement which includes personal information, Stats NZ is required to undertake a Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA). PIAs help to identify and assess privacy risks and ensure there are good practical measures in place for protecting personal information. If there is a change to data collection and use, and the data includes personal information, then a PIA needs to be undertaken or updated.

141. Stats NZ is exploring greater use of the Government Statistician's existing powers under the Data and Statistics Act 2022 to mandate data standards and request government agencies and Crown entities provide the admin data required to support the delivery of the next census. Due to the high priority and urgency of this work Stats NZ considers that additional, non-legislative levers are required to mobilise a collective approach to admin data improvements across government.

142. The accompanying Cabinet paper is seeking approval for development of a Cabinet directive to relevant government agencies, and a statutory directive applied to Crown entities under section 107 of the Crown Entities Act 2004. The purpose of these directives will be to drive the admin data improvements most critical to delivering the census and supporting other government priorities such as enabling social investment and driving productivity and economic growth. Stats NZ will work closely with affected

agencies in developing these directives ahead of Cabinet report back in late 2025. This includes capturing any financial implications where agencies legitimately cannot meet expectations within baseline, and to consider alternatives or supports.

Undertaking further technical work in areas where admin data coverage and quality is not yet fully known, especially relating to dwellings

143. Stats NZ is currently working to match dwellings in admin data with dwellings reported through the 2023 Census. In March 2025, Stats NZ undertook an analysis comparing 2023 Census dwellings with admin data dwellings. The results of this analysis indicate that over 71.7 percent of dwellings identified in the 2023 Census can be matched with admin data sources by the end of 2025. This matching will help to count dwellings and determine dwelling type. It is estimated that a further 27.4 percent of dwellings will be able to be matched, following the completion of supporting methodological work, by the end of 2026.

144. Some dwellings (0.9 percent of census dwellings) are not available in admin data because no other agencies collect information about them. This includes dwellings in a motor camp, improvised dwellings or shelters, and roofless or rough sleeping locations. Capturing this hard-to-reach data is essential for ensuring an inclusive census that represents groups that rely most on government programmes. Stats NZ will need to develop alternative strategies to identify these types of dwellings.

145. A key area of focus for Stats NZ is to improve its understanding of admin data about dwellings and to develop a longitudinal Dwelling Register as part of the Places Index (which will connect address data to properties, buildings, and dwellings). This is an iterative process that will involve further research, engagement with agencies, and development of methodologies. Stats NZ will develop dwelling strategy in mid-2025 that outlines the path to provide high-quality data about dwellings for the next census.

Determining variables to be collected through surveying and other methods

146. Not all census variables can be sourced from admin data, and some will need to be collected through a combination of surveying and other tailored or bespoke methods.

147. A core component of the surveying approach is the CAS. This will survey a small proportion of the New Zealand population (up to five percent annually) for information where admin data quality alone is not sufficient. Over the coming year, Stats NZ will finalise the design of this survey and confirm what content will be collected, how it will be collected, and what percent of the population will be surveyed. The plan is to complete the design and have the CAS in the field by July 2027.

148. Stats NZ will also work with iwi Māori, priority population groups, and other census customers to design tailored solutions, such as targeted surveys, where admin data and the CAS are not sufficient to meet data needs and aspirations. Stats NZ will partner with iwi Māori to design the approach, investing in iwi Māori data capability and co-developing an iwi affiliation data strategy.

149. As noted above, the variables prioritised for collection and the methods used to collect this data will be informed by public consultation and targeted engagement in 2025, building on previous and ongoing engagement.

Governance and stewardship arrangements

150. Stats NZ is setting up governance arrangements, both internal and external, to ensure programme delivery under the new approach. These are described further in the monitoring, evaluation, and review section below. Multiple levels of external assurance will be established to support strategic governance and operational delivery.

How will the new arrangements be monitored, evaluated, and reviewed?

Chief Executive group

151. The Government Statistician will establish a Chief Executive (CE) group to ensure shared accountability for the development and management of the admin data improvements over time. This helps address concerns raised by some agencies about their or others' technical capacity and capability to deliver the data likely to be requested, especially in the timeframes proposed.

152. The CE group will be responsible for ensuring delivery of the final joint directives, and the phasing of delivery over the next five years to ensure there is sufficient time for this work to be aligned, where possible, with other digital system upgrades (for example legacy systems) that are being funded within baseline appropriations. This CEs group will also be charged with advising if it is discovered that there are additional financial implications to admin data suppliers that cannot be managed within baseline, prior to Cabinet approval of the final directives.

153. At a minimum, the CE group will include the Government Chief Digital Officer, the Social Investment Agency, the Data Iwi Leaders Group and representatives from key agencies who have stewardship responsibilities for priority admin data.

System strategy board

154. The Government Statistician intends to set up a System Strategy Board, which will be responsible for the governance of the four transformational work programmes: modernising data and statistics, the digital programme, system strategy work, and admin data improvements. The delivery of the next census includes elements that cut across all these work programmes.

155. This board will monitor and ensure the delivery of each programme. Additionally, it will allow for a more joined-up approach between work programmes. It will be chaired by an external governance expert, and membership will include some members of the executive leadership team at Stats NZ, as well as an external expert in organisational transformation. There will also be an assessment after 24 months to ensure that the system strategy board described above is functioning well.

Periodic review

156. Similar to the 2023 Census, Stats NZ will set up assurance processes for the next census, including periodic reviews by an independent expert. Stats NZ will also establish technical advisory groups that include international representation. These groups will provide technical expertise and support definitional work, methodology, and modelling. Key agencies like the Ministry for Housing and Urban Development will be invited to join these groups.

157. A statutory review of the Census will be conducted after Census 2030 is delivered. A post-census review is a requirement under section 37 of the Data and Statistics Act

2022. The Act requires the Government Statistician to undertake a review of the operation of the census within 12 months of the date of the census. A review report is to be presented to the Minister of Statistics and published on an internet site maintained by, or on behalf of, Stats NZ.

Annex 1: Approach to public consultation and targeted engagement on future census

Between January 2024 and February 2025, Stats NZ completed a phased approach to consultation and engagement on direction for future census. This included targeted engagement with data system partners and key stakeholders to communicate the case for changes to how we conduct future census, understand stakeholders' context, data and information needs, and understand support for, and concerns about a proposed shift to an admin data-first census. A list of the key organisations and groups we conducted outreach engagements with is attached as Table 1, below.

Between January and June 2024, Stats NZ completed outreach engagements with approximately 140 respondents, including over 30 central government agencies who hold, supply or use census data, local government, business groups, health, education and research sector organisations, and NGOs representing the interests of specific population sub-groups, such as ethnic communities, Pacific peoples, and rainbow communities.

Stats NZ engaged with Māori, iwi, and hapū partners on future census, using Te Arawhiti's engagement guidelines and Stats NZ's Whakapapa engagement approach. Initial engagements involved face-to face hui and Rangitira Hui (Tai Timu Tai Pari) with sixteen iwi and Māori partners. Wider outreach between May and June 2024 on future census involved over 170 iwi and Māori relationships. Engagement occurred through face-to-face interactions, webinars, Zoom meetings, and community pop-ups, including emails and phone calls.

Between May and June 2024, Stats NZ conducted a public consultation on how it could modernise the approach to future census, supported by an online discussion document. This document was translated into a wide variety of languages and accessible formats, with consultation open for six weeks between May and June 2024. We received 467 submissions, mostly from individuals (354), but also from businesses (11), community/non-government organisations (24), advocacy groups (8), iwi/Māori (18), central government (23), local government (18), and researchers/academics (11).

Table 1: Targeted engagement approach for future census, by type of organisation

Academics, research community and consultancies			
Auckland Council – Social and Economic Research and Evaluation team	Ethnicity Data Expert Group	Motu	University of Auckland – Index of Multiple Deprivation
BERL: Business and Economic Research	Hanaga Aro Rau – Workforce Development Council	NZ Deprivation Index (University of Otago)	Massey University
COMPASS research centre (University of Auckland)	Infometrics	Te Ngira Institute for Population Research	University of Otago
Central Government			
ACC	Ministry for Ethnic Communities	Ministry of Justice	Te Puna Aonui
Crown Law Office	Ministry for Pacific Peoples	Ministry of Social Development	Te Puni Kōkiri
Department of Internal Affairs	Ministry for the Environment	Ministry of Transport	Tertiary Education Commission

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Ministry for Women	Office of the Privacy Commissioner	The Ministry for Regulation
Electoral Commission	Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment	Oranga Tamariki	The Ombudsman
Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora	Ministry of Education	Public Service Commission	The Treasury
Inland Revenue	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade	Social Investment Agency	Waka Kotahi New Zealand Transport Agency
Kāinga Ora – Homes and Communities	Ministry of Health	Te Arawhiti	Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People
Land Information New Zealand	Ministry of Housing and Urban Development	Tertiary Education Commission	

Population agencies and interest groups representing priority populations

Population specific engagement comprised discussions with various community and interest groups, academics and government agencies who serve priority populations such as small ethnic groups, Pacific peoples' groups, disability groups and rainbow groups on community specific concerns and census requirements.

Civil society groups; Trust Democracy, Transparency International, and NZ Council for Civil Liberties, have also been involved in engagements.

Local government

A range of city and district councils have been involved in discussions across the census engagement process. Local Government New Zealand, Taituarā – Local Government Professionals Aotearoa, and the Local Government Commission have also been involved in engagements,

Iwi and Māori partners and community groups

Iwi and Māori engagement comprised discussions with the 19 key partners listed below as well as a broader community outreach approach to a further 170 iwi and Māori interest groups.

Moriori	Ngāti Maniapoto (Te Nehenehenui Trust)	Te Hiku o Te Ika	Te Tihi o Ruahine
Ngā iwi o Te Rohe o Te Wairoa (Tātau Tātau o Te Wairoa Trust)	Ngati Porou	Te Kaahui o Rauru	Te Whānau ā Apanui
Ngaa Rauru Kiitahi	Ngāti Rangi	Te Kāhui Raraunga	Waikato Tainui
Ngai Tahu	Ngāti Toa	Te Runanga o Ngati Whatua	Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency
Ngāti Hauā	Raukawa (Te Rūnanga o Raukawa, Settlement Trust)	Te Taumata Whakaritenga	

Annex 2: Summary of the quality of variables available from existing admin data

Table One: Population and dwellings variables

Census variable	Coverage (percent of population in admin data)	Consistency with 2023 Census data[11]	Key gaps	Data improvement requested from agencies?
Most essential variables				
Age/date of birth	100	1	N/A	No
Gender	Not available	Not available	Although many agencies collect gender information, there is not a consistent approach, which makes it difficult to assess the quality of the data.	Yes
Sex at birth/gender	99	0.99	Administrative data currently represents a mix of sex at birth and gender information.	No
Ethnicity Level 1[12] [6 ethnic groupings]	99	0.91	Stats NZ is working on an ethnicity standard to ensure that ethnicity information is collected at Level 4. While Levels 1-3 are still useful, more granular information is needed.	Yes
Ethnicity Level 2 [21 ethnic groupings]	99	0.80	As above	Yes
Ethnicity Level 3 [36 ethnic groupings]	98	0.79	As above	Yes
Ethnicity Level 4 [180 ethnic groupings]	94	0.76	Although many agencies collect ethnicity information, not all are currently collecting it to Level 4. This means there is less information for	Yes

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[11] Values close to 1 mean that the quality of admin data is similar to 2023 Census (direct) responses, whereas values closer to 0 mean that the quality of the admin data for that variable is poor.

[12] Ethnicity is broken down into different levels that refer to the granularity of the data. For example, Level 1 includes groupings of ethnicities, such as "Asian," whereas Level 4 includes granular ethnicities, such as "Thai" and "Indonesian." Level 4 data is particularly important for smaller population groups.

Census variable	Coverage (percent of population in admin data)	Consistency with 2023 Census data[11]	Key gaps	Data improvement requested from agencies?
			more detailed ethnicities (for example Tuvaluan, Thai etc).	
Iwi affiliation	95	0.6	While coverage is high, the quality of the data is relatively low compared with 2023 Census. Very few agencies collect this data, and without another full field enumeration census or another data source, the quality will likely continue to decline over time.	Yes. However, this will require collaboration with Te Tiriti partners and government to identify solutions that work for all iwi.
Māori descent	83	0.94	People born overseas (for example Māori born in Australia).	Yes
Usual residence address	99	0.90	There is high coverage for this data, but consistency is lower for some groups (for example young adults, students, and recent migrants).	Yes
Dwelling occupancy status	Not available	Not available	We need to do further research to understand the key data gaps.	No, but we may request this in the future.
Dwelling type	Not available	Not available	We need to do further research to understand the key data gaps.	No, but we may request this in the future.
Less essential variables				
Birthplace/ country of birth	99	0.99	N/A	No
Years since arrival in NZ	89	0.91	N/A	No
Sources of personal income	97	0.82	There is a lag for admin data due to the tax system structure, thus census data is more current.	No
Total personal income	97	0.91	There is a lag for admin data due to the tax system structure, thus census data is more current.	No

Census variable	Coverage (percent of population in admin data)	Consistency with 2023 Census data[11]	Key gaps	Data improvement requested from agencies?
Study participation	100	0.94	N/A	Yes
Highest qualification	86	0.85	Qualifications earned overseas	Yes
Post-school field of study	89	0.83	Qualifications earned overseas	Yes
Number of children born	83	0.94	Children born overseas	Yes
Years at usual residence	99	0.81	N/A	No
Legally registered relationship status	81	0.94	Relationships occurring overseas	Yes
Industry	95	1.00	N/A	No
Sector of ownership	95	1.00	N/A	No
Status in employment	100	0.93	N/A	No
Tenure of household	86	0.83	Dwellings that are not identified as such in admin data.	No
Sector of landlord	62	0.98	N/A	No
Weekly rent paid	100 (for dwellings identified as rented in admin data)	0.82	Dwellings that are being rented, but are not identified as rentals in admin data	Yes

Table Two: Household and family variables

Census variable	Coverage (percent of population in admin data)	Consistency with 2018 Census data[13]	Key gaps	Data improvement requested from agencies?
Number of usual residents in the household	100	0.74	Households containing individuals from highly mobile groups (for example young adults, renters) and people who have recently entered the resident population (for example migrants)	Yes
Number of usual residents aged 15 and over	100	0.75	Households containing individuals from highly mobile groups (for example young adults, renters) and people who have recently entered the resident population (for example migrants)	Yes
Number of usual residents under 15 years old	100	0.93	Households containing individuals from highly mobile groups (for example young adults, renters) and people who have recently entered the resident population (for example migrants)	Yes
Age of youngest child	100	0.89	Recent migrants, births that have occurred overseas	Yes
Total household income band (±1 band)	99	0.69	Larger households, including those containing more than one family	No
Household income sources	99	0.76	Larger households, including those containing more than one family	No
Household familial relationships and partnerships	89	0.99[14]	Couples in informal de-facto relationships	Yes

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[13] Values close to 1 mean that the quality of admin data is similar to 2023 Census (direct) responses, whereas values closer to 0 mean that the quality of the admin data for that variable is poor.

[14] Coverage is measured against the 2018 Census.

Census variable	Coverage (percent of population in admin data)	Consistency with 2018 Census data[15]	Key gaps	Data improvement requested from agencies?
Household membership	94	0.72[16]	Households containing individuals from highly mobile groups (for example young adults, renters) and people who have recently entered the resident population (for example migrants)	Yes
Family nucleus membership	90[17]	0.82	Households containing individuals from highly mobile groups (for example young adults, renters) and people who have recently entered the resident population (for example migrants)	Yes

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[15] Values close to 1 mean that the quality of admin data is similar to 2023 Census (direct) responses, whereas values closer to 0 mean that the quality of the admin data for that variable is poor.

[16] Ibid

[17] Coverage is measured against the 2018 Census.

Annex 3: Priorities for admin data improvements to population statistics to support future census, by government organisation

The table below highlights the variables and types of admin data improvements that have been the focus of targeted engagements with key government agencies and organisations. This list may change in the future as the CEs group confirms advice on scope and timing of admin data improvements to Ministers.

Variable	Agency	How data is collected	Type of change being explored
Usual residence address	Electoral Commission	Electoral roll	Provide data already collected to Stats NZ on a regular basis
	Tertiary Education Commission (on behalf of education institutes)	Tertiary enrolments	
	NZTA	Driver's licence and vehicle registrations	Provide information about when the data was collected
	Health NZ – Te Whatu Ora	Health enrolments	Increase frequency of collection and consistency across providers
	ACC	Accident claims	
	MSD	Benefit system and StudyLink	
	Corrections	Prison statistics	Increase frequency of collection
Ethnicity	MoE	Enrolments	Collect more granular data, at Level 4 classification
	Health NZ – Te Whatu Ora	Health enrolments	
	MSD	Benefit system and Studylink	Improve infrastructure to ensure Level 4 ethnicity data can be shared regularly
Gender	DIA	Applications to change gender records on birth certificates, citizenship records, and official identification	Align with data standard on gender
	Health NZ – Te Whatu Ora	Health enrolments	
	ACC	Accident claims	
	MSD	Benefit system	
	MoE	Enrolments	
	NZTA	Driver's licence and vehicle registrations	
Iwi affiliation	We have not yet requested any changes from agencies; however, we know the quality of this data needs to be improved. We will need to work with iwi Māori and government agencies to determine suitable solutions to lift data quality.		

Variable	Agency	How data is collected	Type of change being explored
Māori descent	Electoral Commission	Electoral roll	Provide data already collected to Stats NZ on a regular basis
	MBIE	Visa applications	New data collection requested to fill gaps for Māori born overseas
	MoE	Enrolments	New data collection requested to fill gaps for Māori born overseas
Study participation	MoE	Enrolments	Provide data already collected to Stats NZ on a regular basis
Number of children born	MBIE	Visa applications	Provide data already collected to Stats NZ on a regular basis
Legally registered relationship status			
Other relationship information			
Highest secondary school qualification			
Level of post-school qualification			
Post-school field of study			
Weekly rent	MBIE	Tenancy bonds	Increase frequency of collection to ensure data about rent costs is accurate – this may require new collection of data

Annex 4: List of Census 2023 variables, by potential future mode of collection

The table below summarises Stats NZ's current thinking on the potential source of variables collected in the 2023 Census, under a new approach to census. Public consultation on census content in 2025 will confirm the information needs of users, potentially including new or emerging data needs.

The new approach to census will deliver to both existing and new information needs via admin data, a Census Attribute Survey and/or tailored solutions such as targeted surveys from 2030 onwards. The information needs, and the solutions for meeting them, will be subject to collaborative design with Te Tiriti partners, priority communities and/or customers.

Topic	2023 Census variables	Admin data	Survey
Population structure	Gender	✓	✓
Population structure	Number of children born	✓	✓
Population structure	Sex at birth	✓	✓
Population structure	Relationship status - legally registered	✓	✓
Population structure	Date of birth/age	✓	✓
Population structure	Living arrangements/relationship information	✓	✓
Population structure	Variations of sex characteristics		✓
Population structure	Number of census night occupants		
Population structure	Relationship to reference person		
Ethnicity and culture	Iwi affiliation	✓	✓
Ethnicity and culture	Māori descent	✓	✓
Ethnicity and culture	Birthplace	✓	
Ethnicity and culture	Ethnicity (all levels)	✓	✓
Ethnicity and culture	Years since arrival in New Zealand	✓	
Ethnicity and culture	Languages spoken		✓
Ethnicity and culture	Religious affiliation		✓
Ethnicity and culture	Sexual identity		✓
Health and disability	Disability/activity limitations		✓
Health and disability	Cigarette smoking behaviour (ever smoked and regular smoker variables)		✓
Education and training	Highest secondary school qualification	✓	✓
Education and training	Level of post-school qualification	✓	✓
Education and training	Post-school field of study	✓	✓
Education and training	Study participation	✓	
Work	Work and Labour force status	✓	✓
Work	Industry	✓	
Work	Sector of ownership	✓	
Work	Status in employment	✓	
Work	Occupation		✓
Work	Hours worked in employment per week		✓
Work	Job search methods		✓
Work	Unpaid activities		✓
Income	Sources of personal income	✓	

Topic	2023 Census variables	Admin data	Survey
Income	Total personal income	✓	
Housing	Weekly rent paid by households	✓	✓
Housing	Individual home ownership		✓
Housing	Tenure of household	✓	✓
Housing	Sector of landlord	✓	
Housing	Dwelling dampness indicator		✓
Housing	Dwelling mould indicator		✓
Housing	Dwelling type	✓	✓
Housing	Main types of heating		✓
Housing	Number of rooms and bedrooms		✓
Housing	Access to basic amenities	✓	✓
Housing	Access to telecommunication systems	✓	✓
Location	Usual residence address	✓	✓
Location	Usual residence five years ago	✓	
Location	Usual residence one year ago	✓	
Location	Years at usual residence	✓	
Location	Dwelling address	✓	✓
Location	Dwelling occupancy	✓	✓
Location	Census night address		
Transport	Educational institution address	✓	
Transport	Workplace address	✓	
Transport	Main means of travel to education		✓
Transport	Main means of travel to work		✓
Transport	Number of motor vehicles		✓

Note: Variables highlighted in blue are less likely to be collected under a new census approach that involves continuous data collection. Stats NZ is progressing related technical work to produce more complete statistics on dwellings, households, and families from admin data.

Annex 5: 2030 Census: Summary of key workstreams and milestones

2030 Census: Summary of key workstreams and milestones
2025

Module	Workstream	Q3 Jan - March	Q4 Apr - Jun	Q1 Jul - Sep	Q2 Oct - Dec
Census Design The scope, features, characteristics, and assumptions of how the next Census will be delivered	*Foundational design work*	Government Statistician decides on design objectives and choices. Te Ao Māori design approach scope confirmed. Work commences on high-level design and assurance processes.	Design guidance and frameworks confirmed. Work commences on Te Ao Māori design approach. Implementation plan (including dependency mapping) confirmed.	Dwelling strategy published, detailed design work commences.	
	Working with design partners	Work with iwi-Māori and other priority communities to understand needs and work together to design how we will deliver to those needs. In Q3 – decision confirming design partners: iwi-Māori and priority communities within the constraints for Next Census.			
	Understanding information needs	Engagement plan that covers working with design partners, communities and populations of interest, agencies, and data suppliers.	Engagement commences in line with engagement plan, focusing on content to be included in the 2030 Census.	Public consultation on potential range of topics to be supported by the 2030 Census.	Government Statistician decides on content to be included in the 2030 Census (Oct).
Implementation Data ingestion, technology, methodologies, and testing to deliver the next Census	*Administrative data improvements*	Develop Multi-year Data and Statistical Programme (MYDSP) (i.e. plan to improve and acquire admin data from other agencies, including support in implementing data standards).	Further develop Cabinet directive and statutory directive with agencies and crown entities to further refine the data improvements needed to support priorities.	Work with agencies to action MYDSP, work with data suppliers to implement data standards, and plan and shift data to new ingestion platform; complete privacy assessments. Report back to Cabinet with final Cabinet directive and final statutory directive, seeking approval.	
	Census Attribute Survey (CAS) collection	Interim plan – CAS variables and timing, helping to inform field test and public consultation document. Sample and Collection methodology confirmed.	Internal testing of survey collection tool, ensuring it can collect responses online, via phone, and in person.	Confirm design and objectives for a field test of the CAS. Questionnaire designed for initial confirmed content, including alignment with data standards (to support field test in Q4).	
	Statistical methods		Proof of concept for model-based estimates from survey data.	Iterative refinement of methodology for admin data-based measures: population, dwellings, attributes about population and dwellings; and methodology for quality assessment of outputs produced from combination of admin and survey data.	
			Statistical Design for 2030 Census.		
	Data infrastructure	Integrate new survey tool. Completion of enterprise data platform to support ingestion of admin data. Design of new business processes to support the use of the new technology platform. Investigate the adoption and use of AI technologies.		Minimum viable product (MVP) systems developed to support field test operation and data collection.	Admin Population Model built (to facilitate the production of population data).
	Testing and readiness	Develop testing strategy for field test and operational readiness test. Create the procurement plan to underpin the tests.	Procure systems testing partner.	Operational readiness and resilience plan.	Field test to assess design and cost assumptions.
Trust and confidence Building public confidence in the approach by delivering value using safe and ethical approaches	*Trust and confidence*	Point in time understanding of trust levels and areas of concern from communities and population groups. Map communities trust and confidence concerns to inform measures and tools.		Establish a trust measurement and track over time. Strengthen procedures for the safe acquisition and use of admin data.	
	Communications and marketing		Communicate census design (pending Cabinet endorsement) with stakeholders. Campaign to demonstrate the value of data and statistics to the public (ongoing).		Confirm census content with stakeholders and the public. Campaign for a field test of the Census Attribute Survey.
Supports Governance, legislative change, and finance to enable the next Census	*Policy approvals*	Cabinet paper seeking endorsement of the in-principle decision; and Cabinet approval to draft legislation.	Cabinet approval of discussion document.	Bill introduced and first reading in Parliament (TBC via the 2025 legislative programme).	
	Governance	Policy choices and levers for establishing system governance over the admin data pipeline. Internal programme governance established to oversee design and implementation.	Implement and action programme governance framework throughout design phase. Monthly programme governance meetings commence.	System governance mechanisms established: Strategic delivery board chaired by an external governance expert, periodic reviews of the census programme by an independent expert in statistics and census delivery, and a technical advisory group.	
	Business case	Updated detailed costing.	Monthly reporting and quarterly forecasting.		

2030 Census: Summary of key workstreams and milestones
2026 - 2031

Module	Workstream	FY25/26 Q3 – FY26/27 Q2	FY26/27 Q3 – FY27/28 Q2	FY27/28 Q3 – FY28/29 Q2	FY28/29 Q3 – FY29/30 Q2	FY29/30 Q3 – FY30/31 Q2	FY30/31 Q3 – FY31/32 Q2
Data and statistics releases The expected release schedule for when data and statistics will be released	*Outputs*	Provisional admin data-based measures published (**in both late 2026 and 2027**) to demonstrate value of approach and familiarise customers.		First official release of admin data-only measures in late 2028 (for example official population counts).	First release of combined admin data and Census Attribute Survey estimates in early 2029.	Annual release of combined admin and survey data in early 2031 and early 2032. Dwelling counts. Release of outputs to deliver value for iwi-Māori in mid-2030.	Release of official 2030 Census admin data-first measures; release of outputs to deliver value for priority communities in mid-2031.
Census Design The scope, features, Characteristics, and assumptions of how the next Census will be delivered	*Foundational design work*	Detailed design finalised; performance targets and measures agreed.	Design work moves to BAU phase focussed on subsequent CAS annual surveys and further options to advance admin data variables: Design assurance activities; review of design functions; quality assurance activities; methodology assurance activities; and assessment and reporting on performance measures.				
	Working with design partners	Design of bespoke collection approach and work programme to deliver value for iwi-Māori and priority communities.		Delivering value for iwi-Māori programme in progress, outputs to be delivered in 2030.	Delivering value for priority communities programme in progress, outputs to be delivered in 2031.		
	Understanding information needs	Work with agencies to understand their information needs; design and finalise mix of outputs.	Establish regular cycle to manage and refine information needs and outputs.	Ongoing: Establish and maintain relationships with partners, suppliers, customers, and communities. Embed cyclical engagement process: listen and plan, engage, deliver and action, share learnings, and continuous review and improvement.			
Implementation Data ingestion, technology, methodologies, and testing to deliver the next Census	*Administrative data improvements*	Ongoing work with data suppliers to improve admin data, in alignment with the MYDSP, assessment of MYDSP progress to date (and strengthen levers if required)					
	Census Attribute Survey (CAS) collection	Design questionnaire for initial content. Multi-year plan for CAS variables. Operational readiness test.	Census Attribute Survey in field from July 2027.	Continuous Census Attribute Survey collection, to be published on an annual basis. Continuous improvement and programme of embedded design testing.			
	Statistical methods	Iterative refinement of methodology for admin data-based measures: population, dwellings, attributes about population and dwellings. Methodology for quality assessment of outputs produced from combination of admin and survey data.					
	Data infrastructure	Support provisional 2026 outputs. End-to-end Census Attribute Survey infrastructure developed.	Support provisional 2027 outputs. Support CAS by developing a high-quality Operational Dwelling Frame.	Integrated Statistical Data System able to link survey data to admin data.	Integrated Statistical Data System used to support first official release of next census.		
Trust and confidence Building public confidence in the approach by delivering value using safe and ethical approaches	*Trust and confidence*	Proactive, targeted engagement to understand NZ attitudes to data; ongoing maintenance, education, and continuous improvement of safe, transparent, and ethical data practices.					
		Community wānanga on trust measurement framework and admin data (country-wide); annual trust measurement report.		Report against trust measures (every 3 years).			Report against trust measures (every 3 years).
	Communications and marketing	Value of data campaign (ongoing, including supporting key milestones such as collection efforts and in 2028 to support first official release of admin data measures).					
		Educational programme campaign about how Stats NZ keeps data safe.	Census Attribute Survey campaign to launch the survey and encourage people to participate.	Ongoing activities to support participation in the Census Attributes Survey and launch new collections.			