

15 April 2026

Justice Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington

Teena koutou katoa,

## **Submission from Waikato District Council on Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill.**

### **Introduction**

Waikato District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill (the Bill).

Council supports the intent of the Bill to modernise New Zealand's data and statistics system and recognises the potential benefits of increased use of administrative data, including improved efficiency, reduced respondent burden, and more timely insights. However, Council considers that several key matters require further attention to ensure the proposed changes deliver reliable, equitable, high-quality and fit for purpose data that meets the needs of both central and local government decision-making.

### **Importance of Census Data for Local Government**

Local government relies on high-quality population, demographic, and social data to support:

- Infrastructure, growth, and land-use planning.
- Long-term planning and financial strategies.
- Housing and transport modelling.
- Community facilities and service provision.
- Equity-focused decision-making.

Any changes to the census model must therefore ensure data remains robust, granular, timely, and trustworthy at local and sub-regional levels. Council is concerned that a move away from a traditional census, if not carefully designed and managed, could reduce data quality or coverage, particularly for smaller populations or rapidly changing communities.

### **Use of Administrative Data**

Council supports the increased use of administrative data, but emphasises that:

- Administrative data must reflect real-world population and demographic change, including growth, mobility, and household structure.
- Ongoing validation against lived realities is essential to maintain confidence.
- Clear processes are needed to ensure local variation is captured, not just national averages.

As administrative data is not collected primarily for statistical purposes, its quality, coverage, and consistency can vary over time and between sources. Council therefore considers

continued validation, transparent quality reporting, and ongoing improvement of underlying datasets to be critical.

Council also notes that some demographic groups have historically been undercounted, and without active mitigation there is a risk that increased reliance on administrative data could entrench or worsen existing data gaps.

### **Addressing Undercounting and Data Gaps**

Council encourages Stats NZ to:

- Use more frequent surveys and tailored data collection to supplement administrative data, particularly for underrepresented, highly mobile, or less visible populations.
- Regularly review administrative data sources to ensure ongoing relevance and accuracy.
- Clearly articulate how equity impacts, including for Maaori and other priority populations, are addressed.
- Provide clear quality statements so users understand where data is strong and where caution is required.

Council supports the intent to improve coverage of Maaori and other hard-to-measure communities. However, consultation material indicates that annual surveys alone will not provide robust local area Maaori population data, with only larger iwi expected to be adequately represented by 2030. Council is concerned this may reduce visibility for smaller iwi and weaken the local evidence base unless targeted solutions are developed and clearly communicated. Maintaining visibility of demographic change over time is essential for evidence-based decision-making at both local and national levels.

### **Cost to Council as a supplier of information**

Council notes the Bill's increased reliance on admin-data-first approach, alongside a partnership-based approach to data collections, may place additional technical, operational, and financial obligation on councils. Stats NZ's Regulatory Impact Statement acknowledges that these costs have not yet been fully quantified. Without appropriate resourcing, these changes risk creating ongoing unfunded mandates for local authorities.

In order for Council to accommodate this, we may need to change and/or expand the way we collect, manipulate and store data. This could result in new technical solutions, new disclosures and ultimately, higher costs.

Council further notes the population estimates produced under the Bill may be used for non-statistical purposes, including determining each council's share of waste disposal levy funding under the Waste Minimisation Act 2008. Considering the extended census timeframe, Council considers it important that councils have timely access to the methodologies and assumptions underpinning population calculations for the 2029/30 and 2030/31 financial years. Transparency in these calculations will be essential to maintaining confidence in funding allocations and enabling councils to understand, test, and plan for potential financial impacts.

Council recommends that, in the context of the Government's stated intention to achieve approximately \$100 million in census cost savings over time, the Government explicitly address

the potential impacts on local authorities and commit to providing appropriate financial and technical support, including underwriting necessary upgrades to council data systems, so that any increased responsibilities placed on councils are adequately resourced and do not result in additional unfunded mandates over time.

### **Engagement with Local Government**

Council supports provisions that enable more regular engagement between Stats NZ and the public sector and considers strong collaboration with local government essential to the success of the proposed changes.

Council recommends:

- More frequent and structured engagement with Stats NZ.
- Targeted engagement with the local government sector, recognising councils' distinct data needs, including addressing quality, gaps and emerging trends.

### **Data Frequency, Breadth, and Quality**

Council emphasises the need for data that is reliable and high quality, available at sufficient frequency, covers a broad range of demographic, social, and housing indicators, critically accessible at appropriate geographic levels, including SA1, SA2, and SA3

Council supports more frequent data outputs in principle. However, more frequent publication will only be useful if the data remains robust enough for local planning and service delivery. Where local outputs rely on pooled multi-year survey data to achieve statistical reliability, clarity is needed about usability for local decision-making.

### **Transitional Timeframes and Arrangements**

Council notes the importance of clear and realistic transitional arrangements as the system moves from a traditional census to increased use of administrative data. For local government, continuity and comparability across the transition from the 2023 Census to the new annual model are critical.

As a receiver of census information, Council notes that the proposed extension of the next traditional census from 2028 to 2030 will result in councils relying on increasingly outdated census data. By the time councils are preparing their 2030–2040 Long Term Plans, the most recent full census data available will be at least seven years old.

Council considers this presents a material risk to evidence-based planning, financial strategy development, and infrastructure investment decisions, particularly in growth areas and communities experiencing rapid change. This reinforces the importance of robust, well-communicated transitional arrangements and reliable interim population estimates that are fit for local planning purposes.

Council recommends:

- Transitional arrangements that support consistency and continuity of data in planning processes.
- Parallel use of traditional census methods and administrative data to test reliability.

- Clear communication about methodological changes and limitations.
- Practical guidance on what data remains comparable over time.

These measures are essential to maintaining confidence in the data and ensuring local government planning is not adversely affected.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Waikato District Council supports the overall intent of the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill and the move toward a more modern data system. However, Council considers that achieving the intended outcomes will require:

- Strong safeguards around data quality and equity.
- Continued validation of administrative data through surveys and review.
- Meaningful and ongoing engagement with the local government sector.
- Appropriate transitional arrangements to ensure reliability, continuity, and mitigation of further unfunded mandates on councils.

### **Further information**

Should the Justice Committee require clarification on the submission or any additional information, please contact Maggie Ford email [Maggie.Ford@waidc.govt.nz](mailto:Maggie.Ford@waidc.govt.nz)

Ngaa mihi,



### **Aksel Bech**

Mayor, Waikato District Council

### **Council Approval and Reference**

This submission was approved by the Mayor and Chairs Forum on 15 April 2026.

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