



15/04/2026

Committee Secretariat
Justice Committee
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Submission from the Manawatū District Council on Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill

Dear Members of the Committee

Manawatū District Council (MDC) thanks the Justice Select Committee for the opportunity to submit on the Data and Statistics (Census) Amendment Bill.

MDC has concerns that a complete move towards an admin-first Census will mean that districts like ours may no longer have reliable data to inform significant planning and decision-making. MDC uses census population counts and demographic breakdowns to underpin our Long-Term Plan (LTP) and infrastructure strategies. MDC further relies on this data when applying for central government funding and when supporting community groups with funding applications. In addition, Stats NZ data is used in policy development—for example, when reviewing the smokefree policy, we analysed smoking rates across demographics to identify priority groups.

The admin-first Census approach assumes that people interact consistently with government systems. There is a significant risk that those experiencing digital exclusion will be left out of this approach. It will be important for government to actively support participation from individuals who have limited or no engagement with digital or administrative systems, and to ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to enable their inclusion.

An admin-first Census is more reliable in countries that use a unique identifier that follows individuals across government agencies. New Zealand does not currently have such a system. MDC therefore has concerns about an increased risk of misidentification where names differ across organisations. Developing a secure national unique identifier before moving to an admin-first Census would help reduce this margin of error.

MDC also has concerns about the potential expectation that local authorities may need to supply additional data to central government. This could result in increased costs, including staff training and changes to existing data collection practices. For example, MDC does not currently collect ethnicity data, as we rely on census data as best practice. If required to collect this information, issues may arise under the Privacy Act 2020 regarding what councils can collect to properly undertake their functions. There is

also a risk of eroding public trust if communities perceive MDC as sharing their data with central government.

MDC also notes that, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there appears to be a growing reluctance among some parts of the population to engage with government agencies, including local government.

There is a real risk that the expected savings from discontinuing a full Census will not materialise, particularly within the next 5–10 years, and MDC is not convinced that the necessary improvements can be achieved within the proposed timeframes. While the Census was historically a well-respected process with high participation rates, this is no longer consistently the case for all groups. MDC considers that effort should be directed toward rebuilding trust and improving participation, rather than removing the Census in its current form.

MDC has a genuine concern about the accurate representation of smaller population groups within our district. Under the proposed approach, these groups may not be reliably captured until at least 2031, if at all. This could result in reduced funding for certain communities and a misunderstanding of the district’s demographic reality. MDC is particularly concerned that an admin-first model will disproportionately impact iwi, Māori, Pacific, disabled, rainbow, and other smaller or more mobile communities. These are the communities that most need high-quality data to identify and monitor inequities. Without a full Census, iwi affiliation data is likely to degrade quickly, with no alternative population-wide source currently available. We also note strong calls from Māori data experts for investment in iwi-led data systems and indigenous data sovereignty, rather than increased reliance on fragmented government administrative records.

MDC is unsure whether administrative data will produce accurate Māori descent counts and iwi affiliation. Individuals may be hesitant to share whakapapa information with agencies that do not clearly explain why it is required. Additionally, some government forms do not include comprehensive iwi options, which risks under-representation of smaller or less well-known iwi. Administrative data sources also have gaps for people born overseas.

This data is critical for:

- Determining Māori electoral populations and electorates
- Māori health and education planning
- Local partnership and relationship agreements
- Local service planning and investment

MDC also notes that the unhoused community often has a high level of reluctance to engage with government agencies. Relying on community services to provide this data to Statistics New Zealand may erode the trust these services have built. It is also important to recognise that many of these services have experienced recent reductions in central government funding.

To accurately understand the extent of homelessness, MDC considers that dedicated roles would need to be established to collect this data directly. These roles would need to build and maintain trust with the unhoused population over time.

MDC sees merit in retaining a full Census for at least one or two further cycles, alongside the development of administrative data methods. This would allow for benchmarking and validation of administrative data, identification of biases, and a smoother transition. It would also provide a crucial quality assurance mechanism and help maintain public trust in both the electoral system and the wider data system. MDC reiterates that a nationwide Census in 2028 remains the most reliable way to obtain essential population data in the short to medium term.

Yours sincerely,



Michael Ford
Mayor