Tūao Aotearoa
Volunteering New Zealand

Modernising the Census

https://www.stats.govt.nz/consultations/public-consultation-proposed-data-collection-approach-and-content-for-the-census/

16 December 2025

Q1: Feedback on the benefits, opportunities and challenges of the new census approach

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Proposed data collection approach and content for the census*. We strongly support the modernisation of the census and appreciate the significant benefits that the proposed model offers, including improved timeliness, flexibility, and opportunities for collaboration. We also acknowledge the intention to ensure that the new approach works for a wide range of communities.

Our submission focuses specifically on the collection, quality, and usability of **data relating to unpaid work and volunteering**, drawing on insights from our *State of Volunteering* reports, our engagement with the sector, and our longstanding use of census, Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS), and General Social Survey (GSS) data.

Risks associated with the admin-data-first model for volunteering

We acknowledge that many census variables will be sourced from admin data. However, **volunteering and unpaid work have no admin data sources**, and therefore sit entirely within the survey-only category. This is acknowledged by Stats NZ in the consultation document. The discussion document itself highlights that variables not available in admin data will face challenges under the new model, including constraints on granularity and population coverage.

Volunteering New Zealand is particularly concerned about the following key risks that come from this admin-data-first approach from the perspective of volunteering:

- **Loss of small-area insight:** Regional–level volunteering data have been vital for local authorities and community organisations. These may be harder to produce from a sample-based approach.

- **Reduced quality for small groups:** Many communities highly engaged in volunteering (e.g. older people, ethnic communities, rural populations) risk under-representation in a generic sample.

- **Reduced ability to map unpaid work trends longitudinally:** The transition from a full census to a pooled multi-year rolling survey could create discontinuities in time-series comparability, affecting how the sector is able to make cross-year comparisons and map volunteering trends.

We ask Stats NZ to provide clarity on how continuity of volunteering data will be protected across model transitions.

Q20: We're keen to understand what would make the population and social statistics system more useful, inclusive, and future-focused. Are there particular data needs, gaps, or opportunities you think Stats NZ should consider?

Support for retaining and strengthening volunteering and unpaid work data

We note that *unpaid activities* will be collected only through the new annual census survey rather than via admin data, due to the nature of the information (subjective, behavioural, not captured in government systems). We strongly support Stats NZ's highlighting of volunteering data in the consultation document.

Volunteering New Zealand (VNZ) further recommends that Stats NZ:

(a) Retain unpaid activities as core annual survey content
The movement to a smaller annual sample creates risks for data precision, especially for smaller regions and population subgroups. We therefore recommend that unpaid work/volunteering be treated as *primary content* every year, not rotating content.

(b) Ensure detailed, disaggregated unpaid work data
To be useful for community, policy, and sector planning, data should support analysis by:

- age, gender, ethnicity
- disability
- household type
- labour-force status
- region

The current proposal notes that detailed data for small subgroups may be limited in early years of the new model. VNZ urges Stats NZ to mitigate this risk through sampling design, oversampling, pooling strategies, and methodological transparency.

(c) Retain alignment with HLFS and GSS question sets
VNZ places strong value on HLFS modules and GSS measures that already provide partial insights into volunteering. Consistency across surveys (in definitions, question wording, and periodicity) will be critical for longitudinal comparability. Different rates of volunteering are currently presented in the GSS (Wellbeing Statistics Update) and HLFS, for example, and this may be to do with the differing definitions used by Stats NZ in the respective surveys.

Q 21 Are there ways that you use Stats NZ data that you want to tell us about?

How Volunteering New Zealand uses Stats NZ data on volunteering and unpaid work

Volunteering New Zealand (VNZ) has consistently relied on Stats NZ data to underpin our research, advocacy, and sector-wide insights. Stats NZ's labour market and wellbeing datasets have provided the national benchmarks we use to describe the scale and value of volunteering, including participation rates, total volunteer hours, and the economic contribution of formal volunteering. These figures feature prominently across our publications and public communications.

Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) has been especially important. VNZ regularly uses GSS volunteering data to understand who volunteers, how frequently, and in what ways. GSS data has enabled us to highlight demographic trends, shifts toward more informal volunteering, and the wellbeing benefits associated with volunteering. This evidence has informed our commentary to the sector and government alike. The sector relies upon VNZ for these insights about volunteering and unpaid work.

Regional insights derived from Stats NZ data have also been central to reports such as our *State of Volunteering Regional Report*, which used Stats NZ's wellbeing and volunteering measures to show clear differences between rural and urban communities. The granularity of Stats NZ data allowed us to write this report, with our own data unable to match Stats NZ's scale and granularity.

These findings help tailor our support for regional volunteer centres and guide conversations with local authorities and funders.

Across the *State of Volunteering Report* series, VNZ uses Stats NZ's national and demographic data to contextualise our sector-generated evidence — such as changes in volunteer hours, sector participation, and barriers to volunteering. These datasets add rigour and comparability to our reports.

Stats NZ data has further strengthened VNZ's policy submissions, where we have cited GSS and historic volunteering datasets to argue for maintaining and improving national measurement of unpaid work and volunteering. Stats NZ's own analytical outputs (not just its raw data) are widely used by VNZ and by community organisations without in-house statistical expertise that depend on clear, authoritative interpretations.

Together, these examples show that Stats NZ data is fundamental to VNZ's ability to understand volunteering trends, support sector planning, and advocate effectively for the role of volunteering in Aotearoa.

![Tūao Aotearoa - Volunteering New Zealand]

Importance of data on volunteering and unpaid work

VNZ's *State of Volunteering* reports consistently demonstrate that **volunteering and unpaid work are fundamental to New Zealand's community wellbeing, economic resilience, emergency response capability, and social cohesion**. High-quality population-level data enables us to:

- understand the scale and distribution of volunteering across regions and demographics
- assess participation trends over time
- identify equity barriers to volunteering
- inform policy, funding, and workforce planning
- support community organisations' funding applications and strategic planning.

Many of these uses depend on census-derived or Stats NZ-produced population-level statistics. The census has historically been the only dataset capable of describing unpaid work at a national scale, with full geographic and demographic granularity.

Q22: Is there anything else you want to say or share with us?

Value of Stats NZ analysis and interpretation

Volunteering New Zealand emphasises our reliance not only on raw datasets, but on Stats NZ's analytical outputs, dashboards, and interpretative insights, which enable the sector to use data meaningfully. As noted internally, the sector deeply values Stats NZ's ability to interpret and explain complex data patterns. The community and voluntary sector do not presently have the expertise to undertake complex data analysis or access to the population-level scale and with the level of detail that Stats NZ is able to provide for us.

Commented [MK1]: Or access to population level data?

We encourage Stats NZ to commit to:

- clear methodological explanations during the transition.

- regular analytical releases on volunteering and unpaid work.

- engagement with the community and voluntary sector to support capability building and data use.

Summary of recommendations

1. Retain the unpaid activities/volunteering variable as core annual content rather than rotating content.

2. Ensure demographic and geographic granularity is preserved through sampling design to enable Volunteering New Zealand and the sector to understand volunteering and unpaid work at a more granular level across Aotearoa New Zealand.

3. Align census, HLFS, and GSS unpaid work measures for longitudinal consistency.

4. Alongside core content on volunteering and unpaid data, explore rotating modules that can provide deeper insights into volunteering and unpaid work.

5. Provide clarity on how continuity will be maintained during the transition to the new model.

Volunteering is an essential part of Aotearoa New Zealand's social and economic fabric. VNZ welcomes the opportunity to continue working with Stats NZ to ensure the new census model continues to deliver robust, meaningful, and accessible data on volunteering for the benefit of the sector and the wider population.

Please feel free to contact us should you wish to discuss this submission further.