



Overview of the Official Statistics System

Briefing for the Incoming Minister of Statistics
In confidence

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Overview of the Official Statistics System

An introduction to the Official Statistics System

What is the Official Statistics System?

1. New Zealand's national statistics system is called the Official Statistics System.
2. Statistics New Zealand produces most of the core official statistics, particularly economic and population statistics. Official statistics on education, health, crime, justice and welfare are produced by other government agencies, primarily from administrative sources or, in some cases, from surveys conducted by or for them.
3. In New Zealand, a National Statistics Office (Statistics New Zealand) leads the system in which official statistics are produced by a range of agencies. This system is similar to that of Australia and around the norm for centralised versus decentralised systems.

Guiding frameworks

4. The United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics provide the basic framework for official statistics in member countries. In New Zealand, the work of Statistics New Zealand and other government agencies that produce official statistics is guided by the Statistics Act 1975 (the Act). This Act gives Statistics New Zealand the mandate to lead a coordinated system as well as provide information to enable a range of stakeholders to understand economic, social, demographic and other matters of interest. The Cabinet-agreed 2003 "Top Down Review of the Official Statistics System" sets the System's current framework and strategy.

Top Down Review of the Official Statistics System

5. In November 2002, the Ministers of Statistics, Finance and State Services agreed to a top down review by the Treasury, State Services Commission and Statistics New Zealand. The Review was initiated by concerns about both Statistics New Zealand's financial situation and a lack of coordination and management of the Official Statistics System.
6. The Review recommended a model for a stronger System, with:
 - stronger governance and leadership
 - a greater focus on the most important statistics and standards expected of these
 - improved access to a wider range of data by a wider range of users
 - improved management of the burden on respondents
 - long-term protection (archiving) of key datasets and increased research to support statistical development.

7. The recommended model, as approved by Cabinet, defined a portfolio of statistics across the state sector ('Tier 1' statistics) that are important in their own right and, consequently, need to be produced, analysed and released to high statistical standards.
8. Principles and protocols for official statistics' producers, based on international good practice, have been developed and circulated to all producers. These are the basis for assessments of Tier 1 statistics producers' adherence to the protocols.
9. The model's approach envisaged that non-Tier 1 statistics would still play a role in the Official Statistics System and that the Government Statistician would strongly encourage the use of standards in their production, but that coordination work would focus on the Tier 1 statistics.
10. The model has 11 elements. Significant progress to date in implementing them includes:
 - setting up and supporting the Advisory Committee on Official Statistics (ACOS)
 - identifying the Tier 1 statistics
 - developing principles and protocols for official statistics' producers through working with our partner agencies
 - providing support for ACOS with measures of the health of official statistics
 - preparing domain plans for topic areas in official statistics, such as energy and the environment, which provide a path forward and a basis for prioritising proposed investments in official statistics and related information systems
 - developing a Respondent Load Strategy that applies throughout the wider statistical system, and appointing a Respondent Advocate within Statistics New Zealand
 - setting up a data archive as a single reference point for ensuring the unit record datasets for all important official statistics are retained as an enduring resource, and thus can be accessed.

Governance of the Official Statistics System

11. A number of players are involved in making the Official Statistics System work. The table on the next page summarises these roles; those of the Minister and Government Statistician are described in more detail on pages 4 to 9.

| Body | Function |
|---|---|
| Minister | Minister responsible for Vote Statistics and through this the Official Statistics System. |
| Advisory Committee on Official Statistics (ACOS) | Advises the Minister. Represents the interests of the wider statistical community, including users, producers and suppliers of statistical data to ensure that official statistics, specifically Tier 1, are developed to meet users' and producers' needs. |
| Government Statistician/Chief Executive of Statistics New Zealand | Provides leadership of the Official Statistics System through policy advice, coordination, review, the development of standards, protocols and policies, and a programme of statistical research. Major producer of official statistics. |
| Chief executives of producer agencies | Produce and disseminate Tier 1 statistics in accordance with principles and protocols. Also produce official statistics not classified as Tier 1. |
| Officials committee | Key point of liaison across agencies. Key role in advising and overseeing progress. |

Legislative framework

12. The Act provides the framework for the coordination of official statistics in New Zealand. It covers statistics produced and published by government departments, whether they are from surveys of households or businesses, or statistics such as health and crime statistics that are derived from the administrative records of central and local government agencies.
13. The Act requires the confidentiality of information provided by respondents to be protected, and information collected under the Act is limited in its use to statistical purposes. The Act contains provisions that prevent the release of information that would disclose the identity of individual respondents, except under explicit and tightly prescribed situations.
14. The Act also requires a conference of official statistics' users at least five yearly and provides the authority to review areas of official statistics. This helps to ensure that official statistics are relevant and meet major users' quality and timeliness standards. The next conference is to be held in September 2009, at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa.
15. Some areas of the Statistics Act could be usefully updated, with one option being a non-partisan review of the Act. This could lead to changes such as:
 - the creation of different sections on survey data collection to better accommodate data collection via the Internet

- improved mechanisms to facilitate bona fide research by authorised researchers, including academic researchers
- specific provisions on the use of government administrative data in producing official statistics, as a means of addressing respondent load (the effort required to complete survey forms)
- stronger coordination sections to enshrine the principles of official statistics and provide more detail on the roles and authorities of other agency chief executives in regard to the statistics their agencies produce.

Other legislation

16. The Government Statistician also complies with the requirements and thrust of the Privacy Act 1993, which contains a number of principles on individuals' privacy. Other legislation particularly affecting Statistics New Zealand's operation includes the:

- Official Information Act 1982
- Public Records Act 2005
- Immigration Act 1987
- Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987
- State Sector Act 1988
- Public Finance Act 1989
- Employment Relations Act 2000
- Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992
- Electoral Act 1993
- Electoral Referendum Act 1993
- Electoral Finance Act 2007
- Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1995.

United Nations principles

17. The United Nations Statistical Commission has endorsed a set of Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. These are supported by an extensive Handbook of Statistical Organisation, which sets out general principles and good practice for the organisation of national statistical systems. New Zealand's approaches are cited as examples in the Handbook.

The Minister of Statistics

18. The Minister of Statistics has a critical role in balancing the demands for statistical information with the obligations placed on the New Zealand public.

19. The Minister has the authority to approve new surveys or significant changes to existing surveys across all of Government.
20. The Minister has the usual role and authority of a Minister in regard to Statistics New Zealand as a government department and its activity. Specifically, the role covers decisions on all the official statistics the Government directly purchases through Vote Statistics.
21. The Minister also has the capacity to direct the Government Statistician to collect, or cease to collect, statistics where the Government Statistician would otherwise not collect or cease collection of those statistics. The Government Statistician can then make public the fact that the Minister has issued such a direction and that they would not otherwise have begun or ceased collection. As this description indicates, this power would be used if there were some disagreement between the Minister and the Government Statistician about a specific statistical collection. It is seldom used, as decisions on the statistics collected are made via the usual departmental consultation and Budget processes.
22. ACOS provides advice to support ministerial decisions on the health and long-term direction of the Official Statistics System.
23. Under the Statistics Act, the Minister can also authorise the Government Statistician, on request, to enter agreements to operate joint surveys with agencies, local authorities or any statutory body. This aims to avoid duplication when two or more agencies need to collect the same information. It enables information collected under the authority of the Statistics Act to be shared by the joint partners, as long as respondents do not object to this.

Protection of Independent Official Statistics

24. Good official statistics provide independent measures that help the electorate to make accurate judgements on the performance of past and current governments and on alternative governments.
25. The Minister is responsible for supporting the effective implementation of the Statistics Act by protecting the statutory independence of the Government Statistician on procedures and methods of official statistics, and the extent, form and publication timing of those statistics.
26. The section of the Statistics Act providing for Government Statistician independence means there is no access to Statistics New Zealand official statistics prior to their release, and no opportunity for anyone to influence release timing and format. The same practices are expected for Tier 1 statistics produced by other agencies.
27. Ministers can be uncomfortable with this situation. There can be individual and collective challenges to the status quo, especially where other government agencies operate a 'no surprises' approach with Ministers, or where Ministers involve themselves in editing and releasing other agencies' statistical reports.

28. On the other hand, opposition parties in any debate can resort to attacking the Government through challenging statistics released by the official system, or the integrity of the process.
29. Other contending groups carrying out debates via the media will also attack official statistics if they consider making such a challenge will help them to defend or advance their cases.
30. Consequently, the Official Statistics System can, at times, need protection from those it serves and informs. These threats occur in any country, and the national statistics system can, at times, need its champions in defence.
31. The New Zealand institution of a separate Minister of Statistics is a high-profile and important role not present in many other countries. The Minister is well placed to protect the independence and defend the integrity of the statistics system in private and in public, just as the independence of the judiciary and audit functions are supported when challenged.
32. The Minister can be assured of the ability to take a public or private stance on the integrity of the statistical process with full confidence in Statistics New Zealand's performance and the independence and objectivity of the official statistics it produces.

Administration of the Department

33. The Minister of Statistics exercises the usual range of portfolio roles, such as:
 - contributing to effective relationships between the Government Statistician, other government agencies, governments, Ministers, Cabinet and the public
 - negotiating and reaching agreement with the Government Statistician on the Statement of Intent and Agreement to Outputs for Statistics New Zealand, presenting business cases and funding proposals, and monitoring performance
 - receiving an annual report on the operation of Statistics New Zealand, pursuant to the Public Finance Act 1989.

Ministerial Involvement with the Release of Official Statistics and Stakeholder Management

34. The Minister of Statistics' role in ensuring the integrity of official statistics means that they tend to stand aside from the public release, presentation and interpretation of actual official statistics produced by Statistics New Zealand. For other reasons, explanations for the pictures painted by official statistics are generally taken up by lead Ministers who are accountable for setting directions and outcomes in the areas covered by the statistics.
35. The Minister of Statistics still has a significant public role in this area through:

- facilitating better relationships and communications with significant stakeholders, such as local business groups
- presenting the Government's intentions and decisions on investment and expectations of the statistics system and Statistics New Zealand
- announcing future statistical initiatives, such as a new topic area, improved statistical access systems, and approaches that will reduce respondent load
- launching significant publications such as the New Zealand Official Yearbook or events such as the five-yearly users' conference
- encouraging public cooperation, such as signalling the start of the census collection campaign.

Ministerial Support from Statistics New Zealand

36. Statistics New Zealand aims to ensure that the Minister of Statistics is kept fully informed on emerging and significant issues and trends in official statistics, and all matters relevant to their ministerial responsibilities for Statistics New Zealand.
37. A Statistics New Zealand staff member is currently seconded to the Minister's Office as a Private Secretary. This has proved an efficient way of promoting effective and direct communication between Statistics New Zealand, the Minister and, where appropriate, the Minister's colleagues.
38. Outside the content of pending statistical releases, Statistics New Zealand is committed to maintaining a no surprises policy, ensuring the Minister is well briefed on relevant portfolio matters, particularly emerging or potential issues. Feedback is actively sought on the quality of support Statistics New Zealand provides.
39. Statistics New Zealand provides the Minister with advice and briefings on current and strategic issues and on policy projects. Currently, regular meetings are held fortnightly between the Minister and departmental officials, with the agenda arranged by the Private Secretary responsible for Statistics New Zealand matters.
40. Statistics New Zealand also provides the Minister with support services such as preparing replies to ministerial correspondence and requests for official information, and drafting speech notes and replies to questions in the House.
41. Compared with many other portfolios, Statistics New Zealand deals with very low volumes of ministerial correspondence and questions in the House (seldom more than three or four instances of each per month). Correspondence volumes increase several-fold in a census year, with the next peak time being the first half of 2011. Questions in the House tend to increase when select committees are reviewing government agencies' plans or performances.

The Government Statistician/Chief Executive of Statistics New Zealand

42. The Government Statistician is defined in the Statistics Act as the Chief Executive of Statistics New Zealand and the Government's policy advisor on statistical matters.
43. The Government Statistician leads the production of a major part of New Zealand's official statistics and has statutory independence in relation to the methodologies used and the form, content and timing of releases. (The Minister of Statistics determines the mix of statistics produced by Statistics New Zealand, based on the Government Statistician's advice.)
44. Many of the Act's specific tasks assigned to the Government Statistician are those that would be expected of any public service chief executive. The Government Statistician needs to work in both modes to achieve the Act's objectives.

For example, as part of their leadership role for the Official Statistics System, the Government Statistician is the official issuer of, and authority on, statistical standards. Under subsection 14(i) of the Act, their task is to define, lay down and promote such standards.

In obtaining intelligence on other agencies' statistical activities, bringing this information together and analysing it against the Government's objectives, then advising the Government on priorities, the Government Statistician is carrying out statutory duties under the Statistics Act but also acting in the manner of a central agency chief executive.

45. The Act makes all statistical collections conducted by Statistics New Zealand a compulsory activity. Statistics New Zealand has special powers to request the supply of information, but its coercive powers are used judiciously as it focuses on promoting voluntary compliance. Its core aims are to minimise the burden on respondents and maximise the use and value of statistics.
46. Sensitive information provided by respondents to surveys and the census is protected, so that information cannot be divulged to other agencies. This limitation also applies to the enquiry powers of other legislation, such as those contained in the Customs and Excise Act 1996 and the Tax Administration Act 1994.
47. The Government Statistician has specific responsibilities under the Electoral Act 1993, Privacy Act 1993, Official Information Act 1982 and Public Records Act 2005. Some other Acts and regulations also require consultation with or advice from the Government Statistician, or certificates (such as population counts), or the use of published official statistics for particular purposes – such as to adjust government payments and entitlements.

48. The Government Statistician is empowered by the Statistics Act to lead the wider Official Statistics System. They have the mandate to consult official statistics' users about their information needs and conduct periodic reviews of the collection, compilation, analysis, abstraction and publication of official statistics prepared by Statistics New Zealand and other government agencies.
49. As well as producing official statistics needed by government, local government, government agencies and businesses, the Government Statistician is responsible for helping those bodies and the general public to understand statistical matters. This includes publishing and commenting on unofficial statistics, where appropriate.
50. In summary, the Government Statistician:
 - advises the Minister of Statistics on statistical policy
 - reports to the Minister on the statistical needs of government
 - keeps the Minister informed on government agencies' statistical projects
 - defines and promotes the use of standard statistical concepts, procedures, definitions and classifications
 - collects information and prepares and publishes statistics
 - constructs estimates, forecasts, projections and statistical models
 - conducts a five-yearly Census of Population and Dwellings
 - examines and, where they consider it necessary, comments on the interpretation and validity of any published unofficial statistics and publishes any such statistics
 - carries out investigations and provides certificates when required by any statutes (for example under the Electoral Act)
 - supplies, where they consider it appropriate, specifications of the methods, procedures and definitions used in collecting and preparing official statistics.

Ministerial Advisory Committee on Official Statistics (ACOS)

51. ACOS is representative of the wider statistical community, including users, producers and suppliers of official statistical information. Its purpose is to provide independent and reliable advice on official statistics to the Minister of Statistics and the Government.
52. The Minister of Statistics appoints members of ACOS, including the chair. Members are appointed as individuals, not as representatives of any particular organisation or interest group. The Government Statistician is an ex officio member. The Committee reports directly to the Minister of Statistics on the health of Tier 1 statistics and the appropriateness of standards, policies and protocols, with recommendations for change where necessary.

53. The Committee is currently chaired by the Hon David Caygill. There will be a membership review in 2009, as some members' terms expire towards the end of the year.

Statistics New Zealand organisation

54. Statistics New Zealand leads and maintains New Zealand's Official Statistics System. As the major player, it sets the tone and shapes the system so that New Zealand can have an informed society using official statistics. Statistics New Zealand is a core part of the institutions of government and works with others in the Official Statistics System to provide an essential part of the country's infrastructure.
55. The current Government Statistician is Geoff Bascand, who took up the role on 22 May 2007. Statistics New Zealand's Board consists of the Government Statistician and seven Deputy Government Statisticians who each head a particular organisational group. The Board's role is to set the organisation's strategic direction, monitor progress and make collective decisions based on good understandings of the required outcomes, sound evidence and robust debate.
56. Statistics New Zealand has about 800 core staff in offices in Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch, plus 150 field interviewers. Most work on tasks such as statistical developments, survey design, data collection and analysis, publishing statistics and reports and making the results accessible.
57. Customer service, contact centre and field staff have roles that directly connect them with New Zealanders through work on the collection, dissemination and use of official statistics. For example, household survey interviewers are stationed throughout the country, kaitakawaenga work with Maori communities and Pacific liaison officers work with Pacific communities.

Funding profile

58. Statistics New Zealand has one direct source of Crown funding – Vote Statistics – which has one Official Statistics Multi-class Output Appropriation. The rationale for this is that all its work contributes to the outcome of creating an informed society through official statistics.
59. A multi-year appropriation has also been created for the 2011 Census of Population and Dwellings, which provides for certainty in planning for the Census as a single programme over the five-year cycle.
60. Statistics New Zealand's funding profile fluctuates between years as a result of three factors:
- **surveys with cyclical activities** – some Statistics New Zealand outputs are not produced yearly, with corresponding increases or decreases in funding between years. Some surveys include regular revisions to methodology or structure, or activity may build up over a number of years. The most obvious example of a cycle is the five-

yearly census, while other surveys are run every second or third year, or have a boosted sample size from time to time

- **the level of third-party revenue** – this varies depending on the demand for statistics from third parties, as does the level of revenue generated by Statistics New Zealand from contracts to run specialised surveys for other government agencies. Third-party revenue is limited to recovering costs and is not a major revenue source
 - **funding for new initiatives** – in recent years additional funding has been provided to implement the Programme of Official Social Statistics and for the Making More Information Freely Available initiative. In the current year, Statistics New Zealand has received funding for productivity improvement and settlement of the collective agreement in relation to field collections. (Field collections deals with obtaining data by directly engaging with survey respondents throughout New Zealand.)
61. More information on Statistics New Zealand's financial profile can be found in the Statement of Intent 2008, the Budget's Estimates of Appropriations for the year ended 30 June 2009, and the Annual Report for the year ended 30 June 2008.

Other significant producers of Official Statistics

62. Most agencies, other than Statistics New Zealand, that produce official statistics do so based on their core work activities.
63. These official statistics generally come as extracts from the information systems that support the agencies' work. Examples are statistics on health, education and justice. They produce statistical reports on the characteristics and experiences of the populations covered by their work, and on the volumes and types of transaction and engagement with the public.
64. The relevant chief executives are responsible for producing and disseminating statistics produced by their agencies. Since the Official Statistics System was established, chief executives have supported and contributed to the development of principles and protocols for producers of Tier 1 statistics, and have agreed to produce their statistics in accordance with the principles and protocols.
65. Information systems designed to support administrative processes are also major sources of official statistics. The greater exploitation of these sources is a major strategic response to pressures on Statistics New Zealand to reduce the respondent burden from statistical surveys of businesses and individuals.
66. In recent years it has been possible to combine information from several different administrative systems to enable useful and powerful statistical

analyses and research. Statistics New Zealand is in a unique position to do this through both having the statistical skills for the work and its non-involvement with government administration that directly affects individuals and businesses.

For example, information from databases in agencies that deal with student loans has been combined to provide a rich resource on the nature of student debt, the type of people holding it and changes in it over time. The resource is an essential tool for estimating the technical valuation of the debt to the Crown for the Government's accounts. There is also the potential for further studies; for example, there is strong interest in comparative studies about students' subsequent employment experiences. The findings feed into policies and priorities in education and employment.

67. Some agencies also commission surveys that:

- undertake or enable substantial research programmes to inform their policy activities
- provide additional performance measures or facilitate public understanding generally.

Such surveys often provide information about a wider population than the results of analysing transactions in the administrative systems.

For example, the Ministry of Justice conducts crime victimisation surveys of the general population, of whom many might not be currently dealing with any part of the justice system. The topics covered in the surveys also include matters outside the formal systems, such as unreported crime. These surveys of the general public are necessary adjuncts to the statistical reports covering the specific sub-populations dealt with in administering justice in New Zealand.

Stakeholder relationships

68. The New Zealand Official Statistics System relies on collaboration between Statistics New Zealand and other government agencies. It also requires the support and involvement of businesses, government, the academic community and citizens. This is strengthened through contractual arrangements, memoranda of understanding, domain plans and a network of relationship managers. Regular engagement between the Government Statistician and chief executives of the Official Statistics System partners ensures an ongoing focus on strategic and operational issues to increase co-operation and collaboration.

69. Statistics New Zealand is well connected and respected internationally, including in Asia and the Pacific. It works closely with NZAid and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in New Zealand, the Australian

Bureau of Statistics, and regional and international organisations including:

- the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
- the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for South East Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)
- Eurostat
- the International Labour Organization (ILO)
- the International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- the Secretariat for the South Pacific (SPC).

70. Statistics New Zealand is an active member of the global statistical system and works with a number of international agencies and other national statistics offices to:

- influence the shape of the global statistical system
- ensure that New Zealand's statistical systems, frameworks, methods and supporting technology and people are informed by and reflect international best practice
- support selected countries (particularly developing countries in the Pacific) to produce statistics.

Other government agencies

71. Statistics New Zealand consults and works closely with many government agencies when producing key economic and social statistics, and in collecting and integrating administrative data.

72. In recent years, cross-government collaboration has been more important in the production of new statistics. The relationship with Inland Revenue is particularly crucial, as tax data underpins modern economic statistics.

For example, Statistics New Zealand is facilitating a research programme with agencies including the Ministry of Social Development, the Treasury and the Department of Labour, which focuses on labour market dynamics and outcomes. A major resource for these studies is the LEED (Linked Employer Employee Database), which is largely sourced from tax information and draws on Statistics New Zealand's business classification information.

73. The Government Statistician often consults other public service chief executives on issues of common interest. Additionally, Statistics New Zealand's work is guided and informed by four advisory committees:

- the Advisory Committee on Economic Statistics
 - the Official Statistics System Officials Committee
 - the Programme of Official Social Statistics Advisory Group
 - the Maori Statistics Advisory Committee.
74. In addition to these major advisory groups, specific projects within Statistics New Zealand are guided by stakeholder groups.
75. The Minister of Statistics receives independent advice from ACOS.

Statistics' users

76. Statistics New Zealand consults closely with many statistics' users and user communities to monitor their changing requirements. It:
- works closely with businesses to provide services that will help their productivity
 - liaises with users to obtain their input and monitor their reaction to the level of surveying
 - consults regularly with statistics' users about the ways Statistics New Zealand provides information in order to ensure the website, publications and other statistical products are meeting their needs.
77. Statistics New Zealand maintains contact through a variety of mechanisms, including informal networks, advisory committees, partnerships, seminar and conference participation and client forums.

The public

78. Statistics New Zealand communicates with the public in a range of ways, including through the Statistics New Zealand website, print publications, the customer services team (the Information Centre), consultation forums and the media.
79. It enjoys active and positive relations with news media, which facilitate public access and knowledge of key statistical information.
80. Its field staff interact with many individuals and communities, and are a significant public face of the organisation.

Maori

81. Statistics New Zealand's Maori Statistics Strategy is being reworked to ensure it is in the best possible position to meet Maori statistical needs.
82. The organisation has been working on this with the newly formed external Maori Statistics Advisory Committee.
83. The Official Statistics System will deliver outcomes for both Maori and government decision-making processes, through five streams of work that will:

- promote the Maori Statistics Framework to be accepted and used within the Official Statistics System
 - lead production and delivery of high quality, relevant and fit for purpose statistics for and about Maori
 - implement and promote a Maori Responsiveness Forum within Statistics New Zealand to support staff in producing and disseminating high quality and relevant data used by Maori
 - build strong relationships with Stakeholders/Maori to ensure that they and Statistics New Zealand have a high level of awareness of the value and use of statistics for and about Maori
 - build strong partnerships between Statistics New Zealand and Maori which will contribute to building each other's statistical capability through joint projects.
84. Statistics New Zealand will be conducting a Maori Social Statistics Survey, which will be a key resource in responding to Maori issues.