How people become citizens

There are three main ways of becoming a New Zealand citizen – by birth, by descent, or by grant.

Most people born in New Zealand or its territories (including the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau).

People born overseas to a New Zealand citizen parent (provided the parent is not a citizen by descent). However, under section 9(1)(b) of the Citizenship Act, the Minister of Internal Affairs can grant citizenship to the child of a citizen by descent. This provides an option to those born overseas to a citizen by descent who have strong links to New Zealand.

Citizens by grant are migrants to New Zealand who have successfully applied for, and received, the grant of New Zealand citizenship. A person who received his or her permanent residence on or after 21 April 2005 needs to have lived in New Zealand as a permanent resident for most of the previous five years before applying for citizenship. A person who received his or her permanent residence before 21 April 2005 needed to have lived in New Zealand before applying for citizenship for most of the previous three years.

A citizen by grant is someone who has usually come to New Zealand from another country and has successfully applied to become a New Zealand citizen.
Realm of New Zealand

New Zealand is an independent sovereign nation. Because it is a monarchy, New Zealand is called a “Realm.” The Realm of New Zealand comprises New Zealand, Tokelau, the Ross Dependency and the self-governing states of the Cook Islands and Niue.

The Cook Islands and Niue were formerly a part of New Zealand, and are now self-governing, in free association with New Zealand. When they became self-governing, each adopted constitutions that empowered the Sovereign ‘in Right of New Zealand’, and each remained part of ‘the Realm of New Zealand’. Tokelau is a New Zealand dependent territory and also part of the Realm of New Zealand.

Samoan citizens

Samoan citizens may be considered for the grant of New Zealand citizenship under the Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act 1982. Under this Act, applicants only need to fulfil the requirements that they have entered New Zealand lawfully and have the right to reside here indefinitely, or that they were physically present in New Zealand on 14 September 1982. Applicants under this Act do not have to meet any other standard grant requirements such as good character, a minimum period of residence in New Zealand and a sufficient knowledge of the English language.

The different requirements afforded to Samoan citizens under this Act reflect the special relationship between New Zealand and Samoa (New Zealand administered Western Samoa, as it was then called, from 1914 until it gained independence in 1962).