General criteria for the grant of New Zealand citizenship

Anyone can apply to become a New Zealand citizen by grant but to be granted New Zealand citizenship a person must meet the requirements of the law. This is set out in Acts of Parliament: the Citizenship Act 1977 or, if the person is Samoan, the Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act 1982.

Under the Citizenship Act 1977 the Minister of Internal Affairs can grant New Zealand citizenship if applicants:

- are able to understand and speak English;
- are of good character and have not been convicted of certain criminal offences;
- understand the responsibilities and privileges of New Zealand citizenship;
- intend, if granted citizenship, to continue to live in New Zealand;
- are legally entitled to live in New Zealand permanently (i.e. are a permanent resident or an Australian citizen); and
- have lived in New Zealand for most of five years.

If a person is unable to fulfil all of the general requirements, they may still be granted citizenship in rare circumstances.

What does intend to continue to live in New Zealand mean?

A person must intend, if granted New Zealand citizenship, to continue to reside in New Zealand. This intention must continue up until the point of becoming a citizen – usually by attending a citizenship ceremony.

There are some exceptions to this intention requirement, however, such as people who are going to go overseas because they will be undertaking:

- Crown service for the New Zealand Government; or
- service for an international organisation of which the New Zealand Government is a member; or
- service in the employment of a person, company, society or other body of persons resident or established in New Zealand.

The purpose of the intention requirement is to ensure that applicants have a commitment to remaining in New Zealand, although people are, of course, free to leave New Zealand once granted citizenship.

What does of good character mean?

If someone has broken the law (for example, things such as traffic offences or benefit fraud), this may indicate they are not of good character. Other things such as protection orders and debts with government agencies can also be taken into account. Checks are made with the Police about applicants’ backgrounds.
Presence in New Zealand

One of the requirements for the grant of New Zealand citizenship is that the applicant is entitled to reside permanently in New Zealand.

This requirement is sometimes called the presence in New Zealand requirement. The overall purpose of this presence requirement is to ensure that those who are granted citizenship have a genuine connection to New Zealand. The presence requirement also provides a sufficient period of time for applicants to learn English and gain an understanding of the New Zealand way of life.

Prior to 21 April 2005 the requirement was that applicants had to have lived in New Zealand for most of the last three years. However, in 2005, Parliament changed the presence requirement from three to five years. One of the reasons for this was to ensure that all applicants reside in New Zealand for long enough to demonstrate their commitment to the country and suitability for a grant of citizenship.

What does able to understand and speak English mean?

A person must have enough knowledge of the English language to demonstrate they can manage independently in everyday situations, for example catching a bus, going into a bank or shopping. They may be asked to attend an English language interview to assess this. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure that successful applicants for the grant of citizenship have sufficient language skills to cope in the community.

The Kiwi is known throughout the world as a symbol of New Zealand but it has no official status.