Most applicants over 14 years old must attend a public citizenship ceremony where they take the Oath or Affirmation of Allegiance. Those under 14 years old may attend a ceremony if they wish. Sometimes permission is given in special circumstances for a private ceremony, for example when the person granted citizenship is old or unwell.

The first citizenship ceremony was held in 1949, with the establishment by law of New Zealand citizenship to replace the old “British subject” category. But old habits die hard, and until 1996, citizens from Commonwealth countries with which New Zealand shared the monarch were exempt from attending ceremonies. They just had to register. Now, no matter where someone comes from the grant of citizenship is not finalised until they attend a citizenship ceremony.

Right from the start, the ceremonies created an opportunity to involve the community and its local leaders in welcoming new citizens. Mayors often take the lead in the ceremonies and organisation is a matter for local decision-making. The Department of Internal Affairs is also represented, but plays a secondary role. Depending on the area, a ceremony can involve hundreds of people, or as few as one new citizen.

The key step is taking an oath or affirmation of allegiance. In New Zealand law an oath is a statement which invokes a god or spiritual forces. Those who choose can instead make an affirmation, which is a purely secular statement. Each has the same status in law. Each means that from then on the person making the oath or affirmation has a duty of loyalty to New Zealand, as represented by the nation’s head of state.

Apart from this step, and the signing of the oath or affirmation and the distribution of certificates, all other parts of the ceremony are decided by the local authority. Usually, the mayor will make a speech outlining the significance of the event. Very often the mayor will encourage activity in the local community and local politics. There may be a significant role played by tāngata whenua, Māori people with standing in the area or in council affairs. Māori speeches or words of welcome and Māori songs or waiata will link the event back in time to the first generations which called New Zealand home. It is always appropriate, and respectful, to ask Māori leaders questions about the meaning and significance of their words and actions. Although they may be entertaining, there is always a deeper meaning which adds to the mana or prestige of the event and the people taking part. The national anthem is sung, after which there may be some light refreshments and a chance to mingle.

Several of the people interviewed for this book mention the emotional impact of the ceremony, and New Zealanders who attend are often surprised at the way the ceremonies raise their own feelings of pride in our nation, its heritage and future.