



Carers' Strategy Action Plan Submission

March 2026

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Arthritis NZ

Arthritis NZ has been providing services and support to people affected by arthritis since 1966. Today, our services include the provision of our helpline called Arthritis Assist, which manages a range of issues that people living with arthritis experience. We also run online events (webinars, podcasts and workshops) led by experts on arthritis management and work with health professionals and organisations such as Pharmac, Health NZ, the New Zealand Rheumatology Association and physiotherapists who provide healthcare and services that support people living with arthritis.

The 2024/25 NZ Health Survey estimates approximately 860,000 people are living with one or more forms of arthritis (including osteoarthritis, gout arthritis and autoimmune inflammatory arthritis), and more than one in three people who report an arthritis diagnosis also report living with a disability. Consumers of our services include people who require support from informal or formal carers, and may also be carers themselves¹.

As an organisation that supports people living with arthritis we engage with carers who develop osteoarthritis (OA) as a result of the requirements of their occupation. This includes carers whose duties involve lifting and other physically demanding actions. We are acutely aware of the difficulties in obtaining treatment that they need to continue their work as carers. This issue is raised regularly by consumers in phone calls to our Arthritis Assist line and in our arthritis support groups on social media.

The purpose of the Arthritis NZ submission on the Draft Carers' Strategy Rolling Action Plan is to:

1. Support the submission from the Carers' Alliance
2. Provide further comment on issues that impact the people Arthritis NZ supports.

Arthritis NZ supports a rolling Action Plan because it allows the strategy to adapt to changing needs. However, clear accountability, measurable outcomes, transparent reporting, and defined review timeframes will be essential to ensure the Action Plan delivers meaningful progress.

There is a need for stronger practical outcomes (not just consultation), to reduce the risk of frustration at repeated consultation without meaningful change.

Consultation Questions

Question 1: What do you think of the change to a 'rolling' Action Plan to improve outcomes for carers over the short- and long-term?

Arthritis NZ agrees with the proposal for a rolling plan that can enable reviews and change priorities. This approach will only be effective if there is clear accountability, regular reporting of progress, and defined review timeframes.

However, there are also the risks that this form of plan could also be detrimental to carers if:

¹ Ministry of Health. (2024). *Annual Update of Key Results 2023/24: New Zealand Health Survey*. Wellington: Ministry of Health

- themes are not developed with the support of the sector.
- does not have review periods.

Question 2: Do you think the set of immediate deliverables are an appropriate first step towards achieving the Action Plan outcomes? How could we make this more effective for you?

We support the priorities as appropriate first steps toward achieving the Action Plan outcomes, however they do not convey enough detail for us to have a clear view of what deliverables will be achieved.

Without a review timeframe for development and implementation of the Action Plan (with the exception of the launch of a National Carers Appreciation Day in 2026), the strategy is built on trust that future guardians of the plan will continue with the intention to improve the lives of carers, and by extension, the lives of the people they care for. We see the involvement of the community of carers, and incorporating what works already as key to effective actions.

Question 3: How can government work with communities to implement the Action Plan in the short, medium and long term?

We agree with the Carers Alliance recommendation of implementing a national working group to oversee timely Carers' Strategy Action Plan updates and implementation of deliverables.

Several of the deliverables do not provide confidence that they can practically guide the implementation of policy that will improve the wellbeing of carers and the people they care for.

Section 1: Recognition and Appreciation

Public awareness and outreach

While welcome, a National Carers Appreciation Day is unlikely to materially improve carers' circumstances without accompanying practical initiatives. We consider this is the least important action that is listed in the draft action plan strategy.

Cultural safety and relevant services

An equity perspective with regard for sustainable partnerships with iwi and priority communities is a key factor in Arthritis NZ stakeholder relationships. We therefore strongly support the consideration of cultural safety in providing targeted and culturally appropriate services to different carer groups, including te ao Māori, and the integration of cultural concepts that will improve the delivery and promotion of existing services for carers, family, whānau, and aiga.

Services are accessible and easy to navigate

We consider targeted approaches for improving service access and navigation for carers, and frontline staff, an essential component of a Carers' strategy action plan. We look forward to reviewing the targeted approaches that will be developed. We would like to see specific mention of approaches for carers and the people they care for who are not computer literate.

Section 2: Health and Wellbeing: Health and wellbeing outcomes are equitable between carers and non-carers

Respite and taking a break from caring

Arthritis NZ strongly supports initiatives that improve access to respite care and clearer information about available options. We support efforts to promote the availability, diversity and flexibility of respite services and recommend carers and the organisations that support them be involved in developing information and resources.

Carers' needs are considered early and fully

Arthritis NZ supports actions to provide targeted and culturally appropriate assistance and proactive early support to carers, including through the health and disability workforce, care assessments, social services, learning and educational environments and strengthening community pathways to better support frontline professionals to direct and refer carers, family, whānau, and aiga.

Section 3: Financial Security: More responsive financial supports and improved educational and employment pathways to enable carers to meet their needs and plan for the future

Arthritis NZ strongly supports a review of financial assistance and levels of support for carers that recognises gaps and inconsistencies in assistance, and provides options where the outcome will improve carers' financial wellbeing.

We are cautious of the framing of these supports in terms of fiscal sustainability, where other sections that will require spending are not explicitly subjected to this qualification in the strategy, and suggest this phrase be removed.

Employment and education pathways for carers

We support the removal of barriers for carers who wish to take on paid employment and/or education and training opportunities. We support actions that formally recognise the skills that carers have attained in their caring role.

We appreciate recognition that the paid work, or education leading to paid work, is not appropriate for all carers and should not be an expectation that carers seek paid employment.

While we recognise the role of employers in providing supports for carers, Arthritis NZ is concerned that employer obligations do not become a disincentive for employers to take on carers paid employment outside of their carer role, and that carers are not obliged to seek employment outside of their carer role where that would create an unreasonable burden on disabled people and the carers who support them.

We have concerns that recognition of existing supports and the work already completed by non-government agencies should not be used by government to reduce its own commitment to financial and practical support for carers and the people they care for and should be a funded enhancement to government obligation financial security and accessible services.

Summary

Recognition and appreciation

While recognition is valued, carers consistently prioritise practical improvements over symbolic initiatives such as a national awareness day.

Health and wellbeing

Arthritis NZ supports national outreach to assess the availability, diversity, flexibility, and importance of respite and break options. We support the Carers Alliance in their recommendation that a national carers' survey be used to identify priorities and guide improvements in carers' health and wellbeing outcomes.

- Respite is critical but is currently seen as confusing.
- Policy changes create uncertainty.
- Access is inconsistent
- Carers in complex or long-term roles are at higher risk of burnout.

Financial Security

Arthritis NZ considers financial security a long-standing issue and supports a comprehensive review of existing financial assistance to identify gaps and inconsistencies, followed by concrete actions developed with carer input.

Implementation concerns

- The draft Action Plan lacks specific agency actions and timelines.
- Agencies need clearer accountability across sectors (health, disability, education, employment).
- Real progress requires investment, not just policy statements.

Data, monitoring, and governance

Arthritis NZ supports developing a monitoring and reporting framework and building government capacity to improve services over time. This framework needs to be explicitly linked to

- a. moves to improve funding options
- b. the results of the national carers survey

We strongly support:

- A measurable monitoring framework
- Better use of existing data (avoid duplication)
- Partnership governance between government and carers
- Commitment to regular updates on progress and continued involvement of carers in setting future priorities

Key recommendations

Arthritis NZ recommends that the Action Plan:

1. **Include clear accountability and reporting mechanisms**, including defined timelines for review and public reporting of progress.
2. **Prioritise practical improvements for carers**, particularly access to respite services and clearer information about available supports.
3. **Improve service navigation**, including options for carers and care recipients who are not digitally confident.
4. **Undertake a national carers survey** to identify priorities and guide future improvements.
5. **Review financial assistance and support systems for carers**, including benefit rules, employment pathways, and financial security in retirement.
6. **Improve information and referral pathways through frontline services** to ensure carers are identified early and connected with support.
7. **Establish a monitoring and governance framework**, including partnership with carers and organisations that support them.

Without these inclusions to the strategy, carers risk continued consultation without meaningful change.

Arthritis NZ appreciates the opportunity to submit on the Draft Carers Strategy and the work by the Carers Alliance in producing a detailed submission that our submission supports.