

In Confidence

Office of the Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment

Cabinet Social Outcomes Committee

Initial agreement to the draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan and progression to public consultation

Proposal

- 1 This paper seeks initial agreement to the draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan (the draft Action Plan) and notes my intent to progress this draft for public consultation from November 2025 - February 2026.

Relation to government priorities

- 2 Carers are individuals, families, whānau, and aiga who support loved ones with a disability, health condition, illness, or injury to live everyday lives. Their contributions support the Government's priority to reduce the need for more intensive services, such as health care, Disability Support Services, and residential care.
- 3 Other government priorities relevant for the Carers' Strategy Action Plan are better public services; ensuring fairer, consistent and more sustainable access to services for people with the greatest need; and fiscal responsibility.

Executive Summary

- 4 The contributions of carers are recognised through the New Zealand Carers' Strategy (Carers' Strategy) – a whole-of-government strategy whose vision is to ensure that “New Zealand Aotearoa is a society that values people who support others who need assistance with their everyday living”. The Carers' Strategy has been implemented through three multi-year Action Plans, and the most recent Action Plan expired at the end of 2023. Progress to date toward the Carers' Strategy has been limited.
- 5 I have worked alongside my Ministerial colleagues to develop a new draft rolling Action Plan, which provides a long-term framework to address systemic challenges faced by carers over time. The draft Action Plan focuses on three priority areas: **Recognition and Appreciation**, **Health and Wellbeing**, and **Financial Security**. A separate priority on **Data and Information** is also included to support implementation and monitoring of progress of the draft Action Plan.
- 6 I request that Cabinet:
 - approve the draft Action Plan in principle, pending a report back by May 2026 with a final Action Plan;
 - agree that public consultation take place over the period of November 2025-February 2026, enabling me to hear directly from carers as well as wider stakeholders on this new approach.

Background

- 7 Carers are people that provide informal or unpaid care for someone close to them who needs assistance with their everyday living because of a disability, health condition, illness, or injury. Not everyone will identify as a carer, as many people consider caring to be an inherent part of family responsibilities and love. Some Māori, Pacific and ethnic communities provide care as part of a collective cultural responsibility,
- 8 Carers' roles and responsibilities range from providing social support to short-term or more complex long-term care. Their work enables people to manage their health needs at home and in their community. Carers, however, experience multiple challenges, including financial insecurity; higher rates of depression, anxiety and/or loneliness; and lower levels of physical health compared to the general population ¹.

I am leading work to better support, value, and recognise the value and importance of carers

- 9 To better support, value, and recognise the importance of carers, the Carers' Strategy was launched in 2008 in partnership with the Carers Alliance, a collective of over 60 non-governmental organisations concerned with the needs of family, whānau, and aiga carers. The Carers' Strategy is a whole-of-government strategy with a vision to ensure that "New Zealand Aotearoa is a society that values individuals, families, whānau, and aiga who support others who need assistance with their everyday living."
- 10 The Strategy has been implemented through three multi-year Action Plans that outlined individual agencies' commitments. The most recent Action Plan, Mahi Aroha Carers' Strategy Action Plan 2019-2023 (Mahi Aroha), expired at the end of 2023.
- 11 As the responsible Minister, I have worked closely with officials from the Ministry for Social Development to propose a new direction to Cabinet to ensure that the vision of the Carers' Strategy is fulfilled.

Analysis

The Carers' Strategy provides an existing framework for government action to support carers, but progress to date has been limited

- 12 Since the launch of the Carers' Strategy, progress was made in some key areas:
 - In 2023, Health NZ made changes to the Carer Support Subsidy, which included increasing the national daily rate to at least \$80 and increasing the flexibility for carers to use the Subsidy for respite;
 - The Office for Seniors has implemented a Digital Literacy Training initiative that aims to support older people, including older carers, to improve access, knowledge, and use of online tools;
 - Collaboration between government agencies and the Carers' Alliance has led to improved data and research on carers, including publishing of 'The State of Caring in Aotearoa' (2022) and 'The economic contributions and sacrifices of unpaid family, whānau and aiga carers in New Zealand' (2022).

¹ *The State of Caring in Aotearoa*, Synergia, August 2022

- 13 Overall, progress in implementing previous Action Plans, particularly for Mahi Aroha commitments, has been slow. As such, many of the systemic challenges carers experienced 17 years ago continue today, and some have been exacerbated by recent economic and social developments.
- 14 For example, high inflation has affected the affordability of products and supplies (e.g., continence products) and services that carers may use. This has added to greater financial insecurity for carers, many of whom are more likely to work part-time or forego employment. In 2018, 5.1% of carers were unemployed compared to 3.9% of the total adult population; 17% of carers worked part-time compared to 14%; and 46% of carers worked full-time compared to 50%. The differences in employment have resulted in an estimated loss of \$1,536m in employment revenue per annum, of which 97.3% is in lost earnings, 2.2% from lost employer Kiwisaver contributions (based on a 3% contribution), and 0.5% from lost government contributions ².

Carers will be playing more vital roles as new pressures emerge

- 15 In the five years between the previous two Censuses, the number of carers has increased by 10%. The 2023 Census identified approximately 472,000 New Zealanders provided unpaid care, an increase from 430,000 in 2018. This statistic, however, likely underreports the actual number of carers, as care relationships may change regularly and some people (particularly Māori, Pacific, and young people) may not identify with the term “carer”.
- 16 I anticipate that demand for carers will intensify over the coming years. As Treasury’s long-term financial statement from September 2025 noted, New Zealand’s population is increasing and ageing; people are living longer and with multiple disabilities and long-term health conditions; and more people, including those who are young or working-age, are being diagnosed with a health condition or disability.
- 17 The work of carers is of significant social and economic value to New Zealand. For the people receiving care, they tend to have better health and wellbeing outcomes. Research from the UK, for instance, has shown that people who are able to receive care in their own or a loved one’s home live between 12 to 41 months longer than those in residential care or a rest home ³. In addition, people living at home report having better wellbeing outcomes due to more social contact, higher activity levels, and higher exposure to daylight and the outdoors.
- 18 Carers’ contributions also extend to broader society. With an estimated 7.9 unpaid carers for every nurse and 9.6 unpaid carers for every aged-care and disability sector care provider, carers help to reduce the need for more intensive government services (e.g. healthcare, Disability Support Services, residential care, injury support services). Despite many not being paid for their work, carers provide a significant economic contribution, which was estimated to be \$17.6 billion in 2022 ⁴.

² *The economic contribution and sacrifices of unpaid family, whānau and aiga carers in New Zealand*, Infometrics, November 2022

³ *Life Expectancy in Nursing Homes*, Robert J. Brent, October 2021; *Life expectancy in care homes, England and Wales: 2021 to 2022*, UK Office of Statistics, March 2023

⁴ Infometrics, November 2022

The situation requires a refreshed approach that takes a long-term view

- 19 With new societal pressures emerging and carers continuing to encounter longstanding issues, I propose that a new Action Plan more directly address these challenges, namely prioritising recognition and appreciation of the roles and contributions of carers; their ongoing health and wellbeing challenges, such as poor mental health and loneliness; and carers' financial insecurity and material hardship.
- 20 To demonstrate the Government's continued support for carers, I considered proceeding with the Carers' Strategy through either renewing the expired Mahi Aroha Action Plan or maintaining the current approach of agency-led efforts. I decided that neither option provided an appropriate response based on the issues identified with implementation of previous Action Plans, which included:
 - Large numbers of agency-specific commitments, which often progressed slowly and were not directly linked to specific outcomes;
 - Previous commitments tended to reiterate work that agencies were already doing (e.g., updating public information, engaging community-level organisations);
 - An absence of clear accountability mechanisms, including monitoring, reporting, and evaluation approaches, to track tangible progress on actions;
 - A lack of ongoing, dedicated funding to implement the Action Plans.

I am leading development of a new, rolling Action Plan to support carers

- 21 I propose the next Carers' Strategy Action Plan should be an ongoing 'rolling' plan that provides a long-term framework to address systemic challenges faced by carers over time and is updated regularly instead of being timebound. The rolling Action Plan will set ambitious outcomes and lay out roadmaps against which government and partners will make steady progress. The approach builds initial momentum through 'early wins', with immediate deliverables focused on strengthening the knowledge and evidence base to inform options for future action.
- 22 A flexible approach will support the diversity of carers and care work, and recognise that carers' experiences and needs are shaped by many factors, including:
 - **Young carers**, who are more likely to live in intergenerational households and in households experiencing material hardship or deprivation, and often balance caring with education, work and personal development;
 - **Older carers** and **disabled carers**, who may have specific health needs and require additional support;
 - **Māori and Pacific carers** and **carers from ethnic communities**, who may have specific cultural needs for carer supports and may face language barriers which make navigating existing services more difficult;
 - **Female carers**, who make up around two-thirds of people providing unpaid care;
 - **Carers in rural areas**, who have fewer support services available locally and may need to travel for support;
 - **Carers who are working age** and may require additional support to continue working and earning.

Success of the Action Plan requires a whole-of-government effort

- 23 In April of this year, I met with Ministers with responsibilities for Social Development and Employment, Disability Issues, Child Poverty Reduction, Seniors, Children, Youth Development, and ACC to discuss next steps for the Carers' Strategy and shared my proposal to develop a rolling Action Plan, and they agreed with the proposed approach. I have since written to other Ministers – including those with responsibilities for Health, Education, Māori Development, and Pacific Peoples – to inform them of this work.
- 24 Officials from across government have worked closely with the Carers Alliance and a Carers Advisory Group (consisting of representatives of the Carers Alliance and other non-governmental organisations that work with and support carers) to build consensus on the direction for the new draft Action Plan, alongside development of specific outcomes, actions and immediate deliverables that form the steps in this pathway.
- 25 I also acknowledge that the Carers' Strategy vision for carers cannot happen through government action alone. Support, value, and recognition of carers is needed at all levels – across government services and supports; businesses and employers; national and community organisations; families, whānau, aiga, communities, iwi and hapū and all New Zealanders. Providing a strong core framework for government support, as described through the proposed draft Action Plan, allows community recognition and support for carers to be scaffolded and strengthened.
- 26 The draft Action Plan materials for Cabinet consideration consists of:
 - The draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan - A3 summary at **Appendix 1**.
 - The draft Carers' Action Plan Narrative at **Appendix 2**. This slide deck provides fuller information on the Action Plan background and priority areas and will be used to inform public consultation materials on the draft Action Plan.

The draft Action Plan focuses on three key priority areas

- 27 Following advice from the Carers Alliance and the Carers Advisory Group, the draft Action Plan focuses on a few priority areas that make a material difference for carers over time and address complex, longstanding challenges. They are **Recognition and Appreciation**, **Health and Wellbeing**, and **Financial Security**, and each priority area includes a set of key outcomes and immediate deliverables. In addition, a separate priority on **Data and Information** is included to support the implementation and monitoring of progress of the Action Plan. Table 1 provides a summary.
- 28 The immediate deliverables identified in the draft Action Plan have been designed with consideration of the current direction on fiscal sustainability, are scalable to available resourcing, and require no new funding at this time. Immediate deliverables also emphasise interagency collaboration, recognising that joint efforts are needed to strengthen the evidence base and develop shared approaches to improve supports and services to carers. The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) will lead coordination and oversight of this work to ensure that progress is made.

Table 1: Summary of draft Action Plan priority areas and immediate deliverables

Priority area	Outcomes	Immediate deliverables
Recognition and Appreciation	Carers are valued and the support they require is recognised and protected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> launch a national Carers' Appreciation Day. consider how cultural safety can be better integrated into the delivery and promotion of existing services for carers. explore targeted approaches for improving service access and navigation for carers.
Health and Wellbeing	Health and wellbeing outcomes are equitable between carers and non-carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promote the availability, diversity, flexibility and importance of respite and break options for carers, and what these mean for carers. establish a national picture and assess current levels of available respite services and options. expand community pathways to support front-line professionals (e.g., GPs, NASCs⁵) to refer carers to appropriate supports and networks.
Financial Security	More responsive financial supports and improved educational and employment pathways to enable carers to meet their needs and plan for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a picture of available financial assistance, focusing on levels of support and coverage and analysis on any gaps and inconsistencies. map out the potential pathways available to different carers, family, whānau, and aiga. develop an understanding of the supports provided by employers to carers to inform potential government actions.
Data and information	Improved monitoring and data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a monitoring and reporting framework. develop a government data and evidence strategy.

I propose public consultation on the draft Action Plan following Cabinet decisions

- 29 While the Carers Alliance and Carers' Strategy Advisory Group have been closely involved in developing the draft Action Plan, I seek Cabinet's agreement to launch public consultation on the draft Action Plan over the period November 2024 - February 2026. I have developed the fourth Carers' Strategy Action Plan: Consultation Plan (Consultation Plan) at **Appendix 3** to engage more families, whānau, aiga, individuals, and wider stakeholders (e.g., people receiving care).
- 30 The Consultation Plan provides a high-level overview of the engagement to date on the development of the draft Action Plan, outlines the objectives of the consultation process (e.g., to give carers and wider stakeholders opportunities for feedback on the draft Action Plan), and contains a preliminary outline of possible channels, networks, and stakeholders to engage with for targeted engagement.
- 31 The Consultation Plan was developed in partnership with the Carers Alliance, drawing on their extensive networks of charitable and non-governmental

⁵ Needs Assessment Services Coordinators

organisations that support and represent carers. Carers Alliance organisations and other partners and stakeholders, including some agencies, will help promote and, in some instances, facilitate consultations to reach as many carers as possible.

- 32 I propose that the final draft **Action Plan A3 summary (Appendix 1)** be published for comment during public consultation, pending editorial, proofing and/or accessibility changes at the discretion of MSD.
- 33 I propose that content from **Appendix 1** and **Appendix 2** may be adapted for different audiences while developing additional public consultation materials (e.g., translation into alternate formats or development of survey questions) at the discretion of MSD.

I seek Cabinet support to progress the draft Action Plan

- 34 I consider the draft Action Plan provides a clear, realistic, and fiscally responsible approach to addressing the longstanding challenges faced by carers while demonstrating continued government leadership. I request that Cabinet:
- approve the draft Action Plan in principle, pending a report back by May 2026 with a final Action Plan
 - agree that public consultation will take place over the period November 2025-February 2026, enabling me to hear directly from family, whānau, aiga and individual carers, as well as wider stakeholders, on this new approach.

Implementation

- 35 In my report back to Cabinet in May 2026, I will provide details on how the Action Plan will be implemented. In addition, I will provide further advice on proposed governance structures to oversee the administration and future priority setting for the rolling Action Plan as well as on how, if applicable, work to strengthen the Care Safety System intersects with efforts to better support unpaid and informal carers.

Cost-of-living Implications

- 36 There are no identified cost-of-living implications of this proposal.

Financial Implications

- 37 The immediate costs of public consultation on the draft Action Plan will be funded from the ongoing annual Carers' Strategy budget of \$80,000/annum.
- 38 Immediate implementation of the Action Plan is expected to be undertaken within resourcing available from within agencies' baselines; therefore, no new Budget funding will be required in the short term.
- 39 Funding is likely to be required in future years should Ministers introduce new, or expand existing, programmes and services for carers as a result of recommendations made under exploratory policy work described in the draft Action Plan. Any future funding requests will be considered through the annual Budget process.

Legislative Implications

40 There are no immediate legislative implications of this proposal.

Impact Analysis

Regulatory Impact Statement

41 The Ministry for Regulation has been consulted, and the proposal has been determined to not be subject to regulatory impact analysis requirements as there are no legislative implications of the proposal.

Climate Implications of Policy Assessment

42 The Climate Implications of Policy Assessment (CIPA) team has been consulted and confirms that the CIPA requirements do not apply to this policy proposal, as it is in the discussion document stage. The CIPA team will be consulted again when the proposal reaches a later stage, at which point a CIPA assessment may be prepared.

Population Implications

43 The proposals resulting from the draft Action Plan commitments are likely to benefit carers, care recipients, and wider households, including for these population groups.

Population group	How the proposal may affect this group ⁶
Māori	~16.7% of unpaid carers are Māori. Māori are more likely to be disabled, young or working age, and/or provide high intensity care in areas of high social deprivation ⁷ .
Pacific people	~7.6% of unpaid carers are Pacific people, who are also more likely to be young carers.
Ethnic communities	~8.1% of unpaid carers are Asian, ~1% identify as Middle Eastern/Latin American/African, and ~1.3% are other ethnicities.
Women	~61.7% of unpaid family carers are women, who likely spend significantly more time on unpaid care work.
Disabled people	The State of Caring 2022 found 25% of unpaid family carers provided care for intellectually disabled people ⁸ . While not all disabled people receive unpaid care, some benefit from one of multiple carers throughout life. ~19% of unpaid carers have a disability or health condition.
Older people	Nearly 50% of carers provide care for older people ⁹ . There is limited data on numbers of older carers, which may benefit from further investigation.
Children and young people	One in five 12-year-olds have provided unpaid care to someone older than them ¹⁰ . There is limited data on the composition of and challenges faced by young carers in New Zealand, which may benefit from further investigation.
Rural communities	Rural carers face additional challenges, such as limited access to support.

⁶ Unless otherwise cited, data in this table primarily was derived from: Stats NZ. (2023). *2023 Census*. [Dataset] [Unpaid Care MSD] MSD.

⁷ Yao, E. S., Evans, R. J., Bullen, P. (2023). *Young Carers in the Growing Up in New Zealand Cohort at 12-Years: MSD Bespoke Report*. MSD.

⁸ Synergia. (2022). *The State of Caring: A report for Carers NZ and the Carers Alliance*.

⁹ Synergia. (2022).

¹⁰ Yao, E. S., Evans, R. J., Bullen, P. (2023).

Human Rights

- 44 No human rights implications have been identified.

Use of external Resources

- 45 An Advisory Group consisting of members selected from the Carers' Alliance membership was resourced to provide expertise and insights into the lived experiences of carers to develop the draft Action Plan.

Consultation

- 46 The following agencies and Crown entities were consulted in the preparation of this proposal: the Ministry for Social Development, Ministry of Health, Health New Zealand, Ministry of Disabled People | Whaikaha, Accident Compensation Corporation, Te Puni Kokiri | Ministry of Māori Development, Ministry of Education, Oranga Tamariki | Ministry for Children, Ministry for Youth Development, Ministry for Pacific Peoples, Ministry for Women, the Treasury and the Social Investment Agency. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has been informed.
- 47 The listed agencies and Crown entities have confirmed their support for the paper and the agency commitments as listed against each action at **Appendix 1**. Departmental feedback has been considered and addressed where appropriate throughout this paper and in the draft Action Plan and Consultation Plan.
- 48 Further agencies and Crown entities (e.g., Ministry for the Environment, Department of Corrections, the Executive Board for the Elimination of Family Violence and Sexual Violence) may be consulted, where appropriate, as the Action Plan is finalised and should common areas of interest be identified.
- 49 The Carers Alliance and the Carers' Advisory Group were engaged in the preparation of this proposal. The Carers' Alliance has provided the following statement:

“The Carers Alliance is pleased to be continuing its role as a partner to develop a new Carers' Strategy Action Plan. We support the focus on a small number of long-term outcomes that reflect the priorities identified by carers over the years. We are particularly pleased to see the focus on valuing the role that carers play, the diversity of carers and the supports they need, and that carers should not be disadvantaged by choosing to care which may lead to poorer health or lower incomes than those who choose not to care for others.

We also support the immediate focus on a small number of tangible actions that will benefit carers in the immediate short term which can be monitored and measured, as well as the shift to a rolling action plan to build momentum over time. We know that there will be keen interest from our communities in this draft Action Plan and are ready to support and engage in the consultation process.”

Communications

- 50 Public consultation on the draft Action Plan will be launched on 17 November 2025 following agreement to the recommendations below. The launch will be

communicated through established agency and partner channels, including social media, newsletters, and/or community media sources as available budget permits.

Proactive Release

- 51 I intend to release the Cabinet paper proactively within 30 business days of decisions being confirmed by Cabinet.

Recommendations

The Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment recommends that the Committee:

- 1 note that the draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan has been developed in partnership with relevant agencies, the Carers Alliance, and the Carers' Advisory Group;
- 2 agree in principle to the government commitments outlined in the draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan at **Appendix 1**, subject to the report-back referred to in recommendation 4;
- 3 agree that the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) will lead a period of public consultation on the draft Action Plan between November 2025 and February 2026, which will include public release of:
 - 3.1 the draft Action Plan at **Appendix 1** as agreed in recommendation 2,
 - 3.2 additional consultation materials as needed at the discretion of MSD based on the contents of the draft Action Plan at **Appendix 1** and the draft Action Plan narrative at **Appendix 2** (e.g., simplified slide decks for public workshops);
- 4 direct the Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment to report back to the Social Outcomes Committee and Cabinet in April 2026 with:
 - 4.1 a final Carers' Strategy Action Plan which considers consultation feedback as per recommendation 3 and seeks approval for public release
 - 4.2 advice on ongoing governance structures for the Action Plan.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Penny Simmonds
Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment

Appendices

Appendix 1: Draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan – Summary A3

Appendix 2: Draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan Narrative

Appendix 3: Draft Carers' Strategy Action Plan Consultation Plan