Submission to the New WA Carers Strategy

November 2026

Volunteering WA

Introduction

Volunteering WA welcomes the development of a new Western Australian Carers Strategy. Unpaid carers make a significant contribution to individuals, families and communities. They need to be recognised and supported, not just in their caring role, but in looking after their own wellbeing, maintaining relationships and staying connected to their communities.

The National Carer Strategy 2024–2034 is a useful starting point for the new WA Strategy. It recognises the importance of carers' wellbeing, their ability to participate socially and in the economy, and access to the right support.

Volunteering WA encourages the State Government to focus more on loneliness and social isolation, the effect of caring on a person's sense of identity, and the practical support carers need to stay connected with others. Partnerships between carer support services, community organisations and the volunteering sector could also reduce isolation for carers.

Recognition of carers

Question 1. How are carers currently recognised, valued and included across services, organisations, education, workplaces and communities?

The WA Carers Charter sets out important principles for recognising carers and treating them with respect and dignity. However, recognition needs to go beyond acknowledging what carers to for others. It also means understanding how caring affects their own lives, including their identity, relationships, wellbeing and ability to participate in the community.

Caring can be rewarding, but it can also be relentless and exhausting. The demands of caring may not leave much time or energy for friendships, hobbies, work or other activities that give people a sense of purpose and help them feel like themselves. Many carers know how important it is to have something in their lives beyond caring, but finding the time, energy and opportunity to do so can be extremely difficult.

Carers are people with their own interests, relationships and aspirations. Their needs should not be overlooked simply because they are focused on supporting someone else.

The Carers Charter outlines expectations for involving carers in planning and decision-making about services. The Government should ensure that the same principles are reflected in workplaces and communities, where carers also need understanding, flexibility and opportunities to participate.

Question 2. What would better recognition look like in practice?

Better recognition means understanding that carers have lives and needs of their own. They need support to maintain relationships, interests and stay involved in their communities.

The National Carer Strategy recognises the importance of carers' physical, psychological and social wellbeing, as well their participation in society. The new WA Strategy should build on this by recognising social connection and community involvement as important parts of carer wellbeing.

Volunteering WA recommends that the Strategy:

- Recognise how caring can affect a person's identity, social connection and participation, as well as their physical and mental health.
- Make it easier for carers to stay involved in activities and interests, with flexible options.
- Help community organisations understand the challenges carers face, including the difficulty making commitments because of availability that can changes at short notice.
- Raise awareness of the WA Carers Charter and make sure it is implemented in consultation with carers.
- Recognise that carers should not feel pressure to be involved in community activities if they do not have the time or energy.

Question 3. How do caring responsibilities influence participation in community, the workforce, or education?

Caring responsibilities can significantly limit opportunities to participate in community life, maintain employment or pursue education. The demands of caring may make it difficult to commit to activities, maintain friendships or continue outside interests, especially when caring responsibilities are intensive or unpredictable.

Loneliness and social isolation should feature more in the new Strategy. In Ros Thomas's report, *Solitary: How to Beat Loneliness*, the story of Maria who became a full-time carer for her husband following his dementia diagnosis, illustrates these challenges. As her caring responsibilities increased, Maria experienced a loss of independence, work identity and social connection. Moving into town, participating in activities and eventually volunteering at an op shop helped her reconnect with others and regain a sense of purpose and belonging.

Maria's experience shows how opportunities for connection can help carers feel less isolated. It also highlights the importance of practical support that makes participation possible.

The Australian Government's *National Carer Strategy Annual Report 2025* found that 42.7 per cent of surveyed carers often or always feel lonely. The report also identifies difficulties accessing respite as a significant concern.

Financial pressures can also make it harder for people to participate in the community. Volunteering WA's *State of Volunteering Report 2023* found that volunteers in Western Australia spent an average of $13.75 for every hour volunteered before reimbursement, with only 21 per cent of expenses reimbursed on average. While these findings are not specific to carers, they highlight the financial barriers that may affect people already experiencing the added costs of caring.

The Strategy should recognise that carers' ability to participate depends on practical circumstances, including access to respite, transport, financial resources and suitable support for the person receiving care.

Volunteering WA recommends that the Strategy promote flexible participation opportunities and consider how financial and practical barriers can be reduced for carers who want to remain connected to their communities.

Diversity of carers

Question 4. What are the unique needs, experiences and opportunities for the carers or carer groups you represent, belong to, or support?

From a volunteering sector perspective, carers need opportunities for connection and participation that recognise their special circumstances.

Young carers may be balancing caring with education, employment and social activities, while older carers may be managing their own health needs alongside caring responsibilities and planning for future care arrangements. Carers in regional and remote communities may face additional challenges due to distance, lack of transport and fewer local services.

Aboriginal carers, carers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTIQA+ carers and carers with disability may also encounter barriers if services and community activities are not inclusive, culturally safe or responsive to their circumstances.

Community organisations and volunteer-involving organisations can provide opportunities for social connection, participation and a sense of purpose. However, these opportunities need to be flexible and accessible, with realistic expectations about availability and commitment.

The Strategy should recognise the diversity of carers and avoid assuming that one approach will meet everyone's needs. It should also acknowledge that some carers may not have the time or capacity to participate in community activities while their caring responsibilities are demanding.

Question 5. What systemic or cultural barriers are most urgent to address?

Volunteering WA identifies several barriers that should be addressed:

- **Loneliness and social isolation:** Caring can reduce contact with friends, colleagues and community networks, particularly when the person receiving care cannot be left alone.
- **Limited access to respite and practical assistance:** Without suitable support, carers may not have the opportunity to attend appointments, maintain relationships or participate in community life.
- **Fragmented services:** Complex eligibility requirements and lack of coordination between services can make it difficult for carers to access appropriate assistance.
- **Financial pressures:** Reduced employment opportunities, loss of income and the costs associated with participation can further restrict carers' choices.
- **Inflexible participation opportunities:** Fixed schedules and expectations of regular attendance may not accommodate the unpredictable nature of caring.
- **Limited awareness and understanding:** Community organisations, workplaces and service providers may not fully understand the demands of caring or the importance of supporting carers.

These barriers are often interconnected. A carer experiencing fatigue and financial pressure may also be socially isolated, with limited access to respite or transport. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated response that considers the whole caring experience rather than treating each issue separately.

Question 6. What supports or policy changes would create better outcomes?

Volunteering WA recommends that the Strategy strengthen partnerships between government, carer support services, community organisations and volunteering infrastructure to improve social connection and participation.

Explore a volunteer companionship scheme for carers

The Government could explore a volunteer companionship scheme to help carers stay connected to their communities and maintain their own social connections and interests. The scheme could draw on relevant elements of the Australian Government's Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme (ACVVS).

The ACVVS provides volunteer visits to socially isolated older people receiving eligible government-subsidised aged care. A similar approach could be explored to support carers who may have limited opportunities to socialise, maintain friendships or take part in community activities because of their caring responsibilities.

Trained and supported volunteers could provide regular companionship, conversation and opportunities for carers to participate in activities outside the home. In some cases, volunteers might also spend time with the person receiving care, giving the carer an opportunity to attend an appointment, catch up with friends or take a break.

The Government could work with carer organisations, community service providers and volunteering organisations to assess and determine how a scheme could operate, including its costs, safeguards and regional considerations.

Any scheme would need to complement, not replace, funded respite, formal care and specialist carer support. Volunteers should not be expected to provide personal care or take responsibility for complex care needs without appropriate qualifications and support.

Support participation and social connection

The Strategy should:

- Encourage volunteer-involving organisations to offer flexible roles and realistic participation expectations.
- Promote accessible opportunities that take account of financial, transport and time limitations.
- Recognise the skills developed through caring, including communication, coordination, advocacy and problem-solving, without assuming carers have capacity to take on additional responsibilities.
- Encourage partnerships between carer support services and community organisations to help carers find suitable opportunities for connection and participation.
- Consider the additional challenges facing carers in regional and remote communities.
- Improve coordination and referral pathways between government agencies, formal support services and community organisations.

The Strategy should make clear that volunteering complements formal care and respite services; it is not a substitute for them. Community organisations and volunteers can contribute to social connection, but they cannot be expected to fill gaps in essential funded services.

Strategy vision and priorities

Question 7. Does the vision of the current Carers Strategy provide a clear and meaningful direction for carers in WA? How could it be improved?

The current Strategy's vision provides a useful foundation. It recognises carers' contributions, the importance of their wellbeing and their right to participate in the community as full and equal citizens.

The new Strategy should recognise that carers need opportunities to maintain relationships, personal interests, employment and community connections, and that these opportunities depend on access to appropriate support.

It should also acknowledge that caring circumstances change over time. Support should be available early and consistently, including when people first become carers, when caring demands increase and when they transition out of a caring role.

A meaningful vision must be supported by practical actions that improve carers' everyday experiences, rather than relying on recognition alone.

Question 8. What priority areas should be retained in the new Strategy? What could be strengthened, changed or added?

Volunteering WA supports retaining the existing focus on awareness and recognition, carers as partners in care, support for carers, participation in education and employment, and data and evidence.

The following areas should be strengthened or explicitly included:

- **Social connection and loneliness:** Recognise loneliness and social isolation as important aspects of carer wellbeing, with practical actions to improve connection.
- **Identity and participation:** Support carers to maintain relationships, personal interests and community involvement beyond their caring role.
- **Flexible and accessible support:** Recognise that carers' needs and capacity change over time, and that support must accommodate these changes.
- **Community partnerships:** Strengthen collaboration between government, carer support services, community organisations and volunteering infrastructure.

- **Regional and remote communities:** Consider the additional barriers created by distance, transport and limited service availability.

These priorities should be reflected in the Strategy's Action Plans, with responsibilities shared across government and relevant community-sector partners.

Additional information

Question 9. What additional insights or experiences would you like to share?

Volunteering WA would like to highlight the importance of recognising carers as people with their own identities, relationships and aspirations, rather than defining them solely by their caring responsibilities.

Volunteering can provide opportunities for connection, contribution, skills development and a sense of purpose. For some carers, it may offer a way to maintain links with their community or reconnect with interests outside caring. For others, participation may only become possible once their caring responsibilities change or end.

The aim should be to make participation possible for carers who want it, without creating another expectation in an already demanding role.

The new Strategy also presents an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between formal carer support and community-based opportunities for connection. Better referral pathways, flexible participation options and carefully designed companionship initiatives could help carers and the people they support remain connected to their communities.

Thank you

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the new Strategy. We'd be happy to be involved in further discussions.

References

1. Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. (2024). *National Carer Strategy 2024–2034*.
2. Thomas, R. (2024). *Solitary: How to Beat Loneliness*.
3. Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. (2026). *National Carer Strategy Annual Report 2025*.
4. Volunteering WA. (2023). *WA's State of Volunteering Report 2023*.
5. Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. *Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme (ACVVS)*.