



## Advocate groups welcome changes to travel assistance scheme

A collective of health charities has welcomed today's announcement by Health New Zealand - Te Whatu Ora to introduce changes to the National Travel Assistance (NTA) Scheme as an "important step in the right direction".

The NTA was set up in 2005 to provide vital financial assistance for people who need to travel long distances, or frequently, to receive specialist health services. A Ministry of Health review of the Scheme in 2018 highlighted it was underfunded, inaccessible and inequitable. Despite important recommendations, no action had been taken in the last five years, leaving the Scheme woefully out of date, and failing those who need it the most.

This motivated NGOs to push again for meaningful change to the Scheme, uniting under the banner of a Cancer Society-led [NTA: Let's Drive Change](#) campaign at the end of 2023. This campaign culminated in an Open Letter sent to Health Minister Dr Shane Reti in December signed by 30+ organisations and more than 1000 individuals all calling for much-needed change.

Health New Zealand today announced changes to the Scheme that include an increase to overall funding, increases to reimbursement rates for petrol and accommodation, easier payment methods including up-front payments, and changes to eligibility criteria.

Speaking on behalf of the NGO collective, Cancer Society Chief Executive Dr Rachael Hart says while these initial changes are welcome, the next steps will be crucial.

"We need reassurance from Government around timely implementation of improvements to the NTA as well as a commitment to work alongside advocacy groups and patients to ensure the full set of changes truly meet the needs of those the Scheme was designed to support.

"These are steps in the right direction for rates, but we are keen to understand both the rationale behind the travel rate and whether it provides enough assistance to support those needing to get to life-saving medical treatment – so that people are not falling through the gaps".

NGOS say these changes can't come soon enough for the New Zealanders they collectively represent. Along with signing the Open Letter, NTA consumers shared their stories and reasons for backing this call for change.

They told the campaign team that the costs can be "crippling", that the Scheme puts up barriers that feel "insurmountable" and many echoed the sentiment that one consumer shared: "With the rising fuel cost and with my cost-of-living expenses I have second thought my treatment at times. There is enough stress just knowing you are fighting cancer without the added stress of the added expense to get to treatment."

Dr Hart says the Cancer Society and partner agencies are keen to work alongside health officials as they develop a clear implementation plan for changes.

"We remain united behind driving change for those who need to travel to treatment, their whānau, friends and supporters across the motu. We will continue pushing for significant change to take place this year."

END

For a full list of those organisations who have partnered on the [NTA: Let's Drive Change](#) campaign, please visit the campaign website: [www.letsdrivechange.org.nz](http://www.letsdrivechange.org.nz)