nras
National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society

The National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society

Strategic Plan 2026-2029

CEO's Foreword

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis are autoimmune conditions which affect the entire body. People living with these conditions require lifelong support to manage the significant impacts on their physical and mental health.

The National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society is a leading, independent UK charity; we represent and support almost half-a-million adults living with Rheumatoid Arthritis. We also support thousands of children and adolescents living with Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis.

We raise awareness, we advocate for improvements to NHS care, and we support patient involvement in research. We offer individuals a range of services, helping them over their lifetime as their symptoms and needs fluctuate.

We support the newly diagnosed, providing educational resources, guidance and reassurance. When people are thriving under treatment, we help them safely self-manage their healthcare. Should anyone feel unable to cope or unable to work, perhaps due to pain or fatigue, we lend them support.

I am grateful to my predecessor Clare Jacklin, for putting the charity in a strong position to meet the challenges ahead.

The hundreds of thousands of individuals living with these diseases continue to face significant challenges. People are still not being diagnosed early enough. Waiting lists remain unacceptably long. People are increasingly required to self-manage their health and report difficulties in accessing specialist care. Individuals who are resistant to several drugs experience significant challenges, as do those diagnosed before the advent of today's advanced treatments.

Many others would benefit from earlier access to established, cost-effective treatments. Lastly, inequalities of provision persist and need to be eradicated.

In the coming years, we shall address these issues, respond to the 10 Year NHS Plan, and target the areas of greatest need. We will support ground-breaking research and make our services more visible, relevant and accessible, so that we can help thousands more adults and children. We will also do more to measure our impact and inspire financial support.

This strategy provides a clear roadmap of just how we will achieve our ambitions. It is the result of a wide consultation, and I am very grateful to all those who invested their time, energy and expertise in helping to shape it.

We hope it will inspire you.

Peter Foxton

Joti's Story

Joti grew up watching her dad struggle with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). She was just 27 years old when her own symptoms started.

After giving birth to her son, Joti initially complained of pain in her feet, and then in her hands. Blood tests showed no rheumatoid factor, and doctors felt it was just hormonal changes, which would soon settle.

'When by baby son was 18 months old, my hands started to become deformed, and that's when the doctors took me seriously and I was finally diagnosed' says Joti.

For four years, Joti and her husband kept her diagnosis from the rest of her family. Partly to protect her dad from feeling responsible and from the judgement she feared might come from their community. And partly from fear of what the future might hold for her.

"Dad experienced such immense suffering – I was scared for my future. However, I didn't realise how medication has improved and that my outcomes were likely to be much more positive."

Severe pain forced Joti to leave her high-flying career before her RA was under control. Yet with the support of her entire family, she has battled on, had a second son, and started her own business.

Running her company successfully, has given Joti a great deal of fulfilment and she and her family are now flourishing.

Having personally benefitted from NRAS services, Joti helps us raise awareness and support more people from South Asian communities.

Our Vision

A future where everyone with Rheumatoid Arthritis and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis can thrive.

Our Purpose

To inform and support people with Rheumatoid Arthritis and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis and campaign for improvements to care and treatments.

Our Values

Passionate	We are brave, bold and deeply committed to improving lives
Trustworthy	We use evidence and the 'patient voice' to operate with integrity
Focused	We spend funding wisely to achieve the greatest impact
Inclusive	We represent a diverse community with a broad spectrum of needs

Our Goals

We will achieve our vision by focusing on the four main areas of work outlined in this strategy.

Informing and Educating
Supporting and Empowering
Campaigning and Researching
Raising funds and building a resilient organisation.

Informing & Educating

The variety and severity of symptoms of both Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA) remain relatively misunderstood. Many people mistakenly believe only the elderly are affected. This is to the detriment of early diagnosis and the support people receive navigating education, family and working life. More awareness is sorely needed.

Thousands of people that could benefit from our work are not currently aware of the charity or the services we offer. We urgently need to change this; not least to help alleviate pressure on NHS services. We shall target those newly diagnosed, who most benefit from the information and emotional support we provide. We shall continue to support those who are not responding well to treatments. Offer individuals and their families lifelong support regardless of their circumstances.

Goal: To greatly increase awareness and understanding of RA and JIA and the number of people receiving help from our services.

We shall achieve this by:

- Promoting services to healthcare professionals, providing resources and encouraging referrals, particularly for those newly diagnosed.
- Strengthening our communications and establishing a press function to proactively secure publicity, raise awareness and discredit myths and unhelpful stereotypes.
- Improve early diagnosis and prevent irreversible joint damage through campaigns that increase GP and public awareness of symptoms.

We shall measure success by:

- The number of people accessing our Right Start programme and our helpline service
- The number of healthcare professionals referring and signposting people with JIA or RA.
- Achievement of industry accreditation for our educational resources.

Equity and inclusion goal: *We shall highlight inequalities and raise awareness of gaps in care provision relating to where people live, their gender, socio-economic status or ethnicity.*

Clare's Story

Clare had a long history of pain in her foot and knees caused by osteoarthritis. Clare then started getting muscle pains and awoke one morning unable to move and with stabbing pain in her hands. She was diagnosed with polymyalgia rheumatica despite taking an unusually high dose of steroids. Three years later and with increasingly aching muscles and swollen wrists, a third consultant finally diagnosed rheumatoid arthritis (RA) using an MRI with Fluoroscopy.

As is sometimes the case, Clare's blood tests were negative for antibodies associated with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Though difficult to diagnose, her symptoms were either dismissed, discounted or misdiagnosed. By now Clare had considerable damage to her wrist joints, loss of mobility and pain which forced Clare to retire early from the career she loved. Earlier diagnosis could arguably have prevented some of this.

"Not being believed and the resulting avoidable damage was hard to bear initially."

Following diagnosis, the first line drug Methotrexate was tolerated better once tablets changed to weekly injections. The severity of Clare's RA meant different biologic drugs were tried over the next few years. Some worked better than others, she is now on her fifth biologic drug which she hopes is working well.

"Whilst it is hard sometimes, it is essential to keep cheery and to keep smiling!"

Clare points out that distinguishing new inflammation & pain from old is essential when Rheumatologists access the efficacy of your current drugs. She advises people with RA to know their Disease Activity Score.

From diagnosis onwards, NRAS services have supplemented Clare's NHS care with a wealth of information. She supports NRAS when she can and hopes to volunteer more as her health improves.

Supporting & Empowering

The symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA) vary widely in each individual and can fluctuate over time. Individuals require lifelong, highly personalised support in managing their symptoms, lifestyle and treatments. We will help adults, young people and their families manage their practical, physical and emotional needs as they adjust to each different stage of their lives.

We will also help people navigate the ever-changing health landscape, including issues caused by GP and rheumatology workforce shortages and reduced access to nurse-led helplines. We will support people with 'self-management', particularly those on 'Patient Initiated Follow Up' pathways. We shall help ensure that no one suffers as a result.

Goal: To support more people to safely self-manage their health by improving the relevancy, accessibility, visibility and reach of our services.

We shall achieve this by:

- Improving, expanding and promoting services to ensure people receive lifelong support.
- Supporting self-management with enhanced evidence-based services.
- Increasing access to local, in-person support by strengthening our UK wide network of groups and signposting partners' services.
- Building a new model for supporting young people and families with JIA and RA. Focusing on the key transition phases in their lives.

We shall measure success by:

- Increasing numbers of adults and young people engaging with our services.
- Conducting quality audits to determine the effectiveness of our services.
- Strengthening engagement in our peer-to-peer support network.

Equity and inclusion goal: *We shall build services that are accessible and relevant for the diverse community that needs them.*

Leesa's Story

It was when Leesa's four daughters were all under the age of ten, and she was in the midst of her marriage breakup, when she was first diagnosed with an autoimmune condition.

Years later, whilst out walking, she hurt her knee. This seemingly innocuous injury caused incredible pain, and she was soon diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis.

"An initial steroid injection helped, but the pain and swelling continued, and I lost a lot of weight. My friends and family were understandably worried. How would I possibly manage 52 stairs up to my flat with four children in tow?"

Whilst waiting for her medication to take effect, Leesa managed the school runs on crutches.

"I had no option, however bad my pain I had to get my girls to school and put food on the table."

Nowadays, thanks to support from her rheumatology team and advice via NRAS, Leesa's rheumatoid arthritis is under control. She is very careful with what she eats, she exercises daily and manages her stress. She has suffered the occasional setback and flare however, she and her four daughters are thriving.

"Once I started responding to my drug regime, it was business as usual, raising my daughters and trying to make a living."

Leesa found NRAS's online courses and lifestyle advice particularly helpful, and has become a valued supporter of our work.

Campaigning & Research

Delays in diagnosis or ongoing treatment, and gaps in the continuous monitoring can lead to irreversible joint destruction and organ damage. Yet excessive NHS workloads and intolerably long waiting lists mean not everyone receives the quality of care that should be widely available to all.

Furthermore, there are currently thousands of people who would benefit from earlier access to established and relatively inexpensive medications. Broadening access could profoundly impact remission rates, reduce the burden on NHS services and support people in contributing to society. We shall robustly represent and defend the interests of our community in all these areas so that policy makers prioritise their needs and allocate resources accordingly.

Many people are resistant to several medications, and it is extremely challenging to relieve their pain and symptoms. We will support cutting-edge research into multi-drug resistance, developing solutions for those currently receiving care as well as for future generations. We shall also support the development of new technologies to transform the way individuals safely manage their own health.

Goal: To support research and campaign to improve access to high quality care and treatments.

We shall achieve this by:

- Supporting clinical and academic research studies by fostering partnerships and developing our network of appropriately trained volunteers.
- Partnering with professional bodies, autoimmune and musculoskeletal charities to strengthen our collective voice and ability to influence decision makers.
- Supporting new technology trials so people can track and report symptoms and disease activity and access information and support.

How we will measure success:

- Increasing the number and diversity of our cohort of trained and supported volunteers.
- Launching of new technologies to support self-management.
- Increase number of people achieving medicated remission within 12 months of diagnosis.

Equity and inclusion goal: *To shape services, technologies and treatments for all those with RA or JIA, regardless of their gender, socio-economic status, education, ethnicity or where they live.*

The Richards Family

Andy and Vicki have two daughters Olivia and Maria. Maria was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) when she was three.

Right from when they were toddlers, physical differences between the two sisters became noticeable. Olivia was running around fit as a fiddle, meanwhile Maria was unable to move her knee or ankle joints properly.

Andy and Vicki knew something was wrong, yet despite them both having autoimmune conditions, their GP repeatedly told them there was nothing to worry about. It took eight long months for Maria to be diagnosed with JIA.

'We were so relieved to have a diagnosis and couldn't wait to make Maria's daily life easier. However, we had no understanding of the complex nature of JIA.' Andy says.

Since that time, Maria and her family have bravely endured a whole host of challenges, injections, medications, clinics, and check-ups.

Maria's periods of remission have been frustratingly short and her symptoms have flared and returned. The process of trying alternative treatments has felt relentless.

Maria's symptoms will continue to fluctuate through her lifetime and NRAS hopes to continue supplementing NHS care and providing this family with relevant support.

Over the years the Richards family have found NRAS services extremely helpful. They continue to support and champion our work.

Funding & Resilience

As a relatively small charity we achieve a great deal with modest funding. However, to support tens of thousands of people that need us, we urgently need to raise more money. Historically, much of our work has been funded through generous legacy gifts, and we now need to broaden our appeal and develop additional income streams. Increased funding will allow us to strengthen our resources, improve efficiency and make targeted investments.

To achieve our goals, we shall nurture and develop our staff and volunteers. We shall equip them with the skills they need to deliver our mission. We will ensure our team remains representative of the diverse community we serve.

Goal: To build a strong organisation that raises more money from diverse sources to meet people's needs

We shall achieve this by:

- Investing in fundraising and communication resources, enhancing individual giving and securing larger gifts from trust, corporate and statutory sources.
- Improving our use of data in planning, maximising efficiency and reporting our impact.
- Improving our relationship management to help us effectively initiate and foster supporter engagement.
- Investing in development, wellbeing and inclusion of staff and volunteers.

We shall measure success by:

- Year-on-year growth in income and supporter numbers.
- Increasing the percentage of income from non-legacy sources.
- Retention and development of staff and volunteers.

Equity and inclusion goal: *We will build a team that represents the diverse community we serve and shape decision making, services, partnerships and campaigns accordingly.*

Find out more!

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