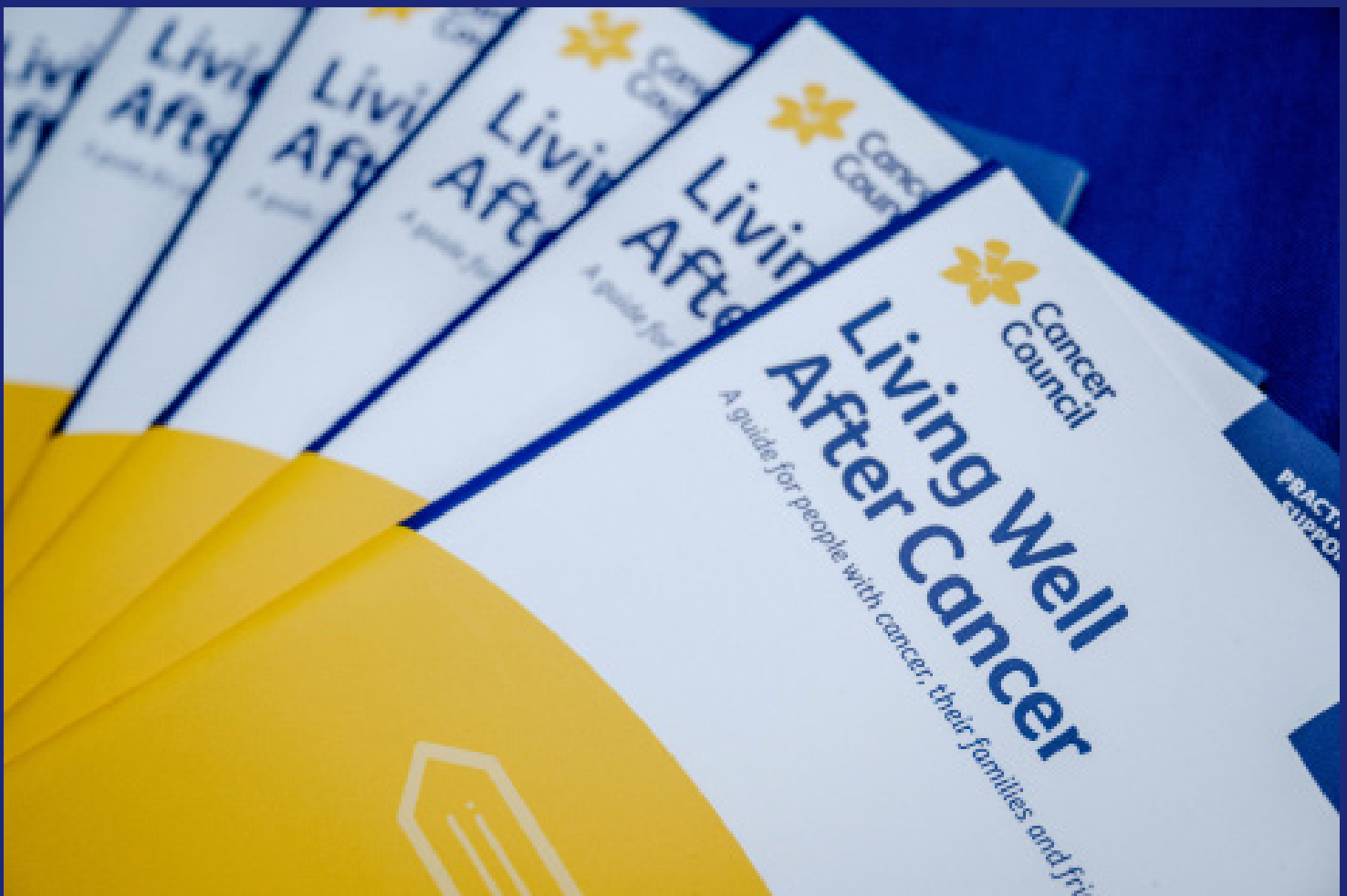




Cancer, Work & You: Community Forum

Tamworth NSW
July 2025





NSW

Cancer Council NSW is the leading cancer charity in NSW dedicated to reducing the impact of cancer and ensuring programs and services reach communities throughout NSW. Our purpose is to change the path of cancer and make sure no one walks alone.

To achieve this, Cancer Council NSW:

- Supports people affected by cancer by providing evidence-based information and resources about cancer
- Provides emotional and practical supportive care services including, financial guidance, information, and support, targeted financial assistance and our Transport to Treatment service, which provides a free transport to people with cancer who cannot access Community Transport Services or have other transport barriers
- Delivers 13 11 20, a dedicated confidential phone service where anyone can call to speak with an experienced health professional who can answer any questions about cancer
- Enables the community to reduce their cancer risk through programs, information and policy efforts in skin cancer prevention, nutrition, alcohol, tobacco control and cancer screening.
- Advocates and speaks up to achieve better cancer outcomes
- Conducts and funds world-class research to reduce the impact of cancer.
- Cancer Council has long advocated for the needs of people with cancer and action to improve the lives of people impacted by cancer.

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Executive Summary

CANCER, WORK & YOU FORUM SNAPSHOT

This snapshot captures the key themes and preferred solutions that emerged from the Cancer, Work and You community forum held in Tamworth by Cancer Council NSW. The insights presented here reflect the real-life stories, challenges and ideas shared by participants, and highlight the practical changes needed to better support people affected by cancer in the workplace.

KEY THEMES

- 1 Work is essential and beneficial for people with cancer
- 2 Staying in the workforce when affected by cancer requires empathy, flexibility and individualised support
- 3 Employers and employees need clear guidance, open communication, and trust for mutual benefit
- 4 Additional financial and structural support is needed to reduce the impact of cancer in the workplace
- 5 Other system reforms are needed like priority health care appointments and return to work support
- 6 Regional specific issues around transport, systemic regional healthcare issues and impact on treatment
- 7 Cancer teaches resilience, gives perspective and reorders priorities.

PREFERRED SOLUTIONS

Tax concession for downsizing business and/or a review the asset test for government support payments.

Support payments or extra leave for carers to support their loved ones.

Extending entitlement and protections for casual workers.

Employer training, upskilling in managing employees with a cancer diagnosis.

Cancer and work helpline and advisory service for employers and employees to contact for assistance supporting people with cancer in the workforce.

Simplify process for compassionate release of superannuation to make it more flexible.

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BACKGROUND

Cancer impacts so many of us, with an estimated 2 in 5 people (or 43%) in Australia diagnosed with cancer by the age of 85, chances are you either know someone who has cancer or have had it yourself.

In NSW, cancer still poses a major financial burden for people affected by cancer, even with universal health care. This financial burden comes from a combination of direct out-of-pocket costs for treatment and care, indirect costs, such as accommodation and travel, and the changing financial circumstances brought on by cancer.

1 in 2 people with cancer who are of working age are not in the workforce. This means approximately 50% of working-age people with cancer are at risk of unstable income, which can significantly affect their quality of life, ability to pay for out-of-pocket costs they need for treatment, and ultimately, their cancer outcomes.

At Cancer Council NSW we strive to improve the lives of people affected by cancer and work with the community for better outcomes. Helping people manage the financial burden of cancer is a key priority for the communities we work with.

To understand some of the barriers and enablers of living with cancer and work, we held a community forum “Cancer, Work and You” in Tamworth on 3 July 2025. The aim of the forum was to hear directly from people affected by cancer about the barriers to working and/or employing someone with cancer and collaboratively co-design practical solutions for those wishing to continue to work.

We chose Tamworth as we know people with cancer in regional areas have poorer cancer outcomes than those metropolitan NSW. While we will continue to explore the issue of work and cancer in the urban context, we wanted to make sure those in the less frequently discussed regions have their voice heard first.

Who attended the forum

The forum was attended by 50 guests including people with cancer from the surrounding areas, local support groups, local business owners, local business council, mental health support, volunteers and Cancer Council NSW staff.

MEET OUR SPEAKERS



Len Waters

Len Waters is a Kamilaroi man with a passion for sharing his culture. Skilled at communicating his deep sense of connection to Country and culture to all age groups, Len's deep insights are both inspiring and invigorating, leaving his audiences with a renewed view of their own world. Listening more, seeing more, feeling more and appreciating more of their own environment.



Dane O'Connor

Diagnosed with an incurable cancer ten years ago, Dane has defied the odds while navigating significant changes in his life. In addition to his role at the Department of primary industry and regional development, Dane is also a speaker and coach.

He finds deep fulfilment in sharing his story to support others facing similar challenges. His reflections on resilience, purpose, and starting over offer powerful insight into living and working with long-term illness.



Cr Ryan Brooke

A cancer survivor, community advocate, and lifelong Tamworth local, Ryan channelled his experience with testicular cancer during the pandemic into a drive for change.

His advocacy work led him to be an elected member of the Tamworth Regional Council. Ryan brings a unique perspective shaped by his work in disability care, videography and deep involvement in the local arts and environmental communities.



Sue Woodall

After a breast cancer diagnosis brought her 30-year executive career to an end, Sue founded Live Work Cancer to support others navigating the challenges of cancer and employment. Sue will share her unique perspective combining personal experience and professional expertise, offering valuable insights into creating workplaces that truly support people living with cancer.



Joey Tass

Joey Tass is a Partner at Hunt & Hunt lawyers, practicing in the areas of employment law and litigation and dispute resolution. He has participated in Cancer Council's Legal Referral Service for a number of years, volunteering his time and expertise to provide free legal advice to patients and carers who are experiencing employment law issues and supporting them to navigate the challenges that can arise in the workplace after a cancer diagnosis.

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Len Waters a Kamilaroi man with a passion for sharing his culture welcomed the group to Kamilaroi country. The Kamilaroi or Gamilaroi are an Indigenous Australian Murri people who are the traditional Aboriginal custodians of an area that extends from Northern NSW through to Southern Queensland.

Len's welcome showed his deep sense of connection to Country and culture. His storying telling and deep insights were both powerful and inspiring, leaving us feeling welcome with a new appreciation for the Country we were meeting on.

The Forum

The forum was opened by The Hon Kevin Anderson, Member for Tamworth, Shadow Minister for Tourism, Shadow Minister for Gaming and Racing, and Shadow Minister for the Arts and Heritage. He acknowledged that a cancer diagnosis brings shock and uncertainty, followed quickly by a realisation of the practical impacts of this diagnosis on their day-to-day life, livelihood or business. He reiterated the need for a forum such as this to understand what is needed to support people with cancer and what the government can do to support this.

To frame the group discussion, it was first important to hear from people who are living with cancer and working. We heard from three guest speakers Dane O'Connor, Sue Woodall and Ryan Brooke, who shared their experience with cancer and articulated how cancer impacted their work and what could have helped them stay employed. Our fourth speaker was Joey Tass, a Partner at Hunt & Hunt Lawyers, who provided important background on employment law rights and responsibilities.



CO-DESIGNING SOLUTIONS

After the speakers' insights, we split into six groups to discuss policy problems and co-design solutions. Each group was made up people of different backgrounds, including people with lived experience, carers, local employers, and Cancer Council NSW staff.

Each group was given one problem facing people impacted by cancer in the workforce. The groups were asked to think broadly about the issue and what solutions would help to solve it. They were then asked to choose one preferred solution, discuss how it would work and then present it back to the larger group.

This approach enabled broad thinking, sharing of ideas and practical problem solving. It was a successful way of getting quickly to the heart of a problem and creating practical solutions.





KEY THEMES

Speakers and participants at the forum shared their stories and frustrations about cancer and work. From these discussions, several key themes emerged.

1. Work is essential and beneficial for people with cancer

- **Work keeps you going** - Work provides purpose, structure, and social interaction. It's good for mental health. Cancer can influence the type of work people want to do and, pushed some people to change to work in a job that makes a difference.
- **Work is essential for financial stability** - The financial impact of leaving a career is severe. One person reported the end of their career impacted their finances five times more than their medical expenses, even though they had income protection.

“Managers want to do the right thing – I know that, however without guidelines, policies it is tough. Managers often make assumptions about our treatment and its impact, which isn’t helpful as everyone’s experience is unique.”

“I expected to feel unwell, lose my hair and be sick. I didn’t expect to lose my job”

“I lost my professional identify, self-confidence, and connection to my workplace”

Sue Woodall



2. Staying in the workforce when affected by cancer requires empathy, flexibility and individualised support

- **Empathy and compassion from the workplace** is an essential part of responding to someone with cancer in the workplace. However, this needs to be something already embedded in the culture, not something that can suddenly be expected.
- **Individualised support is needed** – ideally practical support that factors in the persons needs and circumstances. Not everyone has the same cancer experience.
- **Cancer ends careers** – Participants reported they didn’t want to stop working but had not choice, others had to close their business or see it as the end point a previously enjoyable career.
- **Carers also need workplace support** – The burden of travel, stress, and out-of-pocket costs extends beyond the patient to their family and carers. This care burden is often an invisible in workplaces and carers need support at work too.

3. Employers and employees need clear guidance, open communication, and trust for mutual benefit

- **Employers need information** – employers need information on what to do and their obligations. They want to know what workplace policies can be flexible or changed but are still in line with workplace laws and business needs. There needs to be a cancer plan in the workplace before it happens to one of their employees.
- **Employers and employees should communicate directly** to clarify needs and discuss possible solutions, reducing gossip and speculation.
- **Trust is needed to support hidden symptoms** – such as brain fog or changes in continence – that are difficult to talk about in a workplace. People want to feel safe to speak up and trusted that when their symptoms are limiting.

4. Additional financial and structural support is needed to reduce the impact of cancer in the workplace

- **All leave is used up by cancer** – employees that have long service leave or sick leave can use it. Those without entitlements, like casual employees had may need to resign.
- **Small businesses face unique challenges and need additional targeted government support.**
- **Income protection provided outside of the employer helped keep people in work** – Some participants highlighted that income protection provided through superannuation helped cover wages during time off, allowing employers to hold the job. Others suggested this could be a new government payment, structured like government maternity leave payments until the person with cancer is able to return to work.



“Cancer affects everything—mental health, finances, relationships. That’s why tonight’s inaugural forum by the Cancer Council is so vital”

“I’m grateful for my relationship with the Cancer Council and the advocacy we’ve done together. We know the challenges in regional NSW and what Parliament and government need to do”

Kevin Anderson





5. Other system reforms are needed like priority health care appointments and return to work support

- **Priority treatment times for working patients** – Participants suggested people undergoing cancer treatment who continue to work should be able to request treatment times that enable them to keep working i.e. at the beginning or end of the day. Especially in regional areas with travel time increasing this issue.
- **Return-to-Work Planning** – Participants recommended employer or government funding for structured return-to-work plans. Another suggestion was an advocate to help people with cancer navigate the return-to-work process.
- **Mental health support and career support** – Participants suggested there is a need for better systems to help people transition to different work whilst living with cancer like access to a few sessions with a rehabilitation counsellor.

“I relied on mum to keep me going financially, I would have sunk without her”

“After treatment my employer didn’t want me back, i felt like i was a replaceable cog not a human”

“I thought I would be able to continue my business but could barely walk to the bathroom”

Ryan Brooke

6. Regional specific issues

- **Long distances to travel to treatment is an extra burden in regional areas** – and has a flow on impact on work. One participant described how the travel was so exhausting it led to them to quit their job. Another adding the travel to and from treatment contributed to a draining of sick leave more than the treatment itself.
- **Systemic issues in regional healthcare** – participants noted that a cancer diagnosis highlights the structural challenges within the regional healthcare system, including travel requirements, added stress, and out-of-pocket costs.
- **Distance can cause people to refuse treatment** - we heard that this dislocation from family and support networks can lead people to decline treatment because of the impact on their loved ones.



7. Other

- **Cancer teaches resilience** – Participants highlighted that living with cancer re-frames what’s important to them, gives perspective and reorders priorities. We heard that friends and family are what’s most important.



SOLUTIONS

Several solutions were presented during the forum, including those proposed by speakers, informally discussed among participants, and introduced during small group activities.

These include:

- 1 Temporary government payments to support job loss and leave loss** – government funded cancer leave, additional leave or a top up of sick leave used.
- 2 Mandated income protection** insurance through superannuation.
- 3 Tax concession** for downsizing business and review of asset test for government support payments.
- 4 Support payments** for carers to support/ replenish their leave.
- 5 Changes to superannuation** to make it more flexible and easier to access.
- 6 Regulations that require employers to provide flexibility** when someone is living with cancer.
- 7 Extending entitlements and protections** to casual workers such as portable leave schemes.
- 8 Helpline for employers** to call for professional advice on how they can support employees.
- 9 Guidelines, employer training and upskilling for employers on managing people with cancer in the workplace.** This could be expanded to employer ratings for “cancer safe” employers i.e. if you offer certain benefits to employees, the employer can be rated a 5 star cancer safe employer.
- 10 Helpline and advisory service** for both employees and employers to support both employee and employers with workplace issues.
- 11 Change treatment appointment policies in the health system.** So, there is a flag in the system for those who are working, and they get priority appointments i.e. first appointment or last appointment of the day.
- 12 Mental health support and career support** – funding for additional support i.e. mental health sessions or sessions with a rehabilitation counsellor.
- 13 Return-to-Work Plan** – Employers required to provide a structured return-to-work plan and an advocate or intermediary to help navigate the process.



“I want to be known as someone with courage living with cancer, not just having it.”

Dane O’Connor





PREFERRED SOLUTIONS

These recommended solutions have been identified by the groups as those for which Cancer Council NSW should continue its advocacy efforts.

	Solution	What could this look like
1	Tax concession for downsizing business and/or a review the asset test for government support payments	Cancer Council NSW work with the Australian Government and ATO to review guidelines for compassionate exemption to certain taxes for someone living with cancer this could include such as capital gains tax if selling a business or stamp duty if forced to sell a home.
2	Extending entitlement and protections for casual workers	Cancer Council NSW to partner and advocate for industrial relations reform at the Australian and NSW Government levels to ensure casual workers have some protection and leave entitlements when they are impacted by cancer.
3	Cancer and work helpline and advisory service for employers and employees to contact for assistance supporting people with cancer in the workforce.	Cancer Council NSW has a dedicated information care and support line. With additional funding we could potentially expand this to include a dedicated workplace information service.
4	Support payments or extra leave for carers to support their loved ones	Cancer Council NSW work with the government to provide additional carers leave entitlements expanded for people with cancer.
5	Employer training, upskilling in managing employees with a cancer diagnosis.	Cancer Council NSW work with others to create cancer in the workplace specific education modules for workplaces. This could be extended to Cancer Council NSW rating workplaces as “Cancer friendly or Cancer Safe”
6	Simplify process for compassionate release of superannuation to make it more flexible.	Cancer Council NSW work with the Australian Government and ATO to review and redesign compassionate grounds eligibility criteria and process for releasing superannuation. Ideally this could be a simple process for people with cancer with as minimal barriers as possible.





Brad Gellert

Manager, Policy & Advocacy Unit

02 9334 1748

bradley.gellert@nswcc.org.au

cancercouncil.com.au

**If you need to talk about cancer,
call Cancer Council on 13 11 20**

