Briefing paper - October 2026

MSK Health: The Foundation of a Thriving Nation

How better MSK health can support opportunity, work, independence and prosperity.



Why this matters

- **Scale:** More than 20 million people in the UK live with an MSK condition.
- **Impact:** MSK conditions are a leading cause of pain and disability and a major cause of sickness absence and reduced productivity.
- **Beyond healthcare:** MSK health affects whether people can learn, work, care for others, participate in their communities and remain independent.
- **National opportunity:** Better MSK health can help governments improve health, increase employment and productivity, reduce inequalities, support healthy ageing and deliver economic growth.

Our ability to move and function shapes our opportunities throughout life. For children and young people, MSK health can affect education, physical activity and confidence. During working life it can determine whether people can remain in good work. In later life it is fundamental to staying active and independent.

The case for change

Despite its scale and impact, responsibility for MSK health is fragmented across health, prevention, employment, education, healthy ageing, inequalities and economic policy. National ambition is not consistently translated into local action. What is needed is clear national leadership for MSK, better MSK health built into relevant government policy, and a national framework for earlier, coordinated local action.

ARMA's three asks

Government and national leaders should:

1. Establish a national cross-cutting MSK strategy

Develop a national MSK strategy to coordinate action across government, with clear leadership, shared outcomes and accountability.

2. Embed MSK health across national policy

Build better MSK health into national strategies and programmes for health and social care, inequalities, education and skills, employment and economic growth.

3. Create a national framework for local delivery

Create a national framework that sets clear outcomes and accountability while giving local systems the flexibility to deliver earlier, joined-up action based on local needs.

Better MSK health is not a new or competing priority: it is an enabler of the ambitions governments already have.

The UK Government and devolved governments should engage with ARMA and the MSK community in developing a joined-up approach, working within their respective responsibilities.

How you can help

- Ask Ministers what steps they are taking to develop a national cross-government strategy for MSK health.
- Champion MSK health across debates about employment, economic inactivity, education, prevention, healthy ageing and economic growth.
- Meet local health, local authority, employment and community leaders to understand how better MSK health could help people in your constituency remain active, independent and in work.

Why this matters in your constituency

Every constituency includes thousands of people whose lives are affected by poor MSK health — children whose health is affecting their education, people finding it harder to remain in work, parents and carers managing everyday life, and older people whose mobility affects their independence.

MSK conditions contribute to sickness absence, reduced productivity and economic inactivity. In 2025, 27.3 million working days were lost to MSK conditions in the UK demonstrating the scale of the challenge for people, employers and the economy.

Better MSK health helps people learn, work, care and contribute. It supports healthier ageing, helps employers retain staff and strengthens communities. It is fundamental to greater opportunity, higher employment, reduced inequalities and economic growth.

Better MSK health helps people live well, work and remain independent – and helps build a healthier, more prosperous nation.

MSK health at a glance

- 21.3 million people in the UK live with an MSK condition.
- MSK conditions accounted for 18% of working days lost to sickness absence in the UK in 2025.
- MSK health affects our ability to learn, work, care for others, stay active and remain independent
- Better MSK health supports opportunity, productivity and healthy ageing.
- Clear national leadership is needed to embed MSK health across government policy.

More information

Find the full paper here:

The Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance is an independent charity bringing together 40 patient, professional, research and industry organisations to provide the collective voice of the 20 million people living with MSK conditions in the UK.

www.arma.uk.net

Contact Lauren Garbutt-West, Public Affairs and Communications Manager **lgarbutt-West@arma.uk.net**