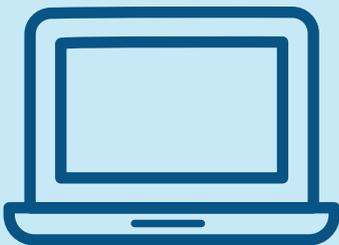




2019 Election Priorities



Leading lives with choices and control

About: The Australian Blindness Forum

The Australian Blindness Forum (ABF) is the peak body representing blindness and vision impairment rehabilitation in the Australian blindness sector. ABF is a partnership between consumers and service providers; seeking equity in access for the 382,000 Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

ABF and its member organisations support the right of people who are blind or vision impaired to participate in education, employment and community life. Equal access to all aspects of society is vital to live with independence and dignity.

About this document

This document has been designed to meet best practice accessibility standards.

About the reforms across disability and aged care sectors

The blindness and vision impaired community are in the midst of great upheaval and cultural change due to reform across the aged care and disability sectors.

While we recognise the great advantages to people with disability of the principals of choice and control that underpin these reforms, we concurrently note the inconsistencies and inadequacies of the NDIS and aged care systems at this early stage. Action must be taken to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired are not left behind as Australia transitions to these reforms.

This Election Australian Blindness Forum seeks Six Key Commitments

- Improvements to the NDIS
- Effective and relevant aged care support and services
- Employment Access and improved education experiences and outcomes
- Audio Description
- Independence and safe mobility
- The right to a secret, independent and verifiable vote



Improvements to the NDIS to meet the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired

The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has meant that many different services and programs need to interface with the Scheme. Whilst the intent and potential of the NDIS is to allow people with disabilities to access greater and more tailored supports and services there remains many challenges for current and potential NDIS participants and their service providers.

As a sector we regularly encounter consumers who have been refused funding for supports and services alongside other consumers, with very similar needs and circumstances, whose plans are approved.

Additional to inconsistencies within NDIS plans, we see many examples of plans where the recommendations of specialists and or the preferences of NDIS participants themselves are not reflected. Many plans are not tailored to the complex and special needs (including assistive technology) of people who are blind or vision impaired and often not designed for the episodic nature of support required.

We attribute this to the lack of specialist assessors and planners, and their limited understanding of blindness and vision impairment and assistive technology needs.



Election Commitment Sought

Commit to implementing the findings of the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS's Inquiry into Assistive Technology, recognising the specialist nature of blindness and vision impaired equipment and technology.

NDIS Pricing

The NDIA's interpretation and application of tiered therapy pricing to participants with visual impairment will have a critical impact on the level of support that the vision impaired and blindness community will be able to access from specialist service providers with low incidence cohorts.

A decrease in therapy prices would likely lead to office closures in regional areas and as such loss of access to services for many people who are blind or vision impaired.

If a tiered structure for therapy prices is to be introduced, complexity should be linked to the skills required to meet participant's needs and specialised planning resources used to classify what skills are required, and which participants require higher skilled support workers, at the level of the disability cohort.

Election Commitment Sought

Any change to therapy pricing structures is postponed until the full NDIS rollout.

Lift the Staff Cap

It is widely acknowledged that the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) staff cap has led to inadequate service for many NDIS participants, resulting in widespread negative outcomes.

ABF believe the staff cap must be lifted to enable the NDIA to employ greater numbers of qualified, experienced planners, capable of providing the level of service NDIS participants require and deserve.

Election Commitment Sought

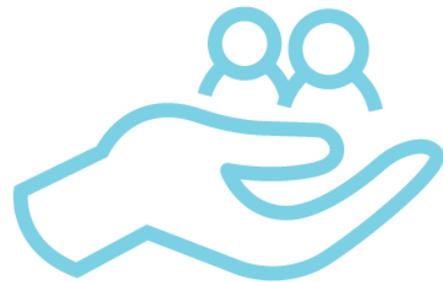
Lift the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) staff cap to ensure greater positive outcomes for NDIS participants.

NDIS & Children

Under the NDIS children are currently missing out on funded services, or being denied access, due to a lack of understanding of specialist service need.

This has resulted in the possibility that for the first time in a generation children with a vision impairment may be worse off than their previous generation.

The introduction of a set package for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, has been adopted by the NDIA and is proving to be extremely successful in ensuring newly diagnosed children and their families attain the services and supports without delay.



Election Commitment Sought

- Early access for children under 7 to receive an interim plan (i.e. 6 months) for vision needs only.
- A pathway to identify additional needs and ongoing supports.
- Potential for demonstrated outcomes to result in bonus payments.
- Set criteria for access, both for the initial access and for ongoing supports.

Effective and relevant support and services for people 65 and over who are blind or vision impaired



Aged care consumers who are blind or vision impaired have additional and more specific needs than the vast majority of aged care consumers. The needs of this group are not necessarily linked to frailty but rather the episodic nature of blindness and vision impairment rehabilitation and the desire to remain independent.

To assist with addressing this issue we recommend that: assessors within the aged care system must be appropriately trained to assist in identification and have the capacity to collect information about a consumers' need for blindness and vision impairment rehabilitation services.

We believe there must be appropriate triggers implemented within the assessment process which result in the early identification of the need for blindness and vision impairment rehabilitation.

Finally older people who are blind or vision impaired must not bare the financial burden associated with the acquisition of vital adaptive technologies.

Election Commitment Sought

Implement a streamlined consumer assessment process that includes an appropriately trained workforce and mechanisms within the lines of enquiry that quickly and efficiently identify need.

Develop and Implement a National Assistive Technology scheme, to improve equitable and affordable access to aids and equipment for people who are blind or vision impaired in the aged care system.

Employment access and improved education outcomes for people who are blind or vision impaired

Employment

The unemployment rate of people who are blind or vision impaired sits at 52% and only 24% of this cohort are in full time work, which is half the rate compared with the general community.

In 2012, an OECD report found that 45% of Australians with disability were living at or below the poverty line, ranking Australia last among all OECD countries for the economic participation of people with disability.

Living on a low income and/or being unemployed are common experiences for many people who are blind or vision impaired. Critical to decreasing unemployment among people who are blind or vision impaired, is making Australian workplaces more accessible.

Progress was made towards this end in December 2016 when an Australian Standard for accessible Information and Communications Technology (ICT) procurement, AS EN 301 549, was adopted within the Australian Public Service.

However the standard is voluntary and has not been widely promoted or monitored. We believe that AS EN 301 549 must be mandated, which would require government agencies to purchase accessible office equipment and software.

As the Standard applies to Government procurement it will help to make the public service an equal opportunity employer for people with disability. Due to the size of many Government procurement contracts, it would push ICT providers to develop accessible technology solutions.

At present within the Australian Public Service only 3.7 per cent of the workforce identify as having a disability, a number skewed by the outstanding work in the NDIA achieving a greater than 15% workforce participation of people with disability.

We acknowledge As One: Making it Happen, APS Disability Employment Strategy 2016–19 and the actions within this document, however we believe more must be done to make a significant positive impact on the lives of people with disability.

Election Commitment Sought

Ensure the setting of a seven percent disability employment target for the APS by 2023

Amend the Commonwealth Procurement Rules to include a direct reference to AS EN 301 549, the Australian Standard for the procurement of accessible software and hardware within the public service

Education



The value of a tertiary education is increasing, and there is a clear connection between tertiary education and employment. People who are blind or vision impaired and who have obtained a tertiary qualification have a much greater chance of finding employment than those who have not.

The 2018 Vision Australia Report: Barriers to Online Learning Experienced by University Students who are blind or vision impaired, found that university students who are blind or vision impaired experience numerous accessibility barriers when using online learning environments.

With few exceptions, participants reported that they had encountered significant accessibility barriers when using online learning environments. In some cases these barriers had resulted in participants abandoning their studies altogether, while many others found studying extremely stressful, difficult and unrewarding.

The accessibility barriers reported by participants include:

- Inaccessibility of key components of online learning environments, such as discussion boards and collaborative tools, to the most common assistive technology used by people who are blind or vision impaired;
- Lack of understanding and timely support from disability services staff;
- Unwillingness of lecturers to make changes to course delivery formats to make them more accessible;
- Inconsistency in the provision of reasonable adjustments.

Election Commitment Sought

- Ensure the Commissioning of a review of current university funding arrangements to allow universities to provide adequate support for students with a disability.
- Ensure that accessibility outcomes in the area of online learning are consistent with legislative requirements, community expectations and the principles of disability rights and Government policy.

Audio description

Australia is the only OECD country not to provide audio description on television. This is despite the blindness and vision impaired community campaigning decision makers to mandate audio description for close to 20 years.

People who are blind or vision impaired are excluded from television which limits their access to information, entertainment and social inclusion. This is due to the non-adoption of audio description on Australian Television.

Audio description is narration on a separate aural track, to describe visual elements happening in a television program, during the natural pauses in the dialogue. It is the access equivalent of captions that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can utilise to watch television. There are laws regulating TV stations to caption shows for people who are deaf, but television remains out of reach for the thousands of people who are blind or vision impaired.



Without audio description on television people who are blind or vision impaired miss out on important news and current affairs, entertainment and other information. They are unable to take part in a very basic and ubiquitous recreational activity with their family, friends and colleagues. It is frustrating, isolating and discriminatory.

In April 2017, Government announced the establishment of an audio description working group. The working group brought together representatives from the broadcasting and streaming industries, audio description service providers and consumer representatives to explore options to increase the availability of audio description services in Australia.

The working group handed a report to government and it was released on 22 May 2018. No policy reform has since resulted.

Election Commitment Sought

- A clear pathway to the introduction of audio description in Australia
- An amendment to the Broadcasting Services Act that will mandate audio description on Australian television



Independent and safe mobility

As digital technologies continue to supersede machinery we see both positive and very disruptive impacts on the blindness and vision impaired community.

An example of this is the increasing prevalence of electric / hybrid vehicles (silent cars) on Australian roadways. Silent cars pose a serious threat to the safety of people who rely on sound to navigate the built environment, people who are blind or vision impaired.

In November 2018 the Transport and Infrastructure Council were presented with a research report into the impact of electric / hybrid vehicles and bicycles on pedestrians who are blind or vision impaired which had been conducted by Monash University Accident Research Centre in collaboration with Vision Australia.



The research found that 35% of respondents experienced either a collision or near-collision with an electric / hybrid vehicle.

The key recommendation resulting from this research is to adopt UN Regulation 138-01 which would require all electric and hybrid cars to emit sounds by having an Acoustic Vehicle Alerting System fitted. The recommendation was made to the Transport and Infrastructure Council however no acknowledgment from Council was received.

At the recent Senate Estimate Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure it was revealed that there is no specific work being actioned on a noise standard for electric vehicles in the vehicle safety standards ADR work program.

Election Commitment Sought

We call on Government to direct the Transport and Infrastructure Council to include an Australian Design Rule (ADR) for a minimum noise standard for electric and hybrid vehicles, in the National Road Safety Action Plan 2018-20.

The right to a secret, independent and verifiable vote



The right to a secret, independent and verifiable vote is taken for granted by most people. This is not the case for people who are blind or vision impaired at Federal elections. iVote has been used successfully in NSW and we recommend that a similar system be implemented federally.

iVote or other forms of remote electronic voting, allow anyone with a disability, restricted mobility or reading difficulty to vote independently, in secret and on Election Day. Currently the blindness and vision impaired community are obliged to rely on human assistance to vote, often leaving people feeling demoralised.

In November 2018, The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters released their report from their Inquiry into and report on all aspects of the conduct of the 2016 Federal Election and matters related thereto. Recommendation 24 from the report is as follows:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government investigate the feasibility of extending the NSW iVote system to blind- and low-vision voters only in federal elections

Election Commitment Sought

The Australian Government implement the iVote system for Federal Elections to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired can cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote, in line with the rest of the community.



Contact:

For further information please contact:

Rosemary Spry
Executive Officer

Australian Blindness Forum

e: rosemary.spry@australianblindnessforum.org.au

m: 0499 018 779

