# **2016-17 Overview Report**

# **For the year ended 30 June 2017**

# Prepared by John Simpson, President and Emma Bennison, former President and CEO

## Overview

Throughout the 2016-17 financial year, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) has made significant progress towards re-establishing itself as the strong and effective national representative voice of Australians who are blind or vision-impaired. Members are engaging with the organisation’s advocacy and campaigning activities like never before, we are well on the way to diversifying our funding sources and we have a strong and cohesive board and staff team ensuring we can maintain a truly national presence. In short, thanks to the commitment of members, board and staff, BCA is now poised to effectively deliver on its mission into the future.

## 2016 – 17 Appointments and resignations

Emma Bennison resigned as BCA President in February 2017 when she was appointed as our Executive Officer. Our thanks to Emma for leading BCA through some challenging times. Following Emma’s resignation, John Simpson was elected by the board as BCA’s new President. John had previously served as Vice-President and we thank him for his significant contribution and support of Emma in that role.

Barry Chapman resigned as a Director in November in order to contribute to working towards consolidation of Blind Citizens NSW (BCNSW) into BCA in his role as Treasurer of BCNSW. We thank Barry for his service and want to acknowledge the outstanding contribution he has made as a director of our organisation over the past ten years.

In December, we also accepted Tony Starkey’s resignation from the Board. Tony has made an immense contribution to BCA in his role as a Director and we thank him for his tireless work on behalf of people who are blind or vision impaired.

We reluctantly farewelled our CEO, Leah van Poppel in August. We thank Leah for her dedication to communicating with and supporting our members. Leah remains a strong supporter of our organisation and her ongoing contributions are much appreciated. John Devine stepped in briefly as temporary Chief Operations Officer while the board turned its attention to reconsidering the scope of the CEO role. John resigned due to ill health in November, but remains in touch with the organisation. We thank him for his short but invaluable contribution to maintaining the smooth running of BCA during a difficult transition. Lauren Henley then generously stepped in as Policy and Administration Coordinator, which she undertook on top of other employment to assist us while a new Executive Officer was appointed. Our sincere thanks to Lauren for stepping up at this difficult time.

## Report Against Strategic Priorities

The board met face-to-face in February with staff and members of the newly formed National Policy Council for an induction and to discuss the strategic direction of the organisation. The four pillars which the board determined should under-pin the organisation’s work are:

Sustainability: which requires us to achieve;

* adequate funding from a diverse range of funding sources;
* an appropriately skilled and committed staff team;
* an expanding and more diversified membership;

Credibility:  which requires a commitment to;

* evidence based public policy development and well-articulated advocacy;
* well-developed internal communications and networking mechanisms that remain in tune with the needs and aspirations of the membership;
* well-developed sector intelligence mechanisms;
* and the strategic appointment of appropriately skilled external representatives with appropriate feedback mechanisms in place.

Independence: which requires the development and maintenance of strategic partnerships across the blindness and broader disability sectors, with no organization in a position to exercise undue influence over the BCA Board or staff.

Leadership: which requires us to ensure we have;

* skilled and committed leadership;
* and a leadership training and succession plan that is integrated into all aspects of the organization.

## Funding

Board and staff have worked hard to maintain and diversify our funding. In addition to the core funding we receive from the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, we are appreciative of the ongoing support we receive from the Jeffrey-Blyth Foundation and from Vision Australia. In this financial year, we also received an additional grant from the Department of Health and Human Services through its Advocacy and Innovation Fund; funding from the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) to support our core operations and funding from the NDIA through AFDO to build organisational capacity. In addition, we were delighted at the support which members with the capacity to do so offered through our regular donations program and in response to our member appeal. Our thanks to all who made a contribution, whether large or small for demonstrating your support to BCA during the financial year. Your donations have contributed to the successful outcomes detailed in this report.

## Staffing

Past and present staff have been instrumental in BCA’s success throughout the year. A staffing restructure took place during the year to maximise the effectiveness of the team. Since Emma’s appointment in February, she has focused on implementing systems and processes to support remote working arrangements for herself and other staff. We would like to take this opportunity to sincerely congratulate and thank all staff, past and present for going above and beyond for BCA during yet another year of change and transition for the organisation.

## Member Engagement

Again this year, we have recognised the need to give priority to re-connecting with our members and finding opportunities to introduce new members to our organisation. To this end, we attended all state conferences held in 2016. These took place in Perth, Brisbane, Coffs Harbour, Adelaide, Hobart and Melbourne. In addition, we worked hard to consult with members on the structure of our branches and the need for state divisions to support the ongoing work of our local branches which we heard from members across the country remains crucial to meeting their information, advocacy and peer support needs.

We worked closely with BCNSW to plot a course towards consolidation of our two organisations in order to reduce duplication and increase service delivery to members in NSW and the ACT. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Presidents of both organisations on 26 November in Sydney, committing them to working towards a resolution to consolidate the organisations to be put to their respective annual general meetings in late 2017.

We continued to communicate with members through a range of mechanisms. These included our newsletter, “Blind Citizens News”, our audio magazine, “SoundAbout” and our weekly national radio program and podcast, “New Horizons”. We also increased our presence on social media this year, and became more active in the media through our advocacy campaigns.

## Policy and Advocacy Work

This year, we have focused on some key areas in relation to our policy and advocacy work. These include campaigning for an audio description service on Australian television, ensuring the NDIS and My Aged Care meet the unique needs of people who are blind or vision-impaired, the inaccessibility of touch screen eftpos terminals and ATMs and more.

In addition, we made numerous submissions on issues such as the national Disability Strategy, individualised funding mechanisms including the National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Aged Care, employment, human rights, banking accessibility, accessibility of state and federal elections and the mobility allowance.

Our National Policy Council, (which replaces the National Policy and Development Council) was chaired by Vice-President, Lynne Davis. They have begun work on updating existing public policies and prioritising the development of new policy.

**External Representations**

We have been represented on a range of boards and committees throughout the year. Key roles have included:

* AFDO board representation: John Simpson
* Australian Blindness Forum board representations: John Simpson and Emma Bennison
* Chair, Vision 2020 Independence and Participation Committee: John Simpson, BCA advocacy representative, Rikki Chaplin, Advocacy Officer.

## World Blind Union general Assembly

The World Blind Union, (WBU), is the international body representing the 285 million people who are blind or vision-impaired across 190 member countries. Every four years, the WBU holds its General Assembly which brings together delegates from across all continents, including from developed and developing countries. The purpose of the General Assembly is to review the work of the WBU, elect its leaders, adopt constitutional amendments and agree priorities for the next quadrennium.

Bill Jolley and myself were privileged to represent BCA as part of the Australian delegation, (which also included Kevin Murfitt and Tony Starkey) at the 9th General Assembly in Orlando, Florida from 18 to 25 August. Bill Jolley was elected to the board of the WBU Asia Pacific, and represents the region on the WBU Executive Committee. Congratulations and thank you to Bill for taking on these important roles. Another highlight was that former BCA leader and past president of the WBU, Maryanne Diamond was the recipient of the Louis Braille medal, the highest honour bestowed by the WBU, to an individual who has made a significant contribution to improving the lives of people who are blind or vision-impaired at an international level over a number of years.

As a direct result of our attendance at the WBU General Assembly we were able to trial the use of indoor navigation technology which was demonstrated to us there at the Victorian and NSW state forums. Our involvement also afforded us the opportunity to extend an invitation to Fred Schroeder to be a keynote speaker at the 2017 National Convention, which we were delighted that he was able to accept.

## Partnerships and Collaborations

During the year, the board has reaffirmed its strong commitment to building strategic relationships across the blindness sector. Collaborative relationships have been maintained with Vision Australia through the signing of a new three-year memorandum of understanding. There has also been ongoing work to develop mutually beneficial relationships with other blindness agencies. In broadening our strategic relationships, the board’s intention is to ensure that no one organisation can exercise undue influence over BCA.

## Leadership

At its face-to-face meeting in February, board and staff undertook governance training and induction to BCA. In addition, all directors have taken on responsibilities as part of their roles. Staff have also been offered additional professional development opportunities, including management training for those with supervisory responsibilities. We have also turned our attention to strengthening the leadership capability of our leaders and emerging leaders at branch level. We worked towards the delivery of a Leadership Development forum to be held in July, involving leaders and emerging leaders from across Australia.

## Closing remarks

We are delighted with the progress our organization has made over the past twelve months and hope that you, our members are too. There is always more to be done, but we are now very well placed for the future. Our thanks to all Directors for your unwavering dedication to supporting our organization and to all staff, past and present for your outstanding work throughout the year. Most importantly, thanks to you, our members for the many and varied ways you contribute to BCA. It is chiefly due to your belief and commitment that BCA is once again an organization of which we can all be proud.