# BLIND CITIZENS AUSTRALIA

ABN: 90 006 985 226

2018-2019

Year in Review

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# The Year In Review

# For The Year Ended 30 June 2019

# Overview

The 2018-19 year has seen Blind Citizens Australia, (BCA) enter a new phase of consolidation and sustainable growth. Much of the work required to rebuild the organisation was completed in the 2017-18 financial year, so this year, we were able to build on these strong foundations to scale up. For instance, we delivered significant projects in relation to leadership and mentoring in four states, held our largest convention yet in Tasmania for the first time ever, developed a policy outlining expectations of blindness service providers, represented Australia at the World Blind Union and more.

We have maintained our focus on building a sustainable organisation equipped to deal with future challenges; ensuring we have credibility with our members and stakeholders; building and maintaining strong partnerships whilst ensuring our independence; and developing the capacity of our current and future leaders. The Board and staff continue to work tirelessly to ensure we make progress on these strategic priorities. To that end, we developed a Business Plan this year, which provides an aspirational yet realistic road map to guide the organisation’s trajectory over the next three years. It is available on our website, [www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au).

The successes outlined in this report are only possible because our members and stakeholders support our work and have confidence in our organisation to represent the needs and interests of Australians who are blind or vision impaired. The Board and staff sincerely thank you for working collaboratively with us throughout the year as it is your contributions that have ensured our success.

# Staffing

Our staff have been critical to our organisation’s success this year. We had thirteen staff, most of whom work part time and nine of whom are blind or vision impaired. Staff were based across four states in regional and metropolitan areas mostly working remotely. We would like to take this opportunity to sincerely congratulate and thank all staff for their tireless dedication and hard work on behalf of BCA members. Our staff go above and beyond to ensure our members are well informed, represented and supported.

# Member Engagement

## National Convention

Our National Convention was held in Hobart from 29 March to 1 April 2019. The convention was hugely successful and was attended by 300 people, in person or via the Internet.

The theme for Convention 2019, “you can do it your way” was explored through sessions focusing on travel, health, independence, living with additional impairments and diversity. BCA’s Blindness Service Provider Expectations Policy, which was unanimously endorsed by the convention, highlighted our philosophy of collaboration, consultation and doing it our way.

One of the key focuses was the impact of emerging technology on the lives and independence of people who are blind or vision impaired. The session on the Future of Work brought this into sharp focus. In particular, we were intrigued by insights from our keynote speaker, Suman Kanuganti, (then CEO of Aira) into how people who are blind or vision impaired use technology to solve workplace challenges.

A workshop on the future of Audio Description, contributed to our work in this area and broadened the discourse.

Several awards were presented at the convention dinner. These included the David Blyth Award, presented to a person who has made an enduring contribution to improving the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired and Certificates of Appreciation, presented to people who have made a significant contribution to the work of BCA. Martin Stewart received the David Blyth Award for his forthright and tenacious advocacy. Certificates of appreciation were awarded to Doug McGinn and Sondra Wibberley for their many years of service to BCA and their long records of achievement in the education sector.

The weekend wasn’t all serious business. Our choir, “Strictly Unconventional”, was just one opportunity for friends old and new to enjoy each other’s company.

The success of convention was made possible by contributions from our sponsors; our hosts, the Old Woolstore Hotel; our staff team; and over 40 volunteers who assisted with everything from hosting our radio and internet coverage to assisting attendees to navigate the venue.

You can listen to audio of convention sessions on our website, [www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au).

## Our Branches

BCA has thirteen branches around Australia, each serving the needs of members in particular regions or with special interests. During the reporting period, some branches have focused on peer support activities which bring people who are blind or vision impaired together, while others have concentrated their efforts primarily on advocacy work and some have managed to do both.

The Sydney Branch was revitalised following a period of recess to avoid duplication between its work and that of Blind Citizens NSW, whilst the consolidation of the two organisations was under consideration. The Brisbane Branch, (which had been near to winding up) was also renewed.

The NSW/ACT Coordinating Committee, chaired by Stephen Belbin has played a significant role in strengthening relationships and building strong communications mechanisms between branches in NSW and the ACT. We also convened occasional branch presidents meetings and our branch presidents e-mail list was used to share information among the group.

Our sincere thanks to branch presidents, committee members and to all those who contribute to the work of our branches. In doing so, you provide our members with opportunities to connect with and learn from one another and to collectively advocate for the changes which make a tangible difference in their local communities. To find out more about branch activities, visit the BCA website, [www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au).

## NSW/ACT State Division

Under the strategic direction of the NSW/ACT State Division Committee and thanks to the tireless work of BCA staff, the State Division has much to be proud of. Highlights have included:

* **Our Legacy Project:** One of the issues identified in early planning work by the State Division Committee was the importance of a sense of community. The Committee was of the view that knowledge of history is important to having a sense of community. Under the leadership of Graeme Innes, with the support of the Board and staff and with the contributions of a number of BCA NSW/ACT members, a five-episode podcast series was created setting out the history of blindness advocacy and community in NSW and the ACT in the voices of those involved.
* **2018 NSW/ACT State Convention:** Despite a number of challenges, including the need to change location and transitional staff arrangements within BCA, the 2018 NSW/ACT State Convention was a success, with a large number of people accessing sessions online. A social activity (drumming circle) was trialled with great success, which as laid the ground for similar activities and approaches to future conventions. The 2020 convention will have more of a leisure focus, being a BCA Getaway, rather than a traditional convention.
* **Spring Into Action:** The idea for Spring Into Action arose in early planning and involves encouraging branches and members alike to hold events and organise activities during one month in Spring. The idea is to create momentum for activities that increase the sense of community among blind people in NSW and the ACT and make blind people more visible in the community. So far, this initiative has been held with great success in 2018 and 2019. Activities have included tours of art galleries and fruit plantations, policy/information forums and other social events.
* **Camps:** Previously, BCNSW, with BCA support, had sponsored a number of blind people to attend the Enchanted Hills Camp in the United States. The State Division continued this initiative and sent two volunteers to the camp this year. As a result of the success of this initiative, the State Division has commenced a process to explore the possibility of holding similar camps in NSW/ACT.

## Accessible BCA Elections

Following constitutional changes passed at the 2017 AGM, work commenced to ensure all aspects of BCA elections were fully accessible. We commenced the process by removing the requirement for signatures on nomination forms and consolidating the nomination forms into a single document for ease of reference. We then worked to develop an accessible and cost-effective model for telephone voting in time for the 2018 AGM, however elections were not required. The process has been implemented for the 2019 elections and will be evaluated at the close of the voting period.

## Member Communications

We continued to communicate with members through a range of mechanisms. These included:

* **“Blind Citizens News”** which was produced quarterly for the first time in many years. The magazine provides an in-depth exploration of topics relating to blindness and vision impairment and is edited voluntarily by Jonathan Craig. We thank Jonathan for his contribution to refreshing “Blind Citizens News”. Our thanks also go to all those who have contributed informative and stimulating articles;
* **Our weekly national radio program and podcast, “New Horizons”** which continued to be presented and produced voluntarily by Vaughn Bennison. This fifteen minute information package is broadcast through 23 radio outlets, is available as a podcast and is distributed through the Vision Australia library. We thank Vaughn for his ongoing commitment to “New Horizons” and express our appreciation to all who have featured on the program.
* **Email Discussion Lists:** Members have enjoyed robust discussion about issues that affect them through BCA’s email distribution lists.  The lists provide important peer-support and discussion mechanisms.  BCA also provided updates on events and policy work through these email lists.
* We continued to increase our web and social media presence this year. In addition to increasing social media engagement, we also developed [www.tv4all.com.au](http://www.tv4all.com.au) as a platform for our Audio Description campaign work;
* We continued to be active in the media through our advocacy campaigns and awareness raising initiatives.
* Our inbound and outbound text messaging service enables members to receive immediate and timely information about current BCA activities and to provide us with feedback and ask questions via text message. This is particularly critical for people who are Deafblind and those with speech impairments.
* Our phone system not only facilitates remote working for our staff, but also provides members and other stakeholders with information about current BCA activities, campaigns and events via the telephone keypad. Callers can also provide anonymous feedback via the system.

## Member Skill Development

### Peer Mentoring and Leadership Development

Thanks to funding from the National Disability Insurance Agency and the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, BCA conducted peer mentoring and leadership training to build the skills, confidence and capacity of people who are blind or vision impaired to act as peer mentors and leaders within BCA and their local communities. In total, fifty people participated in the training, twelve of whom were from regional and remote locations and six of whom identified as being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This training enabled participants to build confidence and gain skills and knowledge in areas of mentoring, leadership and governance through a series of teleconferences. Most were facilitated by leaders who are blind or vision impaired.

Participants have gone on to take on leadership and mentoring roles within their local community, educational institutions or place of employment. They have also used the skills they have gained to continue to develop their own career and look towards leadership roles.

The training has also increased awareness of the work performed by BCA and the various leadership opportunities available throughout the organisation. It has significantly increased confidence, self-advocacy skills, community and social engagement.

### Life Ready

Another way we seek to build skills and confidence and celebrate the diversity of our membership is through the sharing of stories which highlight the unique and varied experiences of our members. Through funding from the NDIA’s Information, Linkages and Capacity-building program, we developed the Life Ready podcast series. Presented by BCA member Steve Richardson, this series of five podcasts explores the experiences, values, hopes and dreams of five members from very different backgrounds. To listen to the series, visit our website, [www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au).

# Sustainability and Growth

## Funding and Finance

BCA ended the year in a strong financial position. The Finance, Audit and Risk Management Committee is responsible for monitoring the organisation’s finances and risk management strategy. The Committee was chaired by Daniel Stubbs until Rocco Cutrie took over in May 2019 to enable Dan to assume other board responsibilities. Full details of our organisation’s finances and the Independent Auditors Report are contained in our *"Directors and Finance Reports 2018-19"* available on our website, or in your preferred format on request.

The Board and staff have continued to work hard to maintain and diversify our funding. In addition to the core funding we receive from the Victorian and NSW Governments, we are appreciative of the ongoing support we received from the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation and the newly established Shirley Fund. We also have agreements in place which include a financial contribution and collaborative arrangements with Vision Australia, Guide Dogs Victoria, Guide Dogs NSW and Guide Dogs Qld. We thank these organisations for their commitment to support the work of BCA.

BCA benefitted significantly from Information Linkages and Capacity-building funding from the National Disability Insurance Agency during the reporting period. This funding supported much of the project work outlined in this report. We also appreciated the support we received from the Department of Social Services and a range of sponsors who contributed to our national convention.

In addition, we were delighted with the support members with the capacity to do so offered through our regular donations program, "BCA Backers". Members and organisations also donated generously in response to our member appeals. 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.

## Partnerships and Collaborations

During the year, the Board maintained its strong commitment to building strategic relationships across the blindness sector and beyond.

Collaborative relationships have been maintained with Vision Australia through a continuation of our long-standing Memorandum of Understanding. We also maintained collaborative agreements with Guide Dogs Victoria and Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and implemented a similar arrangement with Guide Dogs Queensland.

**The Australian Blindness Forum,** which provided a mechanism for blindness service agencies, technology providers and BCA to work on policy and strategic issues that impact across the sector, resolved to wind up during the year, with its policy work being taken on by Vision 2020 Australia. BCA had two positions on the ABF Board and, through the involvement of our CEO and President, made an ongoing contribution to this work.

**Vision 2020 Australia** is the Australian arm of an international alliance that brings together eye health professionals, blindness service providers and consumer representative organisations to address issues of blindness prevention, sight restoration and specialist service provision. BCA is an active participant in the Vision 2020 Independence and Participation Committee. President John Simpson chairs this committee and various staff members contribute to the committee's work, which has focused on the interaction between the service provision agencies and Government in areas such as the NDIS, Aged Care, employment and other advocacy issues.

**AFDO,** the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, brings together eleven disability specific peak organisations and a range of state-based "Disabled Persons Organisations" to represent the views of people with disability to Government and to the corporate and community sectors. BCA has been an active member of AFDO since its formation in 2002 and is represented on the AFDO Board by President John Simpson. During the year under review we continued to both contribute to and benefit from this collaboration.

## Diversity strategies

Increasing our connections with members from diverse backgrounds and marginalised communities continued to be a strong focus for BCA during the reporting period. We now have a more diverse board and have established a Cultural Diversity Advisory Committee to guide and inform our work. In addition, we also commenced work to secure funding to employ a National Membership Development Coordinator whose role is to broaden BCA’s membership and reach. We also established an International Engagement Group whose role, alongside considering how we represent Australians who are blind or vision impaired overseas, is also to consider how best we support people who are blind or vision impaired who come to Australia from other countries.

# Representing Australians Who Are Blind or Vision Impaired

## Systemic Advocacy and campaigns

### Audio Description

As we have done for over twenty years, BCA continued to work with other blindness organisations to campaign for Audio Description (AD) on Australian television. This year, we focused primarily on raising awareness of AD among politicians and the general public.

Specifically, BCA launched TV4All.com.au, a website and social media campaign to raise community awareness and enable our members and the public to easily write to their local members of parliament to ask for their support to legislate for AD. We also worked with other blindness organisations to hold an event at Parliament House in Canberra on 12 February to promote AD to politicians. The event was hosted by Greens Senator Jordan Steele-John to mark the introduction of his amendment to the Broadcast Services Act legislating for AD into the Australian Parliament. Over ten BCA members attended and in addition to video demonstrations, BCA CEO Emma Bennison, and member Graeme Innes spoke about their personal experiences of the impact that the lack of Audio Description has had on their family and professional lives. Regrettably, an election was called shortly after the event and to date, the amendment has not yet been reintroduced. However, there is no doubt that our efforts were not wasted as there is now an increased awareness of AD among our politicians and we continue to work hard to raise community awareness at every possible opportunity.

### NDIS and My Aged Care

Activities included:

* Provision of fact sheets and resources to assist people who are blind or vision impaired to navigate the NDIS and My Aged Care systems.
* Establishment of an Aged Care Reference Group to inform BCA’s work in this area.
* Campaigning to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired can receive information from the NDIA in their preferred format.
* Meetings with various politicians and senior executives in relation to the inequities between the NDIS and My Aged Care.
* Participation in the NDIA’s "CEOs Forum" for CEOs of diagnostic specific peak bodies.
* BCA is represented on the Assistive Technology for All working group (formerly Assistive Technology for Older People)
* NDIS website testing.
* Development of training videos and resources for NDIS planners and Local Area Coordinators as part of a project led by Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA) on behalf of the NDIA.

### Accessible Technology and Banking

Activities in relation to accessible banking included:

* Continuation of our postcard campaign to make business owners aware of the impact of inaccessible touch screen EFTPOS terminals on people who are blind or vision impaired.
* Continued working with the Public Interest Advocacy Centre to support members undertaking legal action in relation to the Commonwealth Bank's Albert EFTPOS terminal.
* Undertook various media interviews in relation to the issue.
* Following the out-of-court settlement of cases brought against the Commonwealth Bank by BCA members Graeme Innes and Nadia Mattiazzo, we developed and conducted preliminary testing of a tactile guide to be used with the Albert EFTPOS device.
* Conducted quarterly meetings with various banks to build relationships across the banking sector, raise awareness of the needs of members and discuss emerging issues.
* Consulted on the Australian Banking Association’s Banking Accessibility Guiding Principles

Activities relating to accessible technology included:

* Presentation by BCA CEO to a Human Rights and Technology conference delivered by the Australian Human Rights Commission, which resulted in a number of articles and media interviews.
* Participation in various workshops relating to artificial intelligence.
* Presentation by BCA’s CEO at an event entitled “Artificial Intelligence, Ethics and Bias” delivered by The Committee for Economic Development of Australia (WA)

### Airline Access

Activities included:

* Working with various airlines in relation to accessibility issues.
* Inviting members to share their experiences of airline accessibility to inform our advocacy in this area.
* Meeting quarterly with Virgin Australia to inform them of issues raised by members and provide feedback on their plans for future service delivery.

### Transport

* BCA sits on a number of access committees in state government transport departments, and has also consulted on the design of trains, trams and light rail in a number of states.
* Significant advocacy work in Victoria has resulted in the new high capacity trains having gangway gap barriers built in to prevent passengers from falling in between carriages. This was based on the experience and advocacy work of Martin Stewart.

## Policy Work

### Submissions and Consultations

During the reporting period BCA made 14 submissions to inquiries. Themes including banking, the National Disability Agreement, aged care and transport.

We consulted consistently with members throughout the year through teleconferences, issues raised on our email lists, feedback received via social media, via our telephone system and at meetings and forums with members. Our individual advocacy work and the support we provided to people who are blind or vision impaired to access the NDIS and My Aged Care also informed our work.

BCA has represented the interests of people who are blind or vision impaired by sitting on a number of access committees for state and federal government departments, including in the areas of transport, education, police and electoral commissions.

### National Policy Council

The National Policy Council (NPC), was chaired by BCA Director, Fiona Woods. Following a significant period of consultation with BCA members and blindness service providers, our Blindness Service Provider Expectations Policy was unanimously endorsed by the BCA Convention.

Position statements were also developed on mobility parking permits, touch screen EFTPOS devices and accessible voting. In addition, work continued on updating older policies and position statements. Thank you to members of the NPC for ensuring our policies reflect the needs and interests of BCA members.

## Individual Advocacy

Our individual advocacy service provided assistance to 45 people who are blind or vision impaired in relation to a broad range of issues, including:

* Education – including primary school, university and TAFE
* Website and app accessibility
* Dog guide access
* Provision of inaccessible correspondence from state government departments
* Employment – recruitment process; support in employment
* Pedestrian safety and access
* Uber safety and refusal of service for dog guide users

As part of the arrangements under our Memorandum of Understanding with Vision Australia, Vision Australia continued referring Victorian clients requiring individual advocacy services to BCA. We also established a similar process with Guide Dogs Victoria and commenced discussions regarding a similar arrangement with Guide dogs NSW/ACT.

### NDIS and My Aged Care Support

During the reporting period, we assisted 40 people to access the NDIS and seven to access My Aged Care. Assistance included plan reviews, assistive technology refusals and delays and transport support and information access issues. We also ran face-to-face and telephone consultations on the NDIS and My Aged Care.

# International Engagement

## BCA’s Involvement in the World Blind Union

The World Blind Union, (WBU), is the international body representing the 285 million people who are blind or vision impaired across 190 member countries. BCA supported Emma Bennison BCA CEO; and Bill Jolley, board member of the WBU Asia Pacific, to represent us at the WBU Asia Pacific mid-term regional assembly in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. They were joined by Helen Freris, BCA Director; Rob Dempsey, CEO of the Royal Society for the Blind; and Ron Hooton, CEO of Vision Australia.

The Assembly ran from 9 to 12 September 2018, commencing with a women's forum at which Helen Freris presented. The theme of the Assembly was "Leaving no blind person behind - ten years of the UNCRPD, what we have achieved so far and the next decade of advocacy". Bill Jolley was also a significant contributor to the program, chairing sessions and presenting on panels.

Emma Bennison presented Australia's country report in her capacity as head of the Australian Delegation. The report summarised highlights of Australia's progress towards full and equal rights for people who are blind or vision impaired over the two years since the WBU General Assembly held in Orlando, Florida in 2016. The assembly adopted the “Ulaanbaatar Statement”, which outlined the goals and actions agreed upon by the Assembly. The statement can be found at: <http://wbuap.org>.

Beyond the General Assembly, BCA has contributed to the WBU Asia Pacific magazine, "*East Wind*" and provided editorial feedback on request. We have also disseminated surveys, media releases and other information of interest to our members and stakeholders. Finally, as part of his role on the WBU Asia Pacific Board, Bill Jolley has continued to represent the Asia Pacific Region on the World Executive. Our thanks to Bill for his work in this area on behalf of BCA.

# Closing Remarks

This report demonstrates not only the increasing breadth and sophistication of BCA’s work but also the fact that slowly but surely, we are beginning to reach people from diverse backgrounds and from marginalized communities. We are committed to continuing to ensure our organisation meets the needs of all Australians who are blind or vision impaired, irrespective of their background, postcode and regardless of their educational or economic status. Thanks to you, our members and to the dedication of our Board, National Policy Council, Finance Audit and Risk Management Committee, staff, and volunteers, we are travelling in the right direction. Thank you for continuing to work with us to ensure BCA continues to grow in its role as the strong and united voice of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

# The BCA Team

## BCA Directors who served in 2018-19

* **Mick Baker:** Member Finance, Audit and Risk Management Committee
* **Chelsea Bartlett:**
* **Stephen Belbin:** Branch Liaison Coordinator and Chair NSW/ACT Coordinating Committee
* **Joanne Chua:** Chair, Cultural Diversity Advisory Committee, Member, National Policy Council, Member, Communications Committee
* **Lynne Davis:** Member National Policy Council
* **Helen Freris:** Vice-President, Member National Policy Council and Chair, International Engagement Group
* **John Simpson:** President; Chair Vision 2020 Independence and Participation Committee; Board Member Australian Federation of Disability Organisations; Board Member Australian Blindness Forum
* **Daniel Stubbs:** Chair, Finance, Audit and Risk Management Committee and BCA Treasurer to May 2019
* **Prue Watt OAM:** Member Communications Committee and Member, Finance, Audit and Risk Management Committee
* **Fiona Woods:** Chair, National Policy Council
* **Emma Bennison** (non-voting Member): Company Secretary; Board Member Australian Blindness Forum; WBU Delegate; member, Finance, Audit and Risk Management Committee; Member, Communications Committee

## Finance Audit and Risk Management Committee (FARM) Members who served in 2018-19

* Mick Baker
* Emma Bennison
* Rocco Cutrie (Chair from May 2019)
* Tony Grant
* Bill Jolley
* Daniel Stubbs (Chair to May 2019)
* Prue Watt

## **National Policy Council Members who** served in 2018-19

* Joanne Chua (Board)
* Lynne Davis (Board) (NSW)
* Helen Freris (Board)
* Angela Jaeschke (BCA staff)
* Greg Madson (WA)
* Doug McGinn (Tas)
* David Morrell (Tas)
* Jennifer Parry (NSW)
* Steve Richardson (Qld)
* David Squirrell (SA)
* Martin Stewart (Vic)
* Julie Sutherland (National Women’s Branch)
* Andrew Webster (ACT)
* Fiona Woods (Chair, Board)

## BCA Staff – 2018-19

* Sally Aurisch: NSW/ACT Coordinator
* Naomi Barber: Project Officer; Assistant to the CEO
* Emma Bennison: Chief Executive Officer
* Anna Briggs: Assistant to the CEO; Communications Assistant
* Rikki Chaplin: Advocacy Officer
* Kathie Elliott: Marketing and Development Consultant
* Tony Grant: Finance and Administration Manager
* Jennifer Grimwade: Policy and Submissions Consultant
* Angela Jaeschke: Policy and Advocacy Manager
* Krystel Malcolm: National Membership Development Coordinator
* Samantha Marsh: Information and Administration Officer
* Kristin Nuske: Support Linkages Officer
* Jennifer Parry: NSW/ACT Administration and Communications Officer