

# Blind Citizens Australia July 2020 - June 2021 Year in reviewbackground image of a hand reading braille Foreground text reads: Inform. Connect. Empower. Call 1800 033 660 visit www.bca.org.au

Mailing Address:

247 Flinders Lane Melbourne Victoria 3000

Tel: 1800 033 660 SMS: 0436 446 780

bca@bca.org.au Website: [www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au/)

ABN: 90 006 985 226

Cover Image Description: background image of a hand reading braille

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Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the national representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Our mission is to inform, connect, and empower Australians who are blind or vision impaired and the broader community.

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## Overview

The 2020-2021 financial year was another full of achievements and successes, despite continuing disruptions due to the covid pandemic.

2021 would normally have been a year that BCA hosted a national convention, however, due to travel restrictions and border closures, an in-person event was not possible. Instead, BCA hosted two “BCA Connect” online conferences, one in October 2020, and the second in May 2021. Further detail is included in the “How we Connected” section of this report.

BCA built on its previous work in relation to leadership development and succession planning, with the launch of an Executive Leadership Program.

BCA has a long-standing commitment to developing emerging and aspiring leaders and we have been excited by the achievements of our first six participants.

This was also a year where BCA renewed and renegotiated its partnerships with blindness sector service providers. These negotiations have ensured our sector is well placed to benefit from continued mutually beneficial partnerships which improve the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired.

## Staffing

During the reporting period, BCA employed twenty-two staff across five states, fifteen of whom were people who are blind or vision impaired. In addition, some experienced mental health issues or identified as people with disability.

With a growing and diverse remote-working team, training and development was integral to the organisation’s professionalism and progress.

Despite our best efforts, due to border closures and state health directives, staff were unable to meet face-to-face in this financial year. However, two full training and team development days were provided throughout the year. Some topics covered in staff online training days included: Media and Social Media training; updates to changes in the organisation; BCA partnerships; and vicarious trauma. Each training day also included some social catch ups, including team building activities.

Online daily catch ups and weekly email updates between staff assisted in keeping the team connected.

In April and May 2021, CEO Emma Bennison took 6 weeks of study leave. Expressions of interest were sought which saw Sally Aurisch acting in the role in Emma’s absence. In turn, Jane Britt acted in the General Manager Projects and Engagement position, and BCA member Fiona Woods, stepped in to the Policy Officer role. Emma and the board would like to congratulate and thank Sally, Jane and Fiona for their efforts in supporting the team to keep the organisation running smoothly in Emma’s absence and for taking up opportunities to gain valuable leadership experience.

## 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 Mick Baker until December 2020; with Doug McGinn taking on the role of chair thereafter. Our thanks to Mick and Doug for their stewardship of BCA’s finance and risk management activities. Full details of our organisation’s finances and the Independent Auditors Report are contained in our "Directors and Finance Reports 2020 - 21" 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.

BCA thanks and acknowledges the following departments, organisations and individuals for their support and commitment to the work of BCA.

* Jeffrey Blyth Foundation
* Shirley Fund
* Vision Australia
* Guide Dogs Victoria
* Guide Dogs NSW/ACT
* Guide Dogs Queensland
* VisAbility (now EverAbility)
* Australian Federation of Disability Organisations – Disability Royal Commission Funding through Department of Social Services
* Australian Federation of Disability Organisations – Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Consortium
* Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) Individual Capacity Building Grant through Department of Social Services (formerly via NDIS) (3 year funding)
* Victorian Government through Department of Health and Human Services
* NSW Government through Department of Communities and Justice
* Aged Persons Welfare Foundation
* DSS Volunteer Grant Australia
* BCA Backers – regular donations program
* Members who donated in response to member and Giving Day appeals

### 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 and we signed a new partnership agreement.
* Negotiations commenced with Guide Dogs Australia to have a national partnership agreement, rather than separate state-based agreements.
* A new partnership agreement was signed with VisAbility (now EverAbility) in Western Australia and Tasmania.
* 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. BCA also contributes to sector submissions.
* AFDO, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, brings together nineteen 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 was represented on the AFDO Board by BCA President John Simpson (until June 2021). During the year under review we continued to both contribute to and benefit from this collaboration.

## How we Informed

Our commitment to providing high-quality, accessible information that meets the needs of our members was stronger than ever this year as demonstrated by the following highlights.

### BCA Websites

* BCA’s website continues to be a source of information and resources for members and the sector. The Covid19 page was regularly updated with information, hints and tips for people who are blind or vision impaired navigating the ever-changing covid environment. The average monthly engagement with BCA’s website is 1,036 homepage visits per month, with the highest monthly visit for this 12 month period being 1,344.
* For employers and employees through BCA’s employment project Eye to the Future, [www.eyetothefuture.com.au](http://www.eyetothefuture.com.au), a one-stop website for resources and information on employment of people who are blind or vision impaired. The average monthly engagement with this employment website was 68, with the highest monthly visit being 126.
* Our TV4All website, [www.tv4all.com.au](http://www.tv4all.com.au) continued as a platform for our audio description campaign work offering information and calls to action tailored particularly to the broader community.

### Social Media

BCA continued to promote our programs, projects, communications and sector success via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. In doing so, we engaged with members and promoted awareness in the broader community. In this reporting period, BCA’s Facebook page had 1,324 page likes. BCA’s Twitter account had around 2,247 followers.

### Media Engagement

BCA continued to be active in the media through our advocacy campaigns and awareness raising initiatives. In particular, we celebrated the launch of audio description on the ABC and SBS, highlighted the challenges experienced by people wishing to tell their stories of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation to the Disability Royal Commission and continued to educate the community and government of the experiences of people who are blind or vision impaired during the pandemic.

### Blind Citizens News

* Blind Citizens News is BCA’s flagship publication, which is sent to all members in their preferred format.
* Under editor Jonathan Craig, three editions of BC News were published in 2020/21.
* BC News can be accessed on BCA’s website in text or audio versions, and is also available as a podcast.

### New Horizons

* New Horizons is BCA’s national, weekly radio program and podcast. It covers topics relevant to people who are blind or vision impaired.
* Hosted by Vaughn Bennison, New Horizons featured regular updates from BCA on staffing changes, programs, events and areas of focus throughout the year. New Horizons also welcomed members who shared their stories and experiences through interviews.
* BCA partner organisations and guests also joined us for important updates on their services and projects.
* New Horizons is available as a podcast, on BCA’s website and through the Vision Australia library service. It is also broadcast via the RPH Network and community radio stations across Australia.

### Member Updates

* With BCA’s focus on member engagement and information sharing top of mind, we implemented Member Updates – weekly emails to members via BCA’s announcement email list, with weekly CEO video updates, information from BCA highlighting news, events and projects, as well as updates from the sector and of interest to its 1,500 subscribers.

### Phone-based Information

* BCA’s inbound and outbound text messaging service continued to enable 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. The text message service was used effectively during BCA Connect, to enable immediate technical support, and to help facilitate questions to panels and discussions.
* BCA’s internet-based phone system not only facilitated remote working for our staff, but also provides members and other stakeholders with information about current BCA activities, campaigns and events via the interactive menu. This year, information about audio described programming on SBS was also available on BCA’s phone system. Callers also provided anonymous feedback via the system.

### BCA Inform Events

A platform for members to come together to learn about and discuss issues of importance to the sector, BCA Inform was launched in late 2020. As well as updates from BCA, guest presenters provided a unique insight to partnerships and work being done to improve access. There was an average attendance of 26 people per session.

BCA Informs were held monthly, with topics including:

* NDIS Thin Markets
* NDIS Independent Assessments
* BCA International Engagement
* BCA’s Service Charter
* Taxi and Ride Share Accessibility

### New Member Welcome Forums

BCA hosted six New Member Welcome Forums, to provide information to new and re-engaged members on how they can connect to BCA projects, programs, events and committees.

### [An Eye to the Future of Employment – Accessibility and Inclusion Beyond 2020](https://eyetothefuture.com.au/accessibility-and-inclusion-beyond-2020/)

BCA’s Eye to the Future of Employment website and videos showcasing diversity in employment of some of BCA’s members, were launched in early 2020. As part of this program, BCA had planned to deliver a symposium around inclusivity within the workplace, focusing on changing employer perceptions about people who are blind or vision impaired at venues in both Sydney and Melbourne. Again, due to the pandemic, we pivoted and instead delivered a successful online interactive workshop that showcased employment inclusion strategies. In this symposium, we heard what has and hasn’t worked well in developing and delivering an accessible workplace, particularly in light of remote working environments. Attendees participated in a forum where you can ask those questions you’ve always wanted to in a ‘You Can’t Ask That!’ style session.

The symposium was held over 2 half-days, in November 2020 and the panel included:

Day 1:

Matt O’Kane MBA, Director, Notion Digital Forensics

Jonathon Craig, Policy and Advocacy Intern, Vision 2020

Janine Sherrard, General Manager Policy, Advocacy and Engagement, Vision 2020

Day 2:

Jaci Armstrong, Non-Executive Director at Accessible Arts

Doug McGinn, Disability Liaison Officer, University of Tasmania

Colin Clark, Head Student Accessibility and Wellbeing, University of Tasmania

The 48 attendees obtained new insights and tips to promote positive change within recruitment processes and employee engagement strategies. And promoted individuals to be a part of the inclusion change and generate a new talent pipeline for their organisation’s continued success.

This event was funded by the Department of Social Services, Information, Linkages and Capacity Building program, which was formerly administered by the National Disability Insurance Agency.

### Aboriginal Blind People’s Forum

BCA, in partnership with First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN), continued to host Aboriginal Blind People’s Forums. These online forums brought together close to 30 people over the 2 events, which were on the topics of sport and education, and “Heal Country”, in recognition of Reconciliation Week. BCA appreciated the opportunity to connect with Aboriginal people and to further our partnership with FPDN.

### Access to National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Aged Care

* BCA supported people who are blind or vision impaired to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and My Aged Care. Support provided included information and resources on each stage of accessing these programs, review of decisions and plans and support with the planning and assessment process.
* BCA ran information sessions on how to access My Aged Care, as it is relevant to people who are blind or vision impaired.
* BCA has developed and regularly reviews and updates resources on both the NDIS and My Aged Care. These fact sheets are available on our website.

## How we Connected

### Branches

* BCA has ten branches around Australia, each serving the needs of members in particular regions or with special interests. 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. This year has been a particularly challenging one for branches, many of whom have needed to transition to virtual meetings for the first time. However, they have risen to the challenge and some report they will continue meeting virtually in the future.
* In 2021, BCA’s Brisbane and Toowoomba branches closed to make way for the development of a state-wide branch in Queensland. This enables members from across Queensland to participate and receive support and the branch benefits from shared resources.
* BCA’s Women’s branch provided connections and support to its members through regular telephone catch ups and activities, and email list conversations.
* The Western NSW branch was recently reinvigorated, with regular phone-based catch ups provided to its dedicated members.
* The NSW/ACT State Division serves as an important link to our branches and members in NSW and the ACT. Activities like Spring Into Action month, advocacy and representation work in NSW and the ACT, and support for branches ensures the valuable work previously undertaken by Blind Citizens NSW continues.
* We convened regular branch president’s meetings and our branch presidents email 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.

### Committees

* BCA would like to thank and acknowledge members, staff and board who participated in our committees over the year.
* Committees included: Finance, Audit and Risk Management; National Policy Council; Communications; Branch Presidents; Stakeholder Engagement; Cultural Diversity; International Engagement and Business Continuity.

### Covid Response

* BCA continued to support members through the coronavirus pandemic and the changing rules and regulations in navigating life with covid.
* We continued regular Happy Hours, an opportunity for members to connect with peers and with BCA. Each week, between 6-12 members came together for these Happy Hours.
* Trivia nights on Saturdays were a popular way of connecting in a social setting, with 15-20 attendees each week. We thank all hosts – staff, board and members who made this possible.
* BCA’s Business Continuity Committee continued to meet to ensure risk management and stability for the organisation in the time of a global pandemic, and for the future.
* BCA connected with the blindness sector by developing an email list, with the aim to share experiences, feedback and areas of most concern within the sector.
* BCA attended regular meetings with the Department of Social Services to discuss and identify issues affecting the disability sector.

### BCA Convention

In a year of uncertainty, and with border closures and health directives preventing in person events, it was important to provide an alternative to a national convention in 2021.

We hosted two BCA Connect virtual events, one in October 2020, and the second in May 2021.

BCA Connect was a virtual conference, where we shared information on important issues, provided a forum to ask questions on a variety of topics, and as is tradition with all BCA events, plenty of opportunities to socialise and reconnect were included.

For each event, we were joined by a number of experts, government representatives and key decision makers. It was a great opportunity to find out more about topics that are impacting on the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired.

In October’s BCA Connect, to an audience of over 130 people, we were excited to provide an update on audio description as part of our welcome address, provided by Communications Minister Paul Fletcher. This was followed by time for questions and answers with representatives from SBS and the ABC.

We also heard from the Disability Royal Commission, and from several key bodies involved in handling complaints.

BCA also launched several exciting new initiatives including our revamped Healthcare policies and two new programs, the BCA Hugh Jeffrey Scholarship Program and the Executive Leadership Program.

During the afternoon, attendees broke up into state-based groups to discuss matters of importance for our individual states. These forums covered topics such as transport, employment and peer support.

Thank you to our National Women’s Branch, who hosted a virtual pub and as has become tradition, we also ran our regular trivia night.

For the May event, the 75 attendees were joined by guest presenters to discuss Communication Technology; the Path to an Independent, Secret and Verifiable Vote; Wayfinding in Today’s World; and Resilience and The Entrepreneurial Mindset. These sessions were run as panel discussions, with opportunity for attendees to ask questions and join the conversation. El Gibbs, Senior Policy and Media Coordinator, First Peoples Disability Network and Freelance Communications Specialist also provided a thought-provoking keynote speech. For lunch, although it was bring your own, breakout rooms created an opportunity to catch up with old friends and meet some new members and staff. Trivia again provided another way to connect socially after a successful and engaging BCA Connect.

While BCA is committed to returning to face-to-face conventions in the future, the online format offered members who may not be in a position to attend in-person events for whatever reason the opportunity to connect and interact with attendees and presenters.

### Meetings and Forums

BCA received many invitations to present at and participate in meetings and forums. These forums engage the disability sector in a conversation on accessibility in a range of sectors and projects.

 These included:

* Australian Banking Association (ABA) consumer outcomes group.
* Australian Bureau of Statistics – census 2021 accessibility
* Australian Electoral Commission
* Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) working groups and member forums
* Assistive Technology for All working group
* ADCET Education Guidelines Advisory Group
* National Disability Gateway Reference Group
* National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)
	+ CEO Forum
	+ Working group on Independent Assessments
* Disability Royal Commission Operational Meetings
* Uber Australia/NZ
* WooliesX – the digital arm of Woolworths
* Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman
* Telstra Access Forum
* Vision 2020 Australia
	+ Independence and Participation Committee
	+ Referral Pathways Working Group
* Quarterly catch ups with Australian banks
* Quarterly catch ups with Virgin Australia and advocacy with other airlines
* Coordination of Audio Description Sector Working Group.
* Expert Advisory Group for the 3D Printing for Accessible Graphics project
* Representation on Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities
* NSW Interagency Policy and Advocacy group
* NSW Department of Community Justice
* NSW Electoral Commission
* NSW Health Community of Practice
* NSW Accessible Transport Advisory Committee
* Victorian Electoral Commission
* Victorian Public Transport access committees – including Yarra Trams and Metro
* Victorian Infrastructure Accessibility Needs Focus Group
* Victorian Police Disability Access Committee
* Victorian Department of Education Disability Advisory Committee
* Queensland Translink – platform wide access gate design / smart ticketing consultation

## How we Empowered

### Advocacy

* BCA’s advocacy service assisted to resolve 126 issues in 2020-21 financial year. This was a similar resolution rate to the previous financial year, where 129 cases were closed.
* Advocacy support covered a range of areas; some of the key themes were:
	+ App and website accessibility
	+ Transport and pedestrian access, including taxi subsidy scheme
	+ Telecommunications
	+ Dog guide access
	+ Employment and workplace access
	+ Education
	+ Healthcare
	+ Covid-related access, including covid testing, QR code sign-in, social distancing, and vaccines.

### National Policy Council

* In 2020-21, chaired by Helen Freris, the National Policy Council, (NPC), finalised and launched BCA’s Healthcare Policy, and related resources. The NPC also refreshed BCA’s Education Policy, in conjunction with a review of the National Education Standards.
* The NPC developed position statements on e-scooters and e-bikes
* All position and policy statements were developed in consultation with members.
* Thank you to members of the NPC and the many members who provided feedback to our consultations for ensuring our policies reflect the needs and interests of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

### Executive Leadership Program

BCA expanded its previous work on leadership development and succession planning, with the launch of an Executive Leadership Program.

This program is unique, with all participants being blind or vision impaired, and bringing together mentors, leaders from BCA and the sector, and program participants.

Six participants were selected via an application process. A combination of seminars, group discussions, individual mentoring, opportunities to step into leadership positions, and observation of external board meetings and AGMs, provided a remarkable experience for growth and development for emerging leaders to develop skills which will enable them to take up leadership roles within BCA and in the wider community.

### Campaigns

* Audio Description on TV
	+ After over twenty-five years of advocacy and campaign work by BCA and the blindness sector, the Federal Government announced in December 2019, that they would fund the ABC and SBS for 2 years to provide a minimum of 14 hours per week of audio described content on their broadcast TV channels.
	+ BCA worked closely with the ABC, SBS and sector partners Centre for Inclusive Design, ACCAN, and Curtin University, in the development and implementation of the audio description service.
	+ Audio description on broadcast TV was officially launched on 28th June 2020, and expanded throughout the year.
* Solutions for improving accessibility of touchscreen EFTPOS Devices:
	+ BCA continued conversations with various banks to ensure they implement accessible solutions to touchscreen EFTPOS devices.
	+ BCA had regular meetings with Australian banks and the Australian Banking Association to promote accessibility in banking products and services more generally.

### Submissions

The following is a summary of submissions made by BCA during the reporting period:

* National Disability Strategy - Response to Stage 2 Consultation
* Submissions were made regarding the National Disability Insurance Scheme, including two regarding Functional Assessments, as well as NDS and NDIS Outcomes Framework, and to the Joint Standing Committee.
* Review of Education Standards for Disability
* Access to Premises Review
* Reform of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport
* response to Department of Social Services Assistance Animal Survey
* Victorian Unbooked Taxi Fare Review

Disability Royal Commission Submissions

* Response to issues paper on Rights and Attitudes towards people with disability.
* Response to issues paper on Employment
* Contribution to Vision 2020 Australia's submission to the issues paper relating to First Nations People with Disability.
* Response to issues paper on Violence and Abuse of People with Disability at Home
* Response to issues paper on Quality and Safeguards
* Disability Royal Commission Issues Paper: Promoting Inclusion.

Six papers were submitted; the topics we addressed were: civic participation, employment, technology, education, public transport, and hospitals / health care.

### Feedback

* BCA welcomes feedback on all of its work, including advocacy, services, projects, events, publications and communications.
* BCA evaluates its projects and events via surveys and collation of feedback from participants, volunteers and organisers.

## Closing Remarks

Despite the challenges of the past year, this report demonstrates our organisation’s continued growth and development. As we look towards new leadership for BCA, we can do so with the assurance that BCA is in a strong and sustainable position, poised to take advantage of opportunities for future growth. Our sincere congratulations and heartfelt thanks to our staff and directors, past and present for continuing to go above and beyond to ensure BCA achieves its goals. Most importantly though, sincere thanks and congratulations to you, our members for the myriad of contributions you have made to our organisation’s success.

We look forward to working with you towards another year of improving the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired in 2021-22.

## The BCA Team

### BCA Directors who served in 2020-21

* Michael Baker Director (until November 2020)
* Stephen Belbin Director
* Joanne Chua Director
* Helen Freris Director
* Lauren Henley Director
* Doug McGinn Director
* John Simpson AM President
* Prue Watt OAM Director
* Andrew Webster Director (from November 2020)
* Fiona Woods Vice-President
* Emma Bennison (non-voting Member)

### Finance, Audit and Risk Management Committee (FARM) members who served in 2020-21

* Mick Baker Chair (to November 2020), member thereafter
* Emma Bennison BCA staff
* Rocco Cutri
* Tony Grant BCA staff
* Angela Jaeschke BCA staff
* William Jolley (until November 2020)
* Doug McGinn Chair (from November 2020)
* Prue Watt (until November 2020)
* Andrew Webster (from November 2020)

### National Policy Council Members who served in 2020-21

* Jane Britt BCA staff representative
* Joanne Chua Board rep (until November 2020)
* Lynne Davis New South Wales
* Helen Freris Board rep, Chair (from November 2020)
* Lauren Henley Board rep (from November 2020)
* John Danesh Krishnan Tasmania (from November 2020)
* Sean McLaughlin Western Australia
* David Morrell Tasmania (until November 2020)
* Paul Price Queensland
* David Squirrel South Australia
* Sean Tyrell Victoria
* Andrew Webster Australian Capital Territory (until November 2020)
* Fiona Woods Chair, Board rep (until November 2020)

### BCA Staff 2020-21

* Jaci Armstrong – Advocacy Projects Officer
* Sally Aurisch - General Manager Projects and Engagement
* Naomi Barber – Executive Assistant
* Emma Bennison - CEO
* Anna Briggs – Communications Assistant
* Jane Britt - Policy Officer
* Rikki Chaplin – Advocacy Projects Officer / Policy and Advocacy Team Leader (former)
* Kathie Elliott - Strategic Development / Corporate and Community Partnerships
* Miriam Fathalla – Project Officer Events and Initiatives (former)
* Peter Gordon – Project Intern (former)
* Tony Grant – Finance & Administration Manager
* Tim Haggis – National Membership Development Coordinator
* Angela Jaeschke – General Manager Operations
* Diana Kube – Policy and Advocacy Team Leader (former)
* Samantha Marsh – Information & Administration Officer
* Jill McKee – Communications Coordinator
* Jennifer Parry – NSW/ACT Program Officer
* Joelene Scot – Project Assistant
* Conor Smith – Project Officer Peer Support
* Martin Stewart – Advocacy Officer
* Joanne Webber – Project Officer Peer Support (former)
* Fiona Woods – Policy Officer (fill-in role for 7 weeks)

BCA would also like to acknowledge and thank our volunteers for their work and commitment to the organisation.