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# Federal Election and the 47th Parliament

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.

The 2022 Federal Election provides an opportunity for all parties to show their commitment to the independence and wellbeing of people with disability across Australia. A specific focus on meaningful reform in the following policy areas over the term of the next Parliament would significantly improve the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired.

## Blind Citizens Australia’s Key Policy Asks

We call on all political parties and independent candidates to commit to upholding the rights and dignity of people who are blind or vision impaired by supporting the following reforms:

1. Develop and implement a truly secret, independent, verifiable voting platform that allows for a multifaceted approach to voting
2. Introduce a nationally consistent assistive technology program to meet the needs of people with disability who are excluded from the NDIS
3. Appropriately fund the ABC and SBS to ensure Audio Description services are expanded, and provide incentives for commercial networks to also introduce these services
4. Create minimum targets for audio description, legislated under the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 to guarantee permanent access for Australians who are blind or vision impaired
5. Set national standards to ensure the safe use of e-scooters by accepting and implementing in full the recommendations of the National Transport Commission
6. Ensure the mandatory inclusion of the Acoustic Vehicle Alerting System (AVAS) in electric and hybrid vehicles by adopting UN regulation 138-01 in the Australian Design Rules and updating the Motor Vehicle Standards Act 1989
7. Introduce mandatory standards to better regulate accessibility across the banking and financial services industry
8. Improve the NDIS experience including through better transparency, and guaranteed ongoing funding
9. Accept and implement all recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care
10. Introduce disability action plans for all medical centres and hospitals
11. Extend funding for the Disability Royal Commission, and accept and act on all recommendations in its final report
12. Ensure the Disability Support Pension (DSP) is available and accessible for all people with disability who require it
13. Continue funding of Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 to ensure the development of robust action plans
14. Develop a National Plan and Roadmap to deliver on Disability Inclusive Disaster Preparedness, Resilience and Recovery, and establish a new National Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Reference Group
15. Reform the Disability Employment Services (DES) system to ensure that a person’s qualifications, employment history and overall capability should be properly considered by DES providers when they are seeking employment opportunities for clients
16. Appropriately fund the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) arm of the National Disability Insurance Scheme to enable appropriate and disability-specific employment resources to be developed and deployed
17. Introduce appropriate procurement standards and guidelines for tenders for suppliers to education services including for e-based learning platforms and text books
18. Implement recommendations of the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005

## Policy Context

### Making Technology Work for Everyone

#### Accessible Voting

Australia was the first country in the world to allow citizens to cast their vote anonymously, indeed the secret ballot is also sometimes known as the ‘Australian Ballot’. And yet, for a sizeable proportion of our population, that noble ideal remains out of reach. An electoral system that relies on pencil and paper means that people who are blind or vision impaired have for too long had to rely on another person, whether that is a support worker, a spouse or other family member, or electoral commission staff, to assist them to vote – and trust that they have completed the ballot paper accurately according to their wishes.

Steps have been taken to enhance access to voting for people with disability in several state jurisdictions, including the introduction of telephone voting, however most of these solutions still fall well short of the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.

In this election, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is calling on all political parties and candidates to commit to developing and implementing a truly secret, independent, verifiable voting platform that allows for a multifaceted approach to voting over the next term of Parliament. This system should include a combination of internet and telephone (with an automated key prompt system) voting, along with an increased focus on improving the accessibility of the paper ballot through the provision of voting information and ballot papers in the voter’s preferred format. We also seek a commitment that consultation with our community will occur during the development of said platform, to ensure it is fit for purpose.

To ensure consistency across all jurisdictions, BCA will be asking all State and Territory Governments for the same commitment.

#### Assistive Technology for All

There are 4.4 million people with disability in Australia, and yet it is expected that only 500,000 people will be eligible for support under the NDIS. While NDIS participants are eligible to receive fully funded assistive technology, people with disability who are excluded from the scheme continue to fall through the cracks. They are frequently forced to wait more than 12 months to access funding for assistive technology, partly fund or fully fund it themselves, or simply go without.

Blind Citizens Australia believes all Australians with disability should have equal access to the life-changing assistive technology they need, regardless of NDIS eligibility. In this election we are calling for a commitment to establish a harmonised and nationally consistent assistive technology program to meet the needs of people with disability who are excluded from the NDIS.

#### Maintain and Extend Audio Description

In 2020, audio description (AD) was launched on the national broadcast channels (ABC and SBS), allowing Australians who are blind or vision impaired to access TV in an equal way to their peers for the first time.

It is imperative that these national broadcasters have the appropriate funding to ensure the ongoing provision and expansion of AD, including AD on video-on-demand platforms (such as ABC iView). We also call for a commitment that commercial free to air networks will be encouraged and incentivized to introduce AD to ensure all Australians can access news and entertainment in the same way as their sighted peers. This includes creating minimum targets for audio description, legislated under the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 to guarantee permanent access for Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

#### Setting Standards for Electric Vehicles, E-scooters and E-bikes

While we acknowledge the importance of electric vehicles (EVs) as an important element of a shift to more sustainable and environmentally friendly transport, BCA has some concerns about the safety of pedestrians who are blind or vision impaired, given the often nearly silent running of these devices and vehicles.

Transport policy is often treated as a political football between the States/Territories and the Federal Government, but we believe national leadership is needed now to ensure consistent safety standards apply across the country. BCA calls for national standards to regulate the speed limit and watt capacity for e-scooters and e-bikes, based on the recommendations contained in the 2020 report of the National Transport Commission 2020. In particular, we believe that the speed limit for the use of e-scooters should be capped at 10 km/h on footpaths, or 25km/h on shared paths, bicycle paths and small roads; and e-bikes and e-scooters that are purchased and imported from outside Australia must undergo strict regulation checks to ensure that the top speeds and maximum allowed Watts cannot be exceeded.

We also call for UN Regulation 138-01 to be adopted and included in the Australian Design Rules and the Motor Vehicle Standards Act 1989. This would mandate the inclusion of a minimum sound emission through an Acoustic Vehicle Alerting System (AVAS) installed in electric and hybrid vehicles. These artificial audio alerts are crucial to indicate the approach of quiet vehicles to people who are blind or vision impaired.

These standards should apply to the full range of electric transport options – electric buses that have been added to public transport fleets, private electric or hybrid cars, and the full range of electric mobility devices (e-scooters, seqways, hoverboards etc).

#### Better access to banking

BCA regularly responds to advocacy cases where a person who is blind or vision impaired has struggled to use an EFTPOS machine because it has a touch-only interface. We believe ensuring all EFTPOS machines retain physical buttons is the only way to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired are guaranteed a legal, confidential, and consistent method of entering their PIN independently.

In this election, we call on all parties and candidates to commit to introducing standards to better regulate accessibility across the banking and financial services industry and achieve greater consistency in the design of banking products. These standards should involve a requirement that all products and devices are designed according to universal design principles.

### Improving Government Services and Support

#### Defending the National Disability Insurance Scheme

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was a significant outcome from the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and has improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of people with disability across Australia. However, trends in BCA’s individual advocacy work, show that there remain many ongoing issues with access to and continued participation in the scheme, including inconsistencies in both information – such as the evidence required for the approval of blindness or vision impairment caused by a neurological condition (e.g., acquired vision loss from a brain injury or stroke) – and in decisions such as approval for dog guides or plan reviews. Other issues our members encounter include long delays for the approval of assistive technology (AT), and difficulties in accessing information relating to a participants plan and supports.

In this election, BCA calls for a commitment that steps will be taken to improve the NDIS experience, including through an evaluation of current review processes to ensure transparency, consistency and accessibility; an increase in overall funding for the scheme to ensure participants are guaranteed high quality supports; and ongoing consultation with participants and the broader disability sector for all ongoing reform and improvements to the Scheme

#### Improving our Aged Care system

According to the Vision Initiative, around 80% of vision loss in Australia is caused by conditions that become more common as people age. This raises numerous implications for Australia’s aging population, with one in every four Australians projected to be 65 years of age or older by the year 2056

BCA has been pleased to see that the Australian Government has responded to and accepted most of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, including the development of a new Aged Care Act, funding of home modifications and assistive technology for those living at home, and better funding home supports, to ensure people receive prompt, individualised support.

Despite this response, we regularly hear from our members that disability specific supports for people who are 65 and over are inconsistent and unequal to those who receive supports from the NDIS. There has been no action taken on ‘Recommendation 72 - Equity for people with disability receiving aged care’, which states that by 1 July 2024, every person receiving aged care who is living with disability, regardless of when acquired, should receive through the aged care program daily living supports and outcomes (including assistive technologies, aids and equipment) equivalent to those that would be available under the National Disability Insurance Scheme to a person under the age of 65 years with the same or substantially similar conditions.

In this election, BCA calls for the recommendations of the Royal Commission to be accepted in full, along with a significant funding boost to ensure these recommendations can be adequately and fully implemented.

#### Quality Healthcare

BCA calls on all parties and candidates to support healthcare service reforms to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired are treated with dignity and respect through the provision of safe and accessible healthcare options.

This extends to Covid treatments and vaccines, the physical accessibility of hospitals and other healthcare locations, privacy, telehealth extension, and accessibility of all health communications – including about procedures, tests, medication and general health information.

BCA calls on the next Australian Government to require the development of disability action plans for all medical centres and hospitals, and the focus on accessible and person-centred practices.

#### Responding to the Disability Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability is a once in a lifetime opportunity for many people with disability to share their stories. This is an opportunity to shine a light on the experiences of people with disability and to influence significant government policy reform and attitudinal change. Blind Citizens Australia has made seven submissions in response to published issues papers that are relevant to blindness and vision impairment; and as part of our advocacy service, BCA has also assisted many individuals to make a submission to the Royal Commission.

The Disability Royal Commission has announced a revised closing date of December 2022. While we welcome this extension, we believe the Government has a responsibility to ensure that all Royal Commission reports are read and the extent of Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability is publicly acknowledged. We call on whoever forms government to commit extra funding to ensure individualised support is provided to those who still have a story to share.

At the conclusion of the Royal Commission, the Government has a responsibility to take action. We call on all parties and candidates to commit that all recommendations in the final report must be accepted, acted upon, and funded appropriately.

#### A Fairer Disability Support Pension

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which stipulates clearly that people with disability have a right to an adequate standard of living and social protection. In this election, BCA supports the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations’ (AFDO), advocacy and policy position relating to the Disability Support Pension (DSP): that the DSP is a crucial mechanism to protect the right to an adequate standard of living, social protection, and social participation, and should not be considered purely as welfare.

BCA urges all parties and candidates elected at this election to take responsibility for taking action on addressing the level of need and distress that people with disability experience while trying to survive on income support. We ask for a commitment that the DSP is available and accessible to all people with disability who require it – enabling them to have economic security and participate fully in community life.

### A Fairer Future

#### Australia’s Disability Strategy

BCA is pleased to see the release of the Australian Disability Strategy 2021 – 2031, replacing the previous National Disability Strategy, and welcome the seven outcome areas under the new strategy: Employment and financial security, Education and learning; Inclusive homes and communities; Health and wellbeing; Safety, rights and justice; Community attitudes; and Personal and community support.

However, for this new strategy to be meaningful and impactful for all Australians with disability, regardless of whether they do or do not access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), it must be adequately funded, and remedial action must be taken for reporting that falls short of identified targets.

BCA calls for all parties and candidates to commit to continue funding of Australia’s Disability Strategy that ensures the development of robust action plans, implementation of these plans.

#### Better Emergency Response

Between bushfires, floods and the Covid-19 pandemic, the last two years has been incredibly challenging for all Australians, but especially those with disability.

Unprecedented bushfire and flood emergencies have seen people who are blind or vision impaired, and people with disability more broadly, experience further barriers to safety and to effective recovery from natural disasters. Members have reported issues safety including access to food, medicine, and shelter – before, during and after an event – as well as problems with the accessibility of both documents and physical spaces, including: communication and alerts; evacuation procedures and the evacuations centers themselves; and the procurement of aids and equipment after loss in a natural disaster.

In addition, the measures introduced to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have often inadverntently caused people with disability to experience further isolation and created new areas of discrimination and access barriers. This includes the accessibility of the Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), QR code accessibility, vaccine access, and public communications and messaging.

BCA calls for all parties and candidates to commit to the development of a National Plan and Roadmap to deliver on Disability Inclusive Disaster Preparedness, Resilience and Recovery, as well as the establishment of a National Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Reference Group. This reference group should include representatives of all emergency response agencies, alongside the National Disability Insurance Agency, and representatives from Disability Representative Organisations.

#### Encouraging Meaningful Employment

BCA welcomes the inclusion of employment as a key outcome area in the Australian Disability Strategy (2021-31); however, we note that while employment was also a focus area in the previous 10 year National Disability Strategy, the reporting showed very little outcome and improvement in that decade.

To ensure real progress and outcomes in the employment space for Australians with disability, the new Australian Disability Strategy must be closely monitored – with transparent reporting and tracking of outcomes and results – and the Australian government must set targets, quotas and demonstrate best practice.

In the next term of Parliament, we ask for a commitment that the Disability Employment Services (DES) system is reformed to ensure that qualifications, employment history and overall capability are properly considered by DES providers when they are seeking employment opportunities for clients to ensure they are appropriately matched. Further, work must be undertaken to ensure DES staff dealing with clients who are blind or vision impaired have specialist technical understanding of their needs and capabilities, or ready access to this information.

BCA calls for the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) arm of the NDIS, administered through the Department of Social Services, to continue its focus on and adequately resource employment projects with the aim to break down barriers to access to employment for Australians with disability. Blind Citizens Australia has received funding through the ILC for an employment project, “An Eye to the Future”. This project aims to provide training and internship opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired. It also provides resources, information and support to businesses to promote accessible recruitment and employment practices. This one-year funded program has the potential to achieve significant outcomes for people who are blind or vision impaired in accessing employment. We call on the whoever forms Government at this election to guarantee further ongoing funding in order to broaden this project and to reach more participants and businesses.

#### Ensuring Equitable Education

BCA believes that all Australians have the right to access education alongside their peers, yet for people with disability, this right is yet to be recognised.

With the quick transition to online learning in the Covid-19 pandemic, many students who are blind or vision impaired were left behind across all levels of education, due to the inaccessibility of online learning platforms, and learning resources.

We hold serious concerns relating to equitable education access for students who are blind or vision impaired in engaging with education across pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors in Australia, and beyond in the context of lifelong learning.

We call for a commitment to introduce appropriate procurement standards and guidelines, where accessibility is included as a criterion for those making a tender as supplier to education and broader government services.

BCA also calls for recommendations of the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 to be adopted.

## Next Steps

BCA stands ready to work with whoever forms government after this election, and is willing to meet with any party or candidate who is willing to take action on the policy priorities we have identified.

To discuss our platform and agenda for the next term of Parliament, Sally Aurisch (CEO – Blind Citizens Australia) can be contacted at [Sally.Aurisch@bca.org.au](mailto:Sally.Aurisch@bca.org.au) or at 1800 033 660.