**BCA Inform: April, Blindness Service Providers**

On Tuesday, April 2nd, BCA Inform was held to address the topic of Blindness Service Providers and the mandatory registration for NDIS providers, aligning with the recommendations outlined in the NDIS Review Final Report.

Martin Stewart (National Advocacy Officer) began by facilitating a discussion that gave attendees an opportunity to share their experiences with blindness specific service providers. The conversation was anchored around the main topic areas of: an entitlement to service regardless of government funding; structure and context of service agreements; pricing; and the communication and interaction with staff. These are key focus areas in BCA’s Blindness Service Provider Expectations Policy (2019) – which is being updated this year.

Encouragingly, members who attended mainly spoke in positive terms of the service and support they have received from their blindness service providers. They praised the professionalism of staff, the wide range of services available (including workshops and other connections with peers), and praised the move towards accepting verbal consent for service agreements. Some concerns were raised about the lack of choice available for blindness specific services, but it was also acknowledged that this could be driven by flaws in the structure of the NDIS.

Areas of improvement that were raised by attendees included inaccurate billing for services – one example that several people identified with was where they had been billed for support worker travel on a day when they (the participant) had come into the service provider offices; or billed for too many hours for a particular bit of work being done. Other members felt that more could be done by all parties (blindness service providers, government agencies, and representative organisations like BCA) to inform people who are blind or vision impaired about what government supports and services (such as the blindness pension) they may be eligible for. Overall, members who attended agreed that the strongest likelihood of good outcomes for people who are blind or vision impaired occurs when all parts of the blindness sector work collaboratively.

In the second part of the session, Jack Reynolds-Ryan (Manager – Policy & Advocacy) led a discussion about the proposal from the Final Report of the Independent Review of the NDIS of the introduction of mandatory registration for all NDIS providers. Jack outlined the proposal, which includes a graduated registration process based on risk profile and level of engagement with participants. Attendees recognised the concerns raised by the Review Panel that a vast majority of the provider market is unregistered, resulting in very limited oversight or accountability. However, members raised a number of concerns and posed questions that BCA will be incorporating into position on the issue. This included uncertainty about the ability to buy specialised items of assistive technology that can only be purchased from overseas, as well as where different types of support (such as vet appointments for assistance dogs, or use of orientation and mobility experts) will fall in the risk profile. Some attendees spoke about their preference for sole traders and concerns about the extra wait, higher price and potentially lower quality of a registered provider.