

**2019 New South Wales Election Priorities**

***Our vision for an inclusive New South Wales***

There are approximately 126,000 people who are blind or have low vision in New South Wales (NSW) and due to an ageing population this number is expected to rise during the term of the next NSW Government.

Vision Australia is the nation’s oldest and largest blindness and low vision service provider. We have 29 centres across NSW, Victoria, Queensland and WA with 12 of our centres based in NSW: Albury, Ashfield, Coffs Harbour, Epping, Gosford, Lismore, Newcastle, Orange, Caringbah, Parramatta, Wagga Wagga and Wollongong.

We support individuals at every stage of life in a variety of ways, including: disability employment services, expert Orthoptist advice, low vision aids and adaptive technology, children’s services, orientation and mobility training and we are a registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care.

Finally, one of our most utilised services is our library. It is the only one of its type in the nation, providing people with a print disability access to more than 43,000 book titles in either audio or braille.

Vision Australia’s mission is to provide every opportunity for people who are blind or have low vision to live the life they choose. This election priorities document outlines six key areas that we believe, if acted upon, will further increase access to society for the approximately 126,000 people who are blind or have low vision in NSW. We call on candidates and parties to commit to our six areas of priority, as follows:

* NDIS
* Vision Australia Library
* Employment
* Education
* Transport
* Secret, independent and verifiable voting in local government elections

**NDIS**

The NDIS is at a crucial juncture in approaching full rollout, yet with lower than expected uptake by people with disability. There are serious pressures on the NDIS plan quality, workforce supply and provider readiness; creating a high risk of poor participant outcomes and the potential loss of access to service through market failure.

This includes challenges to deliver services for low incidence cohorts such as the blindness and low vision community across regional and rural NSW, who at present make up three per cent of the NDIS market. The Federal Government has continued a limited level of sector development support through the Jobs and Market Fund. Additional support is needed to ensure people with disability are not disadvantaged by the growing challenges of the NDIS.

**Vision Australia call on the next NSW Government to:**

* Provide targeted funding to support NSW workforce development and service provision in regional and rural areas, accounting for low incidence cohorts of disability.
* Funding for sector support and development to an amount of $250,000.

**Vision Australia Library**
Vision Australia operates the nation’s only national print disability library, offering accessible information to people who are blind or have low vision, or a print disability. A print disability includes people who have a perceptual disability, amputees and people with chronic arthritis or quadriplegia.

Until recently, before the NDIS, Vision Australia was able to co-subsidise the library service. However, the withdrawal of block funding associated with the NDIS means we can no longer co-subsidise and face the absence of a sustainable income source. While we receive almost $200,000 of funding from NSW for the library, this funding is not library funding and is temporary transition support rather than ongoing funding.

We do however receive ongoing library funding from the Victorian Government for an amount of $1.6 million per annum. There are equal numbers of Victorian library members as those in NSW.

Without significant and urgent financial assistance from NSW, there is the risk that this one of a kind library service will no longer be available to people who are blind or have low vision, or have a print disability, in NSW.

The Vision Australia Library service offers not only 43,000 fiction and non-fiction book titles, it also offers members access to hundreds of newspapers including all national daily papers, access to electronic journals and reference books, podcasts, sport fixtures and a wide range of magazines. Alongside our unique audio, online and braille collection, our specialist library staff can provide advice to our members on their reading choices, on technology available to them to access material and for people recently diagnosed with blindness or low vision, staff can assist with the life change of reading with their eyes, to reading with their ears or in some cases, taking up braille.

The Vision Australia Library can support people across all stages of life. Our Feelix Library provides braille and audio kits to children aged 0-7 and our general library offers content for students, children, young adults and adults. Additionally, the Vision Australia Library collection has 8000+ braille and ebraille titles and 1200+ music braille pieces.

The Vision Australia Library began as the Victorian Braille Library in 1894. In the early 1930’s talking books were recorded and included in the catalogue and the Library became the Braille and Talking Book Library. In the time between its foundation and now, the Library has evolved through providing information on vinyl, on cassettes and on CD to a complete talking book digital service. In December 2018, CDs were phased out and our Library members are now streaming content via a wi-fi Daisy Player, our VA Connect app and/or a device called the Envoy Connect.

While mainstream libraries often have a selection of audio books within their collections, there are no libraries in the state that provide books in braille or Daisy format and commonly the audio book choices are extremely limited.

Below, one of our clients, who has been a member of the library through the days of books on vinyl, cassettes and CDs. and who now accesses her books through downloads using a DAISY 3G player, talks about what The Vision Australia Library means to her:

*“I love using my 3G player. They are extremely simple to use, and the point of the matter is that you don’t have to get any books in the post, and you don’t have to post them back. You just press a button and your books go, and you get more loaded on to your machine. It’s a great way to read. I borrow a lot because I do enjoy reading. Whenever I have had a stressful day at work, as we all have sometimes, you come home and you put the book on, put the heater on, put the jug on, and you think, ‘Oh, I’m in another world now’. I am a prolific braille reader as well, but having the audio books is fabulous because you can do other things while you’re reading. With audio books, you can prepare meals. You can do anything.”*

**Vision Australia call on the next NSW Government to:**

       Help maintain access to accessible information to the approximately 126,000 people in New South Wales who are blind or have low vision, by providing funding to the Vision Australia Library for the amount of $500,000 per annum.

**Employment**The unemployment rate of people who are blind or have low vision sits at 52%[[1]](#footnote-1). While the NSW public sector has made progress towards increasing equal access to employment for people with disability, more must be done.

We acknowledge NSW politicians and the Department of Finance for updating the requirements of the government’s information and communications technology (ICT) services scheme (SCM0020), to include AS EN 301 549.

AS EN 301 549 is the standard that exists to guide the procurement of accessible information and communications technology. We have identified inaccessible workplaces as a major barrier to employment for people who are blind or have low vision, so we are encouraged to see NSW has begun work to include this standard within the public service procurement process.

We recommend a further measure is adopted by the next NSW Government to help combat the high unemployment rate of people who are blind or have low vision.

**Social procurement**
We urge the next NSW Government to develop a whole-of-government social procurement framework, to enhance economic opportunities for people with disability. As Government is a major procurer of goods and services, we ask that disability employment targets are included within each government contract.

**Vision Australia call on the next NSW Government to:**

* Develop a social procurement plan which includes affirmative action recruitment of people with disability.

**Access to braille for school children**Access to braille materials is a fundamental right of all people who are blind or who are unable to effectively access print material. This right is protected by principles set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which Australia has signed and ratified and is therefore bound by the obligations it establishes.

While information in audio format is vital to many people, it is not a replacement for braille since it does not provide direct access to the core elements of literacy. Braille and audio are complementary, not competing, ways of accessing information.

State and Territory Governments have a responsibility to not only provide curricular materials in accessible formats such as braille but to provide the teaching of braille to children who cannot use print effectively. It is vital that braille is maintained and expanded within schools to ensure the true principles of literacy are available to children who are blind or unable to use print effectively, and that it is not phased out in an assumption that audio is an adequate way to access information.

**Vision Australia call on the next NSW Government to:**

* Ensure NSW students who are unable to use print effectively have equal access to instruction in braille as sighted students have to learning to read and write in print.
* Ensure braille equipment is readily available for children within NSW schools

**Transport**

People who are blind or have low vision cannot drive and rely heavily on public and point to point transport to travel independently. Point to point transport, such as taxis and Uber, are the closest equivalent to private car transport for people who are blind or have low vision and are critical to independent access to the community.

The majority of people who are blind or have low vision in NSW make use of the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) fare subsidy. The TTSS can be used in NSW taxis and covers 50 per cent of the fare, up to $60 per trip. The TTSS fare subsidy exists to counter the non-optional transport costs of disability.

We have become aware of a nation-wide State and Federal Government intention to remove taxi fare subsidies for people who are eligible for NDIS funding. We believe this will leave many people who are blind or have low vision stranded without adequate transport support.

While NDIS packages can include funding for transport, our anecdotal evidence tells us that it is often inadequate and inconsistent from case to case. We are very concerned people in NSW will be worse off under NDIS funding if the TTSS is removed.

**Bus announcements**

Public transport is frequently used by people who are blind or have low vision to travel to work, school, medical appointments and social occasions. Audio announcements on public transport is imperative for people who are blind or have low vision to travel safely. While buses in NSW are fitted with audio announcements, bus drivers can choose to switch off the announcements at their discretion.

Without audio announcements on buses, people who are blind or have low vision face the risk of missing their stop, potentially leading to a rushed, unsafe attempt to exit the bus or they may get off the bus at the wrong stop and find themselves stranded in unfamiliar surrounds.

To ensure all buses provide audio announcements for those travellers who rely on them, we seek a commitment to the development of a policy prohibiting bus drivers from turning off audio announcements with a clear sanction if they do not comply.

**AIRA**

Aira is a new subscription based service that has the ability to make the built environment more accessible for people who are blind or have low vision.

Through wearable smart glasses or a smart phone that beams live stream footage, Aira connects people who are blind or have low vision to a trained professional agent who then becomes their ‘eyes’, helping to navigate the built environment, colour match clothes, read a whiteboard and/or travel with increased confidence.

We call on the next NSW Government to sponsor this vital service by providing free Aira access to travellers at Central, Wynyard and Circular Quay stations.

**Vision Australia call on the next NSW Government to:**

* Ensure all NDIS participants are not worse off for transport funding after they enter the NDIS, by committing to keeping the TTSS until such time as NDIS travel funding is proven to be adequate and consistent.
* Develop a policy prohibiting bus drivers from turning off audible bus announcements.
* Provide free Aira service to travellers at Central, Wynyard, and Circular Quay stations.

**Secret, independent and verifiable voting at NSW local government elections**

The right to a secret, independent and verifiable vote on any given election day is taken for granted by most people, but for people who are blind or have low vision this still remains out of reach in both local and federal elections in NSW.

Vision Australia congratulates NSW politicians and the NSW Electoral Commission for establishing the iVote system which allows anyone with a disability, restricted mobility or in remote locations to a secret, independent and verifiable vote at state elections. However there is more that can be done to make the democratic process truly equal for all people of NSW.

As the NSW Electoral Act does not currently allow for the provision of online voting in local government elections we urge for an amendment to the Act to expand the provision of iVote or another form of online voting.

**Vision Australia calls on the next NSW Government to:**

* Amend the NSW Electoral Act to allow the NSW Electoral Commission to extend online voting to local government elections.

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1. Client Insights Unit - Vision Australia (2018), "Employment Research Survey Report 2018" – Service Innovation Department [↑](#footnote-ref-1)