**Vision Australia Submission: Draft National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy**

Submission to: Care and Support Economy Taskforce, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

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Submission approved by: Chris Edwards, Director Government Relations and Advocacy, NDIS and Aged Care, Vision Australia

# Introduction

Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet regarding the draft National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy (the Strategy). Our submission will focus on four areas specific to the care and support needs of the blindness and low vision community. These are:

1. Flexible funding models
2. Accessibility of digital systems
3. Maintenance of the ‘gig economy’
4. Importance of local workers

# Flexible Funding Models

People who are blind or have low vision often receive care and support services from multiple providers. Some personal care services (for example, home maintenance and social access services) may be accessed regularly, whereas services such as specialised vision and allied health supports are more likely to be accessed episodically, in response to a change in circumstance or the level of vision of a person.

Under the individualised funding model, for specialised providers like Vision Australia, the cost of onboarding a client often outweighs the monetary value of services provided, with most clients accessing small volumes of support sporadically. This is more apparent again in the thin markets in which Vision Australia operates. This contrasts with personal care providers who can offset administration costs more readily, given the more regular provision of services. For example, it is not uncommon for Vision Australia to provide services to a client which do not exceed more than 5 hours in total, in circumstances where the on-boarding and planning processes for the client amounts to 2.5 hours of work. This has a material financial impact, particularly when compounded over a number of clients. It is less material for service providers who are delivering ongoing services to a client of several hours per week.

Without appropriate and tailored funding models, the sustainability of episodic service providers will be impacted. Consideration needs to be given to separate or more flexible funding models across the care and support economy to allow the continuation of all types of services. It is necessary to take account of the difference in the nature, scale and variability of services being provided when designing or reviewing such funding models.

# Accessibility of Digital Systems

The Strategy mentions the adoption of technologies across the care and support economy as a way of improving productivity in the sector. Whilst we would welcome measures which will enhance productivity and reduce administrative burden, it is vital to ensure that any systems and technologies which are adopted or introduced are accessible and comply with recognised accessible ICT procurement standards, so that they can be used by people with disability. Employment-related research conducted by Vision Australia has identified the lack of workplace accessibility as a significant barrier to the employment of people who are blind or have low vision. It is increasingly important that the skills of people with disability be harnessed in the care and support sector, and accessible systems are an important factor in being able to do this.

# Maintenance of the Gig Economy

The Strategy notes the advent of the ‘gig economy’ and its potential to deliver a good quality of care and support. It also notes the possibility of further regulation of this care model. For the blindness and low vision community, the gig economy is an important part of the care and support model, particularly in relation to the provision of low-level community access services. Whilst we appreciate the need for appropriate safeguarding measures, we believe that any regulatory framework should be based on the level of risk of the services being provided. Personal care services, for example, would warrant greater minimum standards than community access services, because of the higher safety aspects involved in delivering these services. A high level of regulation of this market, on a generalised basis though, could mean a reduction in the number of workers currently providing a very useful service.

For example, Vision Australia has a number of clients who use university students to support them in accessing the community, and for shopping, recreation and sporting activities. These students offer their services via digital ‘gig economy’ platforms, which link people with similar interests. Many of the clients can articulate their support needs, including for navigation and audio description purposes, and do not require a support worker with pre-training in these skills. We are also aware that many of these support workers would not take on this type of work if there was a requirement to complete accredited qualifications to do so. An overregulation of low-risk services such as these would have the potential to create unnecessary gaps in the care workforce.

# Importance of local workers

The Strategy notes that, given Australia’s current tight labour market, migration is likely to continue to be a part of the solution to workforce shortages. As part of considering solutions to workforce shortages, though, we would like to see a balance maintained between the engagement of local and migrant workers. For those providing care in the disability sector, the ability to understand and implement safe practices in ways that are culturally safe and appropriate is paramount to high quality delivery of services. In particular, for people in the blindness and low vision community, the need for care workers to have strong communication and listening skills is fundamental to ensuring safety, particularly around navigation and participation in the community.

**About Vision Australia**

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia’s most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support, Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Feelix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, Spectacles Program for the NSW Government, Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 30,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment.