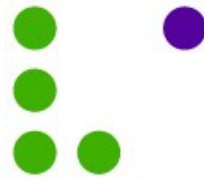


## Invitation for candidates to commit to people in NSW who are blind or have low vision



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There are close to 118,000 people in New South Wales who are blind or have low vision, including more than 110,000 of voting age. As the population continues to grow older and live longer, this number will keep rising. Significant progress has been made for our community in NSW, including through the introduction of the iVote system which was originally designed to improve accessibility. iVote was used by more than 46,000 voters at the last election and is being expanded in 2015, but there is more to be done.

This document outlines our key priorities for the 2015 state election. Vision Australia seeks a commitment on these priorities from you and your party to keep improving NSW for the blind and low vision community.

### Education

Education is key to opportunity and choice. It is a critical pathway to successfully entering the workforce and contributing to the NSW economy.

In late 2014, a decision was taken to remove the TAFE Learner Support course, a flexible program which assists students who are blind or have low vision to gain vital skills during their study, especially on the use of assistive technology.

Now, through the TAFE NSW Smart and Skilled reforms, funding is being directed to institutes to assist with meeting the needs of 'disadvantaged students'.

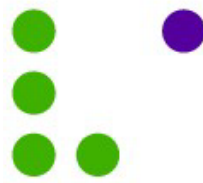
This patchwork approach is not a sufficient, appropriate or beneficial solution for someone who requires specialist disability services.

Vision Australia considers the cut to Learner Support a step in the wrong direction. We believe it will significantly disadvantage more than 7,000 children in the education system.

Given the critical importance of education, it is incumbent upon the NSW Government Education Department, institutions and educators to ensure blind and low vision students have equitable access, equipment and supports to achieve positive learning outcomes.

**Vision Australia calls on you and your party to support blind and low vision students by:**

- developing a coordinated approach throughout mainstream schools;
- delivering dedicated intensive courses on skills training in braille and assistive technology, peer and role-model support;



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- delivering professional development for key members of school learning support teams;
  - developing a streamlined approach to providing technical support and assistive technology; including introducing a NSW State-wide Vision Resource Centre, replicating best practices from other jurisdictions; and,
  - ensuring blind and low vision professionals are key partners in the development and delivery of state education policies.
- develop targeted plans that address structural barriers to employment and deliver job opportunities in partnership with employers;
  - implement the four key recommendations identified in the 'Disabling the Barriers' Report: (developing workplace culture, increasing representation levels, developing effective employment outcome measures and addressing key job accessibility and career progression issues for people with disability).

## Employment

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 19% of the NSW population has a disability. Vision Australia research shows national unemployment for people who are blind is at a staggering 58%.

In 2014, the NSW Public Service Commission confirmed that people with disabilities are grossly under-represented in the NSW Government workforce. The gap is widening, and steps, to date, have not been successful in halting this decline.

Jobs are critical to achieving a genuinely independent and prosperous lifestyle for the blind and low vision community. As the state's largest employer, the NSW Government has a responsibility to play a distinct leadership role.

### **Vision Australia calls on you and your party to:**

- double the workforce participation rates of people with disability within the public sector in the next four-year term.

## Getting Around

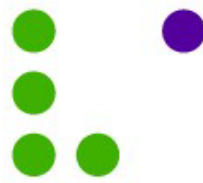
Taxis are a non-optional cost of blindness. They provide a crucial link to maintaining employment, gaining an education, and participating in recreational, sporting and other community activities.

The Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) provides support to people with a disability to access vital services and appointments, thereby facilitating independent living. The service is indispensable in rural and remote communities where public transport options are extremely limited.

In NSW the TTSS pays up to \$30 per journey (in Victoria the amount is double!)

The NSW subsidy has not been increased in over 15 years. During that time there have been multiple taxi fare increases.

Vision Australia is advocating strongly for a transition from the TTSS paper voucher system to an electronic card payment system, which works similarly to a credit



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card. This minor change will vastly improve the user-friendliness of this critical service.

### **Vision Australia calls on you and your party to commit to:**

- increase the TTSS to \$50 per trip;
- increase the TTSS to \$70 in rural and remote NSW locations; and
- replace TTSS paper vouchers with an electronic card payment system to improve ease of use and cut waste.

## **Access to Information**

Being able to access information or read chosen books is a right, not a privilege. Yet less than 5% of all printed materials are made available in accessible formats. Until mainstream publishers produce all their materials in accessible formats, people with a print disability will continue to rely on specialist service providers, like Vision Australia.

We produce books, newspapers, magazines and other printed materials in accessible formats including: braille, music braille, large print, e-Text, tactile diagrams, and MP3 files.

NSW residents who have a print disability are experiencing a “book and information famine”. Public libraries are unable to meet their information and reading needs and reading by listening isn’t the same as having direct access to text.

A lack of sufficient funding to support library and information access services in NSW is severely impacting Vision Australia’s ability

to meet the growing demand for this service.

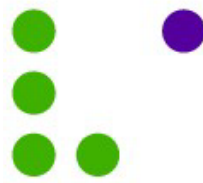
**Vision Australia calls on you to increase funding to Vision Australia to expand this vital access to information service, and make more material available.**

## **Supporting blindness and low vision service continuity in NSW**

Vision Australia, with the support of public donations from across Australia, spends almost \$13.3 million each year providing services in NSW. More than 70% of our clientele is over the age of 65. Due to the ageing population and the fact that they are living longer, the number of people in NSW who are blind or have low vision is increasing.

We employ more than 220 staff in 11 sites, with extra outreach centres throughout NSW. Our sole purpose and commitment is to provide services to people who are blind or have low vision and we directly contribute over 70% of the cost of services to the NSW community.

Without a tailored approach, blindness services for seniors and people living outside urban centres are at risk. We are particularly concerned that the Commonwealth’s aged care program does not deliver the specialised services, technology and equipment required by seniors who are blind or have low vision to maintain safe and independent living in their own homes. Failure to address these issues now will lead to an increased burden



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on NSW's health and community services sector.

Vision Australia advocated for the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and is an active service provider in the Hunter trial site.

The ongoing transition from block funding to individual packages under the NDIS is the number one challenge facing our clients and Vision Australia.

Without a fairer share of funding from the NSW Government, we will be unable to provide our current level of support to the growing number of people in NSW who are blind or have low vision. We are especially concerned about people over the age of 65 who cannot access services through the NDIS or Aged Care, for those living in rural and regional areas, and about how these services will be funded to meet their needs into the future.

**Vision Australia calls on you and your party to commit further funding, to ensure that blindness and low vision services are provided equitably across NSW to people of all ages, to address the current gaps in service support.**

### Accessible Voting through iVote

The right to a confidential and independent vote is taken for granted by most people, but for those without sight this still remains out of reach in many circumstances.

Vision Australia congratulates NSW politicians and the NSW Electoral Commission for establishing the iVote

system – allowing anyone with a disability, restricted mobility or in remote locations to vote independently, in secret and on election day.

NSW is the national leader when it comes to accessible voting. Elsewhere, accessible voting has been introduced in a limited fashion, using a variety of means, and in some cases the service is unavailable on polling day, forcing the blind and low vision community to vote early.

### Vision Australia now calls on you and your party to:

- ensure that the NSW Electoral Commission extends the iVote system to local government elections; and
- promote the adoption of the iVote system to the Australian Electoral Commission, to extend this invaluable service in support of the 350,000 Australians who are blind or have low vision, to vote independently in federal elections.

## Contact

**Jacob Clifton**

Manager Government Relations & Policy

M: 0439 112 937

E: [government.relations@visionaustralia.org](mailto:government.relations@visionaustralia.org)