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**Vision Australia Submission**

Submission to: Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

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## Introduction

Vision Australia is providing this submission to the Inquiry into the 2022 Federal Election in order to draw attention to the experiences of people who are blind or have low vision voting in the 2022 federal election. We would be happy to provide further information if the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters so requests.

Being able to participate fully and independently in the political process is one of the basic rights asserted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 29). Australia signed and ratified the Convention in 2008, yet Australians who are blind or have low vision are still not able to participate in many aspects of the political process on an equal basis with the rest of the community.

In the 2007 Australian federal election, a limited number of accessible voting terminals were provided at selected polling places to allow people who were blind or had low vision to vote independently and in secret. This voting option was not continued in subsequent federal elections, and was replaced by human-assisted telephone voting involving the use of call centre staff to complete and lodge ballot papers on behalf of people who are blind or have low vision. This is the bespoke voting option that was available for the 2022 federal election.

Human-assisted telephone voting is one component of the suite of voting options that comprise the iVote platform, which was introduced in 2011 specifically to provide people who are blind or have low vision with an independent, secret and verifiable vote in NSW state elections (and, later, local government elections in NSW). The exponential growth in iVote usage, especially between 2011 and 2015, attests to the high satisfaction with the platform by NSW voters who are blind or have low vision. Unfortunately, iVote was allowed to stray far from its original purpose by making it available, with insufficient resourcing, to other categories of voters, and its discontinuation for the 2023 NSW election has caused significant disappointment and distress for NSW voters who are blind or have low vision. Barriers to access and participation in all aspects of civic and community life are well-known to people with a disability, including and especially people who are blind or have low vision. It is one thing to experience an existing barrier, but it is another thing altogether to have a barrier removed and then find that it is reinstated. This is exactly what voters who are blind or have low vision have experienced in NSW. We cannot think of any other example, at anytime, anywhere in Australia, where a long-standing discriminatory barrier to participation by people with a disability has been removed and then erected again a decade later.

## Limitation to Human-Assisted Telephone Voting

Vision Australia and other organisations in the blindness and low vision sector are unwavering in our strong view that human-assisted telephone voting, used in isolation, does not constitute a way for people who are blind or have low vision to cast an independent, secret and verifiable vote.

The lack of progress in providing more equitable voting options represents a failure by politicians and bureaucrats to embrace the principles of access and inclusion that are promoted by initiatives such as the National Disability Strategy and most comprehensively expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Nevertheless, the continuation of human-assisted telephone voting in federal elections since 2010 has been a useful development, and it does provide some access to voting for many (but not all) people who are blind or have low vision. Following the 2022 federal election, Vision Australia conducted a survey to collect data about the voting experiences of people who are blind or have low vision, including experiences using the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service provided by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Key results from the survey are presented and discussed below.

## Survey Results and Discussion

Vision Australia’s advocacy always aims to reflect the experiences and views of Australians who are blind or have low vision. Especially given that the 2022 federal election was the first since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and hence presented unprecedented challenges for administrators and voters alike, we felt it was essential for us to gain a clear understanding of how people who are blind or have low vision experienced all aspects of the voting process. While it is impossible to predict the public health and social trends that will shape the landscape for the next federal election, we believe that the insights gained from these experiences can usefully inform planning for subsequent elections.

We designed a comprehensive, 30-question online survey that we promoted extensively through our client newsletters, social media channels and other networks. The survey collected a range of demographic data, including each respondent’s level and duration of blindness or vision impairment, whether they experience additional disabilities, and their geographical location. The majority of the survey questions focused on various aspects of the voting process: how respondents cast a vote, how satisfied they were with the overall experience, whether they had any difficulties accessing election-related information in accessible formats, and whether they had suggestions for improvements. A series of questions focused specifically on experiences with the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service.

The survey was open from late May until mid-June 2022, and received 113 responses. If time and resources had allowed us to offer the survey via telephone as well as online, we would most likely have received a greater number of responses, because we know from previous research that there is a considerable number of people who are blind or have low vision, particularly in older age groups, who find it difficult to complete online activities. As it is though, we are quite confident that the 113 responses we did receive provide an accurate and representative snapshot of voter experiences.

Of the 113 survey responses, 34% were from people who identified as having low vision, while the rest were from people who said they were either totally blind or “legally” blind (a category based on visual acuity that is used as an eligibility criterion for various State/Territory and Commonwealth benefits). Approximately 39% of respondents had been blind or had low vision since birth, while around 35% had been blind or had low vision for more than five years. Respondents ranged in age from 18-24 (4%) to 85 and older (10%), with 25% of respondents in the 55-64 age range. Almost 29% of respondents said that they live in rural or regional areas, while the rest live in metropolitan areas.

36% of respondents said that they experience additional disabilities, including (most commonly) hearing impairment, Parkinson’s Disease, peripheral neuropathy, mobility issues such as loss of balance, neurodivergence, and rheumatoid arthritis. The extent and range of additional disabilities provides clear evidence that the blind and low vision community is very diverse, and that people have unique needs that cannot always be met with a “one size fits all” approach. Having a range of options available in particular contexts will ensure that the maximum number of people will be able to benefit.

In the 2022 federal election, around 13% of respondents voted in person prior to election day, while around 12% voted in person on election day. About 17% of survey respondents said that they voted via postal vote, while almost 1% used the COVID-19 telephone Voting service. This leaves approximately 57% who used the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service.

It is clear from these results that voting in person, either prior to or on election day, was still the preferred option for a significant number of people who are blind or have low vision, despite community concerns about the prevalence of COVID-19 in public and often crowded venues such as polling booths. We are unable to compare the voting patterns of people who are blind or have low vision in the 2022 federal election with previous federal elections, but we have no reason to think that in-person voting was used less in previous elections. It is important that the AEC continues to provide and enhance support by staff to assist in-person voters who are blind or have low vision.

The Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service has been available in five federal elections. As far as we know, the survey we conducted after the 2022 federal election is the first systematic attempt to evaluate its uptake, effectiveness and reception by the blind and low vision community. Usage of the service after 12 years is still only 57%, and we are not aware of any reason to suppose that it has seen the exponential growth that was evident in the usage of the iVote platform in NSW. Usage of the service actually declined between the 2016 and 2019 federal elections. We are not aware of usage data for the 2022 federal election at this time, but it is noteworthy that a number of survey respondents with low vision were willing to face accessibility challenges with other voting methods rather than use the service.

Respondents who said that they did use the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service were asked to rate their experience with registering for the service on a 10-point scale from Extremely Negative to Extremely Positive. Almost 95% of service users rated their experience with the registration process as positive (6-10 on the 10-point rating scale). This is encouraging, and reflects the work that has gone into fine-tuning the process since the service was introduced in 2010.

Users of the service were next asked to rate their experience of choosing and submitting their voting preferences. 86% of respondents rated their overall experience as positive. The 9% difference between registration and actual voting suggests that there is a greater degree of user satisfaction when registering to use the service than there is in actually using it to cast a vote.

We asked service users how confident they were that their vote was secret. Almost 25% of respondents indicated that they were not confident. In our view, one of the serious constraints on the uptake of human-assisted telephone voting is that it is not secret, in the sense that in order to use it a voter has to disclose their voting preferences verbally to another person. While there are separate registration and voter recording processes that aim to minimise the risk of identifying individual voters, it is nonetheless easy to appreciate situations in which there is a higher risk. For example, if a person who is blind or has low vision is acquainted with call centre staff, or if they live close to where the call centre is located, or if they live in a rural or regional area where there are only a few voters who are blind or have low vision, then they may well have concerns about the secrecy of using the service. Of course, the result does indicate that around 75% of service users were confident that their vote was secret. Nevertheless, we believe that if it were found that 25% of the general community were not confident in the secrecy of the voting process then there would be a public outcry and pressure on politicians and administrators to fix it. The tradition of the secret electoral ballot is very strong in Australia, and one reason for the high satisfaction with iVote in NSW is that it did ensure a secret vote for people who chose to use either the automated telephone keypad or online voting option.

In response to the next question about whether service users were confident that their voting preferences had been recorded and submitted correctly, almost 20% of respondents said that they were not. This is hardly surprising, given the difficulty that voters can have keeping track of their preferences when they have to rely on someone on the phone to record them, and also because a voter has no way of verifying that their vote has actually been submitted.

The next question asked respondents whether there were any aspects of the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service that they found especially challenging or inconvenient, with an option to provide specific details. 34% of respondents indicated that there were.

One respondent said:

*“As a user of iVote in NSW I am accustomed to being able to vote below the line. To do this using the telephone voting service would have required hours of preparation and a considerable amount of time dictating my preferences to the call centre staff, with no assurance that my vote would be recorded and submitted correctly, not to mention the pressure I would have felt that I was taking up too much of their time when there were other people waiting. So I felt compelled to vote above the line, which is not how I wanted to vote.”*

Another respondent noted:

*“The limitation of registration and voting to weekday business hours made this process more inconvenient to fit around work commitments. Registration, although necessary, was an extra step not required of sighted voters.”*

Another respondent commented:

*“I only found out 15 mins before the registration closed. It should have closed at 6pm like other polling stations. We have the same right to vote as non-vision impaired people!”*

One respondent noted:

*“I would have really liked the ability to review what parties I had selected already rather than have someone tell me what parties I had chosen and what parties were remaining.”*

Another comment:

*“I would like to have been told that the line would go quiet while he went off to collect my voting papers. I nearly hung up because I thought I had been cut off. When he came back he said I had been on mute.”*

The following comment came from another respondent:

*“When I voted the person reading the names of the candidates kept confusing first and last names, and didn't know how to say them, so it was confusing.”*

One respondent said that they used the telephone voting service “because it was the least inaccessible option”.

Some respondents certainly referred to the benefits (including convenience) of the service compared with other options such as postal and in-person voting.

As mentioned previously, a number of respondents explained why they did not use the telephone voting service. One respondent commented:

*“The federal system still requires everyone to wield a pen. Providing telephone voting is a condescending solution for people who rely on electronic vision aids. The NSW state government can provide on-line voting for all so there is no valid reason why the federal government cannot do the same.”*

A theme that emerged from responses was a perception that AEC staff responsible for providing assistance and information to support the use of the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service appeared often to have received insufficient training. The following comment is typical:

*“I was sent an email via Vision Australia from the Australian Electoral Commission outlining the system of telephone voting. However, I found that some information provided in this message (e.g., availability of candidate lists in my preferred format) were not forthcoming, despite several attempts to get them. Several of the people I spoke to when I called the AEC did not seem to know anything about the telephone voting arrangements, and my enquiries were not followed up. Also, a significant telephone number for casting my vote was not included in the email message – I discovered it in a chance conversation when trying to get candidate information for my electorate. Overall, I had the impression that the people answering the phones had been very recently recruited and had not received thorough training.”*

Not all respondents found using the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service challenging or inconvenient, and in any case, people who used it did not know in advance that there would be challenges, and their primary usage was based on a range of considerations. We asked a survey question about whether there were factors associated with their disability that led people to choose the voting method they used. One respondent answered:

*“I cannot complete a postal ballot without sighted assistance. Getting to a polling booth is difficult, and I would not have felt safe there anyway, given the high COVID case numbers. So using the telephone voting service was a vastly inferior experience for me than using iVote, but it was the only viable option. The alternative was not to vote and contest any fine on the basis that I was not afforded equal and independent access to the voting process. I did seriously consider that.”*

Another respondent noted:

*“Voting in person is time consuming, the ballots are hard to read and it can be difficult to get to polling places on a Saturday by public transport.”*

This comment was provided by another respondent:

*“Human assisted Telephone voting although, I don't feel is secret was my only choice and at least they probably didn't know who I was. And I could do it at home without the mobility challenges to get to a polling booth, having to take somebody to assist me or feeling I couldn't vote below the line because it was a big ask. At home I could dictate my preferences to the operator, from the list I have prepared with the benefit of Vision Australia's well formatted candidates lists.”*

Another respondent explained:

*“I am mobility impaired and have to pay for cabs to get to & from a polling booth. I live on DSP so have limited funds.”*

This respondent draws attention to the need to assess risk when choosing a voting option:

*“As a high-risk person, I did not want to risk getting COVID, and I have no confidence that I could get assistance at the polling booth, so phone voting was better, even though I have no idea if my vote was recorded as I intended it to be.”*

A final comment illustrates both positive and negative aspects of the voting experience:

*“I would have preferred to use postal or phone voting but despite three phone calls to the Electoral Commission I could not get information to my questions. I did receive the papers for postal voting but found it was too difficult to print in the poorly defined squares for each letter. I must say at the polling booth I went to one of the officers was very helpful. She pulled me out of the queue to the front of the line and then escorted me to a polling booth and helped me manage the enormous Senate voting paper.”*

Overall, the results of our survey do indicate that although it does offer some important and convenient access to the voting process that must be preserved, a human-assisted telephone option alone does not offer independence, secrecy or verifiability at a level that is consistent with community expectations. Moreover, after 12 years of operation, the service needs a co-designed refresh, with a particular focus on staff training and user experience.

## Availability of Electoral Information

As has been the case with previous federal elections, Vision Australia was contracted by the AEC to produce the Official Guide to the 2022 federal election, together with candidate lists, in a range of accessible formats, including braille, audio, electronic text (which could be sent by email) and large print. In our survey we asked a number of questions about people’s experiences obtaining and using this accessible information.

The availability of the accessible information and how to obtain it was promoted widely, by Vision Australia through our client newsletters, social media channels, and email discussion lists, and also by other organisations in the blindness and low vision sector. Notwithstanding, about 36% of respondents said that they did not know about it. This suggests that in future federal elections it will be important to explore additional ways of disseminating information in the blind and low vision community.

Less than 10% of respondents requested election information in an accessible format. But of those who did, the majority (70%) experienced difficulties obtaining it. These difficulties are illustrated by the following comments.

From one respondent:

*“I needed to make 3 phone calls to the AEC. On the first 2 occasions the officers were clearly unfamiliar with the concept of braille, the availability of information in braille and the procedure for me to apply for information in braille. When I requested information in braille on the House of Representatives and Senate Candidates in my electorate I was referred to the local electoral office which could not deal with my request. One officer said it was too difficult to read all the information to me although I explained I was not asking for this. I only wanted braille. I reported the matter to Blind Citizens Australia. I then made a third phone call late in the process and received the information. Unfortunately, the braille information arrived too late as I had to postal vote due to my wife's hospitalisation. I had to solve the problem by navigating the AEC website. I understand the difficulties for the AEC with the reliance on temporary staff but I recommend that action be taken to improve the handling of requests for information in braille especially in the early stages of the campaign.”*

Another respondent noted:

*“I asked for an email just in case the braille candidate list didn't arrive on time. I didn't receive the email.”*

Finally:

*“When I looked on the AEC web site for how to order the alternative formats, they were not with the information on blind/low vision telephone voting which I think was pretty nonsensical.”*

The AEC developed a clear procedure for requesting accessible information, and this procedure was promoted by the AEC, Vision Australia, and other organisations in the blindness and low vision sector. Yet it appears that the relevant AEC staff did not have sufficient training to ensure that it was implemented. As noted earlier, the survey that Vision Australia conducted after the 2022 federal election is likely the first systematic attempt to document the experiences of voters who are blind or have low vision. After previous elections we used more informal data-gathering methods to inform our submissions to the Committee and our feedback to the AEC. Lack of staff training and awareness in relation to voting and associated processes for people who are blind or have low vision has been a recurring theme of the feedback we have received after every federal election. The respondent comments included in this submission give a clear sense of the negative impact on voters that this endemic deficiency has. We believe that the approach taken to providing training must be refreshed via a co-design methodology developed in partnership with the blindness and low vision sector prior to the next federal election if voters who are blind or have low vision are not to be further disadvantaged.

## Conclusion

The final question in the survey asked whether respondents have suggestions for improving their voter experience in future federal elections. Many respondents, especially those who have previously used the iVote platform, said that there should be a facility for people who are blind or have low vision to vote online. This, of course, is consistent with the view of Vision Australia and other organisations in the blindness and low vision sector. Other suggestions for improvement include the provision of CCTV magnification systems to assist people who have low vision to vote in person, development of an online repository of candidate information and literature in an accessible format, accessibility improvements to the AEC’s mobile website, a requirement for party How to Vote cards to be available in a format that is accessible to people who are blind or have low vision, and the provision of braille ballot papers in a similar way to their existing provision in a number of state elections. We believe that many of the suggestions have merit and could be readily implemented through a co-design approach between the AEC and the blindness and low vision sector.

Federal elections occur infrequently, and, with the exception of web and app design, it is generally not possible to test features of or improvements to the voting experience beforehand. However, the comparative rarity of federal elections does not obviate the need for continuous improvement. The results of the survey we conducted after the 2022 federal election show that a significant number of people who are blind or have low vision are still facing challenges or difficulties when voting, and point to the need for a focus on improvements to existing services, such as more effective staff training, and enhancements to the Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service to make it more responsive to the needs and experiences of users, for example by increasing user confidence that their votes have been recorded and submitted correctly, and making it easier for users of the service to vote below the line. We urge the Committee to make recommendations accordingly.

## 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.