**World Blind Union Asia Pacific**

**General Assembly, Orlando, August 2016**

**Reporting Country/Territory: Australia**

**Name of Person Reporting: Tony Starkey, Chair**

**Australian Blindness Forum**

**ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN BLINDNESS FORUM**

Australian Blindness Forum (ABF) is a not-for-profit organisation, whose purpose is to operate as a partnership between consumers and service providers in representing the issues for people who are blind or vision impaired in Australia.

In 2016, ABF has 15 organisations as current financial members:

* [Blind Citizens Australia](http://www.bca.org.au/)
* [Blind Welfare Association of SA](http://blindwelfare.org.au/)
* [Canberra Blind Society](http://www.canberrablindsociety.org.au/)
* [CanDo4Kids - Townsend House](http://www.cando4kids.com.au/)
* [Guide Dogs NSW/ACT](http://www.guidedogs.com.au/)
* [Guide Dogs Queensland](http://www.guidedogsqld.com.au/)
* [Guide Dogs Tasmania](http://guidedogstas.com.au/)
* [Humanware](http://www.humanware.com/en-australia/home)
* [Insight Education Centre for the Blind and Vision Impaired](http://www.insightvision.org.au/)
* [Macular Disease Foundation Australia](http://www.mdfoundation.com.au/)
* [Quantum RLV](http://www.quantumrlv.com.au/)
* [Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children](http://www.ridbc.org.au/)
* [Royal Society for the Blind](http://www.rsb.org.au/)
* [South Australian School for Vision Impaired](http://www.sasvi.sa.edu.au/)
* [Vision Australia](http://www.visionaustralia.org/)

ABF is guided by a Board of Directors. In 2016-2017, 3 out of 7 board members are people who are blind or vision impaired. The mission of the ABF is to promote the effective functioning of blindness agencies by exchanging ideas and information and by influencing the policy agenda of governments.

**ABF VALUES**

ABF believes that:

1. People who are blind or vision impaired must have full access as citizens of Australia.
2. People who are blind or vision impaired are involved in the decisions and choices that affect them.
3. Blindness organisations provide quality supports to people who are blind or vision impaired along a continuum of care in ways that are efficient and effective.

**ABF GOALS**

ABF’s goals are to:

* Encourage exchange of information between ABF Members and Associates and key stakeholders.
* Participate in government policy development and law reform and advocate for people who are blind or vision impaired.
* Enable blindness sector representation both nationally and internationally.
* Encourage and promote the development and equity of the level of services throughout Australasia.
* Enable Australia to facilitate its membership of the World Blind Union.
* Increase membership of ABF and encourage full membership.

**ABF MEMBER FORUMS**

ABF holds Member Forums twice a year for all ABF members and associates. The Member Forums cover key issues and important sector developments. Most recently the Member Forums have focused on the National Disability Insurance Scheme which is currently being rolled out across Australia; and the Aged Care Sector. The Member Forums are an opportunity for ABF members and associates to engage with government, key policy makers, ministers and politicians and to raise ABF concerns and issues.

**Information and policy**

ABF has made a significant contribution to the development of government policy by meeting with Australian Government Ministers and other key politicians and government officials in the disability and aged care sectors and networking with other peak bodies and organisations in these sectors. ABF continues to make targeted and comprehensive submissions to government consultation processes which is a core part of ABF’s work. Over the last 18 months, ABF has made 25 submissions to the Australian Government. Please find a list of these submissions at **Attachment A**.

ABF provides a regular stream of information via email which is highly valued by its members and associates. This information stream promotes activities undertaken by ABF, enables consultation on policy work, and provides information on national and international blindness sector activities of interest to professionals working for service providers and blindness organisations across the Australian blindness sector.

ABF is a member of National Disability Services (NDS) which is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 1100 not-for-profit organisations throughout Australia. NDS members represent all type of disability, and range in size from small support groups to large multi-service organizations, and are located in every State and Territory of Australia.

**ABOUT AUSTRALIA**

As at 31 December 2015, Australia’s population was 23,940,300 people (23.9m)[[1]](#footnote-1). Of the total population, there were almost 575,000 Australians aged 40 or over with vision loss, and around 66,500 of this cohort were blind. Like many other developed countries, Australia’s population is ageing, due to sustained low fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. The ageing population means that a higher number of people will be expected to develop age-acquired vision disability in the coming decades.

By 2020, it is projected that there will be 800,000 people over the age of 40 who will be blind or vision impaired.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is believed that there are higher rates of blindness and vision impairment in Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which is especially due to diseases of the eye and conditions such as cataracts and diabetes, and other factors like remoteness and access to services.

1. **Highlights of the past two years**

**National Disability Insurance Scheme**

On 1 July 2016, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) started to be rolled out across Australia. The NDIS is a disability funding scheme that is said to be designed to ‘provide all Australians under the age of 65 with a permanent and significant disability with the reasonable and necessary supports they need to live an ordinary life’. It is anticipated this will cover 460,000 Australians with disability, their families and carers over the next three years.

In 2013, the Australian Government rolled out the NDIS in five trial sites around Australia covering approximately 30,000 people in order to develop how the scheme would look and operate. The National Disability Insurance Agency that administers the scheme says that ‘the trial was on time, on budget and importantly, had a participant satisfaction rating of more than 90 per cent. The NDIS has been meeting the needs of the people it was set up to support.’ However, ABF is not convinced that its members will be better off under the new scheme.

ABF is concerned that the introduction of the NDIS has meant that people who acquire a disability over the age of 65 are excluded from service provision or funding under the NDIS. Instead, they are forced to seek disability services from an aged care system that sets frailty as its primary criteria for funding and service eligibility. ABF is calling on the Australian Government to amend the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act* *2013* (Cth) in order for the Australian Government to meet its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD). In particular, the Act needs to be amended to remove the age restriction that is preventing people over the age of 65 from accessing appropriate services for disability.

In addition to these concerns, ABF has identified gaps in funding for all people who are blind or vision impaired, regardless of their age, who do not become participants of the NDIS. It is not clear what happens to those people who are not considered eligible for a package under the NDIS but who still require disability services. There is no disability funding to cover these people and mainstream health services do not offer specialist blindness services to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Therefore, ABF is currently working hard to persuade the Australian Government to commit to the retention of disability funding to cover those people who are blind or vision impaired and who will not become participants of NDIS.

**Aged Care**

The Australian Government has also been implementing reforms in the Aged Care sector. ABF supports the steps the Australian Government is taking to ensure wellness, reablement and restorative approaches are included in all aged care programs. Early intervention in rehabilitation and reablement is vital for a person who is losing their vision.

However, the introduction of the NDIS has meant that people who are blind or vision impaired and who are over the age of 65 are being forced to be part of the aged care sector. They are forced to seek disability services from an aged care system that sets frailty as its primary criteria for funding and service eligibility.

These people do not have the same generic aged care needs as others in the aged care sector as they are not necessarily frail aged. People with vision loss are capable of living enabled lives in their homes and continuing to work and contribute to their community and pay tax with cost-effective and episodic training and intervention.

It is estimated by ABF members that there will be over 300,000 people with vision loss over the age of 65 and falling within the catchment of the aged care sector. Therefore, the aged care sector must be able to provide the specialist blindness services required by people who are blind or vision impaired over the age of 65.

ABF is calling on the Australian Government to remove the NDIS age restriction as it is discriminatory and contravenes the UNCPRD.

If the age restriction for eligibility for the NDIS is not changed, ABF is calling on the Australian Government to make the following changes to the aged care sector:

* Implement program funding model in aged care sector so that blindness sector service providers can quickly provide a specialised assessment and basic training to a person who has vision loss.
* Integrate specialist blindness services into the aged care sector to ensuretraditional aged care providers refer individuals with blindness or vision loss to specialist service providers; thatcurrent aged care assessment toolkits and processes have sufficient tools or triggers to identify individuals with functional needs relating to their vision loss; thatthe main focus is on keeping the individual independent, ensure their safety and keep them connected to the community**;** andthatspecialist assessment and services are provided as early as possible when an individual is losing their vision.

The ABF continues to work with its members, sector stakeholders, and Australian governments at state and national levels to ensure that the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired will be met by the NDIS and the Aged Care Sector.

1. **On-going initiatives for UNCRPD implementation**

**Marrakesh Treaty**

Australia ratified the *Marrakesh Treaty* *to Facilitate Access to Published Works for People who are Blind, Visually Impaired or otherwise Print Disabled* on 10 December 2015. ABF is now lobbying the Australian Government to pass proposed amendments to the *Copyright Act 1968* that are ready to be introduced into the Australian Parliament.

These proposed amendments were intended to underpin the Marrakesh Treaty in Australia ensuring the provisions for the production and cross-border sharing of accessible works would be easily accessible to all Australians. It is crucial that these amendments are passed in order to achieve the Marrakesh Treaty’s overarching goal of furthering the human rights of persons with print disabilities by promoting their access to literature and information.

ABF will continue to work closely with the Australian Government’s copyright department providing input and advice on the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired in order to achieve equitable access to accessible formats of published material for people who are blind or vision impaired.

**Proposed Changes to Australian Standards including Wayfinding**

ABF is continuing its work to develop a new Australian Standards on Wayfinding. The new standard relates to the provision of a built environment that is legible to people who are blind or vision impaired.

The work on this standard has been part of a 5 year review of the Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards. Ultimately, the intention is for this new standard to become part of Australia’s National Construction Code.

ABF has been advocating for this Standard for many years and made a submission to Standards Australia draft Wayfinding Standards in February 2016. ABF is currently waiting for the outcome of that consultation process.

**Voting**

On 2 July 2016 Australia held its Federal Election. The Australian Electoral Commission advised prior to the election that voters who are blind or have low vision have the options of:

* casting a vote over the telephone from any location
* casting a vote with assistance at any polling place or by post.

If casting a vote over the telephone voters had to follow the following process:

* Voters must first register to cast their vote by telephone. When a voter calls to register, they will be asked questions to enable a check of the electoral roll, and will also asked to choose a PIN. Once registered, they will be sent a registration number by email, SMS, postal mail, or through a phone call.
* Once the telephone voting lines open, voters call the telephone number and their registration number and PIN will be used to mark their name off the electoral roll – they do not need to give their name in order to protect their privacy.
* A call centre voting assistant will record the voter’s preferences on the ballot papers. The vote will be secret and a second voting assistant will ensure that the vote is recorded according to the voter’s intention.
* The vote remains secret because the call centre voting assistants will not know the voter’s name and address. Once the vote is complete, the voting assistant will place the ballot papers into a secure ballot box.

While ABF acknowledges this process allows a person who is blind to pre-register and therefore be able to cast their vote by calling the call centre from their home or work phone, we do not believe that it affords people who are blind the same level of secrecy and independence as citizens who are not blind. At best, it is only an extension of assisted voting.

ABF is continuing to lobby for a form of electronic assisted voting which would not require any human assistance. ABF and Blind Citizens Australia, as members of the AEC’s Blind Voting Reference Group, have been advocating for the adoption of the I‑Vote system which was developed for the 2011 New South Wales State Election. I‑Vote, used by 45,000 voters across a number of eligible categories, offered fully accessible internet and phone interfaces that enabled blind voters to cast a secret and independent vote without the need for human assistance.

ABF intends to continue to advocate on this matter to ensure that the voting mechanism used at the next Federal election supports a secret and independent vote.

**Audio Description**

In 2012 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) conducted a 13-week technical trial of audio description on its ABC1 channel. During the trial, 14 hours per week of audio-described local and imported programming were provided. The trial was funded by the Australian Government, and although it was considered to be a very successful trial, audio description was not continued by the ABC.

In April 2015, the ABC, again with Australian Government funding, commenced a 15-month trial of audio description on its catch-up “iView” service. In part the trial was a response to 31 complaints lodged under the Disability Discrimination Act by people who are blind or vision impaired. This trial will finish in July 2016, and ABF is not aware of any plans to continue with audio description after this time.

Despite ongoing advocacy from ABF, Vision Australia and the blindness sector, no other Australian commercial television networks have conducted trials of audio description on their television services.

1. **Key challenges**

The key challenge for the ABF and its members is currently the proposed National Disability Insurance Scheme, and the Aged Care reforms, as mentioned above.

Both of these issues require our organisation and our sector to be engaged with Government on all levels to remain in the discussion, and to ensure that our needs are addressed.

1. **Activities of ABF and its members** **and associates**

**Timor-Leste advocacy program**

Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) staff member, Frances Gentle, led the delivery of a one-week education advocacy program in Timor-Leste during January 2016. The overall design and delivery of the program was under the auspices of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) Timor-Leste Eye Program. The program objective was to address the key recommendations of the Vision 2020 East Asia Vision Program Review of the Vision Rehabilitation Program that was undertaken by RACS in October 2015.

The recommendations included capacity-building of Timor-Leste’s leading blindness organisations to effectively lobby, and collaborate with, the Timor-Leste Ministry of Education and other government ministries in the promotion of education and rehabilitation services for children and adults with blindness and vision impairment.

The three blindness organisations who participated in the program were East Timor Blind Union (ETBU), Hallibur Deficiente Matan Timor-Leste (HDMTL) and Fuan Nabilan Ba Matan Aat.

**Launch of eLearning program in Unified English Braille for people with vision impairment**

In May 2016, RIDBC launched its accessible eLearning program in Unified English Braille for children and adults who are blind or have low vision. The program is linked with RIDBC’s “UEB Online for sighted learners” eLearning program that was launched in June 2014, and both programs are based on the UEB Australian Training Manual (Howse, Riessen & Holloway, 2014).

The program launch took place during the Melbourne Conference of the Round Table on Information for People with Print Disabilities. System requirements for completing the program consist of an internet connection, computer with web browser (e.g. Internet Explorer or Firefox), screen reader (e.g. JAWS, NVDA) and a standard computer keyboard. An optional addition is a refreshable braille display. The 30 lessons are self-paced, with instant verbal feedback and result notification as the learner progresses through each lesson. Learners may choose to receive audio feedback as they complete each word in the set passages, with the option to repeat a word, spell it, and/or read the entire sentence.

The program is well suited to blind teachers of braille who want to transition to UEB, or to professionals and families who wish to provide instructional support while introducing braille and assistive technology to learners who are blind or have low vision. Program registration and course completion are free, with low cost certificates available from RIDBC for those who require verification of program completion. To register and commence learning UEB, please visit <http://accessible.uebonline.org/register>.

**Royal Society for the Blind**

The Royal Society for the Blind has advised of its current activities as outlined below:

* **Sighted Braille course** – a course run for friends and family of Braille users and used to encourage the continued use of Braille at home and as a communication tool amongst family. From this one family purchased a Braille scrabble board and now play as family on a weekly basis, this has improved the Braille skills of the RSB client.
* **iPad Boot Camp** –a training course for students to learn about the accessibility features of the iPad, how to stay safe online, accessible online shopping, social media and useful vision impaired apps.
* **Non-Visual Desktop Access (NVDA)** – RSB provided training in NVDA. NVDA is a free “screen reader” which enables blind and vision impaired people to use computers. Further information can be found at: <http://www.nvaccess.org/>
* **RSB Tech committee** – this committee comprises an Occupational Therapist, Orientation & Mobility Instructor, Adaptive Technology Specialist and a client. This committee evaluates new software sourced from around the world. Some latest examples of technology assessed include, Dot watch, Suno mobility device and aftershox headphones.
* **New app** – RSB is partnering with local a university developing an app with computer science students to look at developing a Swiss army style app that has a light detector, colour detector, object recognition etc.
* **RSB Tech Fest** – annual technology festival that showcases the latest in adaptive technology with 25 companies demonstrating the latest developments in AT from around Australia and internationally.

**NDIS/Aged Care reforms**

All ABF members and associates have spent the last 12 months holding consultations with clients on how to access and navigate the NDIS, the new aged care portal called MyAgedCare and providing information and training on how these new systems will work.

**ATTACHMENT A**

**ABF SUBMISSIONS TO AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT: JAN 2015-JULY 2016**

1. ABF response to National Disability Insurance Agency - Towards Solutions for Assistive Technology Discussion Paper – February 2015
2. ABF submission to NDIA [Discussion Paper](http://www.ndis.gov.au/document/1286) on the Framework for Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) – March 2015
3. ABF response to the 2015 Review of the Disability (Access to Premises – Building) Standards 2010 – June 2015
4. ABF response to The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties: Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons who are Blind, Visually Impaired, or otherwise Print Disabled – July 2015
5. ABF response to exposure draft legislation limiting FBT concessions on salary packaged entertainment benefits – August 2015
6. ABF submission to consultation on the Migration Assurance Policy Statement and Framework for the implementation of the National Broadband Network – August 2015
7. ABF submission to Senate Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support – 20 August 2015
8. ABF response to the Review of Commonwealth Aged Care Advocacy Services – September 2015
9. ABF response to Independent Review of the Operation of the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013 (Cth)* - October 2015
10. ABF submission to Short-term restorative care consultation – October 2015
11. ABF submission to Increasing Choice in Home Care consultation – October 2015
12. ABF submission to National Disability Insurance Agency – Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Commissioning Framework Survey – October 2015
13. ABF submission to Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission consultation on Annual Information Statements – November 2015
14. ABF submission to National Disability Employment Framework consultation– December 2015
15. ABF submissions to Willing to work: national inquiry into employment discrimination against older Australians and Australians with disability – December 2015
16. ABF submission to Proposed reform on Copyright Act 1968 (Exposure Draft of Copyright Amendment (Disability and Other Provisions) Bill 2016) - February 2016
17. ABF response to Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Education campaign for people with disability – February 2016
18. ABF submission to Wayfinding standards consultation – February 2016
19. ABF submission to Senate Inquiry into aged care sector workforce – March 2016
20. ABF response to W3C consultation on [Accessibility Requirements for People with Low Vision](https://www.w3.org/TR/2016/WD-low-vision-needs-20160317/) – April 2016
21. ABF submission to Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Commissioning Framework – Consultation Draft – April 2016
22. ABF submission to Increasing Choice in Home Care consultation– June 2016
23. ABF submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Intellectual Property Arrangements – June 2016
24. ABF submission to Australian Communications and Media Authority – Statutory Review of Captioning – July 2016
25. ABF submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Human Services – July 2016
1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *December Key Figures,* Canberra: ABS Cat No.3101.0, [http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs%40.nsf/mf/3101.0) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Access Economics (2010) *Clear Focus - The economic impact of vision loss in Australia in 2009,* Canberra, Australia [www.vision2020australia.org.au/resources.cfm](http://www.vision2020australia.org.au/resources.cfm) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)