



blindness and low vision services

Vision Australia  
Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira  
International & Stakeholder Relations  
454 Glenferrie Road  
Kooyong, VIC 3144  
Tel: (+61 3) 9864 9270  
Email: Brandon.ahtong-  
pereira@visionaustralia.org

Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT 2600  
Emailed to: [community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au)

31 January 2011

## **Inquiry into Planning Options and Services for People Aging with a Disability**

**By Vision Australia**

**Submission to:** Senate Community Affairs References  
Committee  
**Response Submitted by:** Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira

---

## **1. Executive Summary**

Vision Australia welcomes the inquiry by the Senate Community Affairs References committee into the Planning Options and Services for People Aging with a Disability. We invoke the Committee's inherent philosophical position, expressing the view that people with disability have a right and are owed the dignity of living a life of their choosing in their later years, and that direct steps ought to be taken to ensure equal participation in this regard.

Vision Australia emphasises the importance of any recommendations arising from this inquiry, to be directly mindful of the various inquiries related to the area of aging and disability also currently under review, especially the work being done by the Productivity Commission. We outline the key considerations for equitable information access pertinent to people who are blind, deafblind, or who have low vision. We also indicate the importance of developing specialist services in the area of planning for aging with a disability, and reiterate the need for information and services to be cognisant of the episodic engagement of planning information and services, by both people already engaged in later life plans and people new to vision loss.

## **2. Introduction**

Living a life of dignity and worth and having the opportunity to create for ones self, a lifestyle of ones own choosing, is a hallmark of Australian life. The values of hard work and hearty leisure are virtues of which Australian's generally hold dear, and the ability to contribute to the economic and social fabric of society is a custom that Australians consider important across all life stages. These values hold true regardless of sex, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexual preference or ability, and the principles of fairness and equality are enablers to their full and free expression.

Vision Australia, as an organisation that seeks to empower people who are blind or who have low vision through providing skills training, peer support and striving to remove the barriers that disable them, we fundamentally believe that governments,

private business and the community at large, ought to ensure equal participation and social inclusion for all. To ensure that such values remain central later in life, planning for the future is essential to maintaining this freedom. Aging positively and maintaining ones lifestyle as much as possible as circumstances change, is pivotal to a life of dignity and worth to which people living later in life have both a right and deserve.

Vision Australia welcomes the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (the Committee) inquiry into Planning Options and Services for People Aging with a Disability (the Inquiry). With the median age of our clients being 79 and with over 80 percent over the age of 70, Vision Australia is uniquely placed to provide a perspective on the needs and views of people aging who are blind or who have low vision, and those who may acquire vision loss later in life in this regard. In responding to this Inquiry, Vision Australia provides general comment to the amended terms of reference set down by the 43rd Parliament in September 2010. As our comments do not fit neatly within the delineated subjects of the Terms of reference, our perspective has been formulated under three broad topic headings: access to information; access to services; and additional comments.

## **2.1 About Vision Australia**

Vision Australia is the nation's premier provider of blindness and low vision services and was formed by combining the expertise of several organisations who shared in a common purpose. We are a partnership that unites people who are blind, sighted and who have low vision. Our goal is that people who are blind or have low vision will be able to access and participate fully in every aspect of life they choose.

To help realise this goal, we provide a range of services around the themes of:

- early childhood;
- orientation and mobility;
- occupational therapy;
- independent living;
- quality living;

- recreation and leisure;
- employment;
- advocacy;
- information access; and
- Seeing Eye Dog services.

We also work collaboratively with Government, business and community groups, to help raise awareness, promote public education and to work towards eliminating barriers for our clients in the community. Through our combined histories of providing a range of quality client focused services, Vision Australia is well placed to provide a considered voice on a range of public issues affecting people, who are blind, Deafblind, have low vision and have other difficulties accessing print.

## **2.2 Our Client Group**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) estimates there are currently about 300,000 people living in Australia who are blind or have low vision, that cannot be corrected by the use of glasses or contact lenses or surgical remedies<sup>1</sup>. With the aging of the Australian population, the World Health Organisation estimates that this number will double by 2020, as vision loss is, by and large, a disability that is age-related<sup>2</sup>.

People who are blind, deafblind or have low vision are an important section of the community. Governments and parliaments must take their needs and perspectives into account when making laws and developing policy, and business and the community, have an obligation to be mindful of their human right to access all aspects of Australian life on an equal footing as their sighted peers.

## **3. Opening comment**

In recent times, Vision Australia has been involved in a range of areas across state and Federal lines which are either substantially or in part, concerned with aging and disability, including the Productivity Commission's inquiries into a Life Time Care and Support Scheme and the Inquiry into Caring for Older Australians, the Queensland Office for Seniors Strategy for Positively Ageless, and the ACT Office for Aging's Strategy for Positive Aging. These inquiries and consultations cover a range of areas ranging from the provision of community services, housing, respite care, and funding models. How to provide care and support for people with disability and their carers and who should fund and how should care and support be funded, have been enduring themes across the spectrum of inquiries. The inquiry of the Committee under review here however, is about people aging with a disability gaining access to information and the services to help them plan for the future – how does one know about their options, not what the options are.

By way of our opening comments, Vision Australia would like to stress that whatever recommendations may come out of this inquiry, that they are mindful of these other works and the potential direct impact that each may have on one another. This is to say that what ever recommendations that arise from this inquiry into the systems, methods and funding for future planning mechanisms for people with disability and their carers, will need to be intrinsically mindful of the potential fundamental changes to the disability support and service system that may result from these inquiries, especially the work by the Productivity Commission. Whilst the “what I will do” of service provision and support may theoretically appear somewhat divorced from the “how do I know what I could do” of the systems and processes in which persons access information and plan for their future engagement, it is however extremely likely that the potential fundamental changes that may occur in the former, will have a massive impact on the later.

An example of this can hypothetically be illustrated with the variants between two types of funding models, as between the current system of service funding and with some proposed versions of a NDIS: model A, substantially block funded service providers; and model B, majority consumer centric individualised funding. Within model a, block funding arrangements, the services and indeed service providers, may be reasonably static and predictable, which in turn may facilitate a reasonably

linear transference of information to material on planning options and planning services. However under model B, individualised funding finds that service providers move in and out of areas of service provision, opportunities arise for small scale highly specialised service providers to enter the market and for that matter, cause others to drop out of the market, and where once single service providers furnished a range of service needs, such packages of service become an eclectic network of different providers.

Whilst this is only a macro level hypothetical scenario, it's illustration can indicate the impact such a shift would have on the types of models and systems that could be used to map the provision of information and services for future planning. For argument sake, under model A, information packages could be generally modular with different interest and need types organised under high level category types, significant sections of information could be largely obtained through databases audited from government funding providers, and services flow and directed according to this information. Model B on the other hand with the inherent decentralisation of funding directed by individual consumers and the fluid nature of service provision that may result, would mean that data sources for information may be also much more widely distributed and often not housed under any overarching structure for easy audit, or two, three or four databases removed from a single point of reference, often changing several times before such a central point is periodically updated, and services rather than being largely directed by static information, would need to be much more dynamic and case by case driven.

Thus, from this simplified illustration, it is clear to Vision Australia that the pending inquiry by the Committee, must have the foresight in their recommendations to provide guidance on the planning and service options needed for people aging with a disability, whilst also being open and directive enough to engage further revision as these other works progress. By the same token, any revision of the substantive recommendations would need further input by interested stakeholders, similarly informed by developments in the details arising from these other works. This is not to suggest that the work of the Committee be delayed in any way pending outcomes of other works, as it is not the lot of policy makers to have such luxuries, but is to

strongly suggest that the work of this inquiry be part of an ongoing conversation in policy in the coming years.

### **Recommendation 1**

That the Committee explicitly indicate in their recommendations arising from this inquiry, that further revision of the recommendations be incorporated as a matter of due course, as a direct inference to other work being undertaken by the Productivity Commission and other bodies.

## **4. Access to information**

Access to information is often cited as the most common barrier to equal participation in community by people who are blind or who have low vision. With an estimated 95 to 98 percent of published information not available in formats that they can access, the resulting information deprivation has substantial flow on effects in all areas of life and often completely shuts people who are blind or who have low vision off from social, economic and cultural participation<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, Vision Australia dedicates a section of this paper to information access directly relevant to this inquiry.

### **4.1 General access to information**

People who are blind, deafblind or who have low vision, access information using a range of different methods from standard print. The most effective way of providing access to published information for this population group, is to convert it into an “accessible format”. Accessible formats include Braille, audio, large print, and electronic text formats. Some of these such as Braille and large print can be provided directly from the source and read directly without intermediary technology, but others, such as electronic text formats, are accessed using synthetic speech screen reading software or programs that enlarge the image on the screen. Braille can also be accessed via electronic devices, and so long as the information is

provided in a compatible electronic format, hard copy paper is not required. An audio format that is being used increasingly to provide reading materials to people who are blind, deafblind or have low vision is DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System). The DAISY format allows audio books to be supplemented with structural features so that readers can quickly navigate by paragraph, section, page number and so on. It thus provides a reading experience that is similar to that of a sighted person reading a print book.

These formats enable people who are blind or who have low vision to fully access information in a manner directly comparable to their sighted peers. Accessing published information is both an exercise that has direct value adding consequence to the reader, as information is transferred, but also has practical implications, in terms of subsequent actions that stem from or knowledge accumulated as a result.

Thus first and foremost, Vision Australia advocates in the strongest of terms, that any information regarding the options for living with dignity and choice available to persons as they age, information about available services and the information used by services themselves that may assist with the planning process, and all subsequent industry and sector information in this regard, must be uniformly made available in these alternate formats. By and large, this information ought to be provided at the same time as other information is made publically available, but information that is not readily available off the shelf so to speak, must also be made available in peoples preferred format in a timely manner.

It should be noted that we specifically advocate “preferred format” rather than simply “an alternate format”, which are two different concepts. Preferred format means that whichever format a person prefers their information to be provided in order for them to interact with its content, that specific format must be provided. An alternate format on the other hand, is where one of the accessible formats noted above, is made available either in the first instance or offered upon request, but is not necessarily the format of an individuals choosing. The issue with this approach is that people who utilise accessible formats to read, have often learned and developed specific skills and/or obtained specific technologies, to read using that specific format. To provide another format, may quite literally not be accessible to them. An example of this is



where Braille is provided but the individual is not a Braille reader, or where hard copy large print is provided but a person is only able to access information using screen reading technology like JAWS.

**Recommendation 2**

That the Committee explicitly recommend, that all information used in the communication of planning options and the provisions of planning services, and all subsequent industry and sector information, be provided in accessible formats.

**Recommendation 3**

That all published information in this regard be made available in accessible formats at the same time as the information is made available in standard form wherever possible.

**Recommendation 4**

That in all cases, published information is to be made available in a persons preferred format upon request.

**4.2 Accessible forms**

Further to the comments noted above, it is likewise the case, that people who are blind or who have low vision, also utilize a range of methods to complete forms and the like that are different to standard means. A common method is using computer or similar electronic devices, that are either equipped with magnification or screen reading software or electronic Braille displays, that enable the reader to access the form, but also allow them to fill in the required fields independently and at their discretion.

Suffice to say that Vision Australia, as above, advocate that any forms that are required to be completed in conjunction with any aspect of future planning, also needs to be made available in accessible formats.

**Recommendation 5**

That the Committee also explicitly indicate in their recommendations or report, that accessible forms be made available.

**4.3 Accessible websites**

In this age of internet ubiquity for the dissemination of information and access to goods and services, internet access for people who are blind or who have low vision is a particular area that requires address.

Again, people who are blind, deafblind or who have low vision access the internet using various adaptive technologies. Some of these technologies are software adapted to standard computers, as with screen reading or screen magnification software, some are built in to the technology such as with some Apple products, and some are specific technologies such as Braille Notes which are manufactured solely as a product used by people who are blind and those with significant vision loss. In all these cases, people are able to utilise this technology to access the internet - access and interact with content and contribute to what is the World Wide Web.

There is however, a significant issue with the accessibility of websites, that is, despite the use of these technologies, web content is often not able to be accessed using these technologies due to the content formatting of individual sites. This can be the case where information may appear structured and easy to locate using visual means, but using a screen reader that interrogates code built into the fabric of the page itself, the information is nonsensical, navigation around the page has no logical structure, links and edit boxes are not detectable, and significant downloadable content is not available in an accessible format.

The World Wide Web Consortium, has developed guidelines for the development of online content that when followed, maximises the likelihood that web content will be accessible to people using adaptive technologies. The current version of these guidelines are the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 (WCAG 2.0). The Australian Government has recently committed to ensuring that all Government

generated information, will be compliant to the highest AA rating with WCAG 2.0 by 2015. Vision Australia therefore recommends that the Committee also hold this standard as an explicit recommendation arising from this inquiry to maximise access to information about planning options and services with regards to aging with a disability available to consumers via the web. Again, like with the recommendations above, all information published or engaged via the internet in this regard, which includes both government and private sector information should be WCAG 2.0 AA compliant. As more and more information, services, and access to services and information, is provided and engaged with via the web, this recommendation is crucial in today's world, but is likely to be even more so as we move forward deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Recommendation 6**

That the Committee explicitly recommend that all information regarding planning options and planning services and the like available via online means, in both the government and private sectors, be WCAG 2.0 AA compliant.

There is however, a flip side to accessible web content which needs comment here. Vision Australia is aware that significant proportions of people over the age of 70, are not comfortable accessing information via online means, and this is not confined to our population group but a broader social phenomena most likely resulting from the relative recency of the internet medium. This is to say that whilst accessible content is essential for equitable access to online information and the engagement that online access provides, this does not in fact cover the access concerns of all people. Thus it should explicitly be expressed in the Committees report, that online information and services should have other non-online means of access, which would ideally be accessed via phone or in person with a real human person.

**Recommendation 7**

That the Committee note that all online information also be available via non-online means either via phone and/or in person.

#### **4.4 Access to equipment and technology**

In following on from the above sections, it should be obvious that in order to access information using alternate means such as Braille or synthetic screen reading software, one must have the means to procuring such equipment and technology. It is often the case, that individuals who live with blindness or low vision throughout their life, obtain such equipment either during study or work, however, this is not always true. Sometimes this equipment is owned by a workplace or an educational institution and thus is not available to the individual at home or for their personal use. Whilst sometimes this equipment which is in most cases several thousands of dollars in cost, is obtained through government equipment access schemes or scholarships in the case of education, people are often forced to raise the funds themselves or re-allocate funds in order to obtain the equipment for their personal use. It is also often the case where vision loss occurs later in life, that individuals have simply not acquired the equipment prior to engaging with the planning stages for future living as a person aging with a disability.

A significant issue with the procurement of expensive adaptive technologies, is the fact that people who are blind or who have low vision, are over represented among the population of Australians living below the poverty line. Whilst it is generally known that people with disability are disproportionately featured in poverty and low income figures, Vision Australia produced a report in 2008 that further directly demonstrates this situation within the Australian population of people who are blind or who have low vision. In a report on employment figures among this group, it was shown that 63 percent of people in the labour market who want a job, can't get one, and of the working population within this group, 46 percent work only part-time but want full time work<sup>4</sup>. This is 5 times the unemployment and 4 times the under-employment figures found within the general population. Thus, here 3 extraordinary situations converge to make access to equipment extremely problematic for people who are blind or who have low vision during the planning phases for the future: firstly, this equipment is very expensive; secondly, people who are blind or who have low vision are more likely to not have an adequate income source through employment; and thirdly, the absence of an engaged work history leading up to the

later years, means that many people from this group both do not have their own equipment nor do they have the means to purchase it for themselves.

This being the case, Vision Australia recommends to the committee, that existing aids and equipment schemes or new equipment schemes that cater for the information access needs of persons with disability, either be adjusted or introduced to provide access to equipment for persons engaging with information or services during future planning. We are aware that state based schemes are currently left wanting when it comes to the area of information access equipment, and that Federal schemes, are often tied to employment or again not inclusive of adaptive technologies for people who are blind or who have low vision. Thus without funded access to equipment, people seeking to access options and services for future planning, who do not have their own equipment, will more often than not, have significant problems being equitably included.

#### **Recommendation 8**

That the Committee recommend the need for Government funded aids and equipment schemes to be adjusted or introduced, to provide access for people who are blind or who have low vision to adaptive technologies for information access.

#### **4.5 Legal information and contracts**

A particular site of concern pertinent to this inquiry, is the issue of legal information and contracts, such as insurance cover, superannuation, retirement home contracts, Wills and the like. Whilst the above comments also hold true here with this category of information and forms, Vision Australia is acutely aware of the notorious difficulty of obtaining accessible versions of this type of information and especially accessible forms and contracts.

The concern here is the importance of having access to the specific information regarding contracts etc. that can be read, verified and signed or completed in a format that is accessible to a person using alternate formats, and which continue to hold their legal standing. Often such forms and information are only produced in a

uniform hard copy format and are required to be signed with blue or black ink pen, with no variation to the form available and no electronic equivalent in existence.

This means that:

- a) a person cannot read the specific material in question;
- b) a person is unable to independently fill in or sign the form;
- c) the combination of both a) and b) means that one does not know what they are signing;
- d) a person is not able to be a witness for others; and
- e) And the resulting reliance upon others to assist with reading and completing forms and signatures, means that the privacy of people who are blind or who have low vision is severely compromised.

these five problems pose serious barriers to people who are blind or who have low vision to be truly independent and informed about the legal contracts to which they are signing up to, and limits their ability to be an active advocate for other family members or significant others who may require their assistance. This second point should be stated more clearly, in that people who are blind or who have low vision, are like any other person in the community, also often charged with the role of caring for others, be they children or elderly parents later in life.

Whilst Vision Australia stands 100% by the previous recommendations and principles of information access, we are aware that with regards to legal information and contracts, much more direct and deliberate measures may need to be taken in a legislative and regulatory sense to facilitate information access here. This may in itself, require a specific Parliamentary inquiry in it's own right to address, however, the attention drawn in the context of this inquiry, should also help pave the way for that further work to be done. Some of this work may include investigation into the types and formats of documentation currently held as legally binding, and the potential for alternate means such as online contracts in HTML format and digital signatures.

**Recommendation 9**

That the Committee explicitly highlight the issues of information access in the context of legal information and contracts for consumers who are blind or who have low vision, and recommend further investigation of the legislative and regulatory frameworks that are required to ensure social inclusion in this regard.

**4.6 PDF format**

It should also be noted in express terms from the above, that Portable Document Formats, are not universally accessible to adaptive technologies. Different technologies have limited compatibility with PDF files, providing that the document is text based but the ability to navigate PDF documents is compromised in all cases in comparison to best practice formats in MS Word and HTML. Image based PDF files, which often occurs when a hard copy document is scanned in to create an electronic PDF document, is generally inaccessible in most cases. And there are some technologies that do not recognise PDF format files at all. The result here, is that PDF documents, should not be used in isolation, either on websites or as a format to be distributed by other electronic means on compact disc or USB.

Vision Australia's view, which is also the view of the Australian Human Rights Commission, is that PDF formats should not be used as the sole format on a website, but we also go further to suggest that this practice be present in all policies regarding electronic format information.

**Recommendation 10**

That the Committee note in there recommendations that PDF formats not be used as the sole electronic format for any information.

**4.7 Easy English and languages other than English**

In addition to providing accessible information as stated in all respects outlined above, information must also be provided in easy English versions for persons with intellectual and cognitive impairments in addition to their vision impairment or

blindness. Likewise, the significant population of persons who are not proficient in English and who are blind or who have low vision, ought to also have equal access to information with regards to planning options and services, in their own language. This is essential for people to be adequately informed about the decisions they make and the specific options they sign up to.

**Recommendation 11**

That the Committee duly note the need for all accessible information to also be provided in easy English and languages other than English.

## **5. Access to services**

Access to services that provide information about planning options for the future and also facilitate the engagement with certain plans, contains all the points raised in the previous section with regards to information access. However, Vision Australia would also like to highlight several additional points about services that are important to this inquiry.

### **5.1 Need for specialist planning services**

It is often the case in other sectors that whilst general services can provide service provision for all persons of the population, there are often specialist services that cater specifically for specific sections of the market. In disability, a good example of this are disability employment services. This specific group of agencies understands the particular nuances of the difficulties faced by people with disability securing employment and the support needs that often accompany placement, and thus provide a stand alone service to cater for this unique population groups needs. Similar issues could be found in the concerns inherent to this inquiry, and Vision Australia directs the Committee to the benefits of specialist planning services in this context.



There are many specific needs that people with low vision may have in relation to their own circumstances later in life, such as procuring adaptive technologies, access to different transport services and concessions, understanding the difference between the aged and disability pensions, accessing peer support groups, recreational activities for persons who have low vision, and a range of independent living skills training services. It is not likely that generalist agencies will have this depth of knowledge, and thus specialist services are required in order to both provide people who are planning for their current and future life needs, with the information and direct access to such options as required.

To our knowledge, aside from the information that organisation such as Vision Australia accumulates during the course of its work on such matters and the subsequent guidance and support that we do provide clients in this regard on an ad hoc basis, there is no planned approach in existence analogous to that of the disability employment model mentioned earlier. Vision Australia, like others, do have provisions for a very limited number of clients who do have some planning aspects built into their individual service plans within the terms of their specific services, as with the case of our 60 Community Aged Care Packages (CACP) clients, but this is part of the specific CACPs case management that we facilitate, and not available as a general service to clients. We are also aware of some other pilot programs currently being trialled in various parts of the country by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, for transitional counselling for retirement in the area of Australian enterprises, but again, as this is a pilot, this is an exception to the otherwise general rule of non-access to specialist services.

Vision Australia therefore recommends to the Committee, that in order for people who are blind or who have low vision to access clear and sound advice and information on the options available to them to both meet their needs and explore the boundaries of possibility in a more nuanced and direct manor than general services as they plan for their future life, a specific network model be developed for specialist disability services.

**Recommendation 12**

That the Committee recommend that a specific Government funded specialist service model be developed for people with disability planning for later life, analogous to the disability employment network model.

**5.2 Referral mechanisms to be built in to services and information**

As a proportion of the population of people living in Australia who are blind or have low vision, Vision Australia knows that only about 13 to 15 percent of this group actually access our services. What this means is that around 85 percent of people who have low vision, do not engage with the information and peer support that engaging with an organisation such as Vision Australia can provide, and thus they often are not aware of the skills that they may be able to develop, the tools that they may be able to acquire and learn how to use, the ways in which people in similar situations overcome the barriers that they may be facing themselves, and the range of different activities that people in similar situations to themselves, do to continue living an engaged and meaningful life. This is not to suggest that those who do not access Vision Australia services somehow have a less than fulfilling life, but it is to suggest that people don't know what they don't know, and thus information that might be useful to them either now or later in life, may not enter their radar by other means.

We also are aware that referral services generally within the eye health sector, is poor in terms of providing direct referrals to organisations such as Vision Australia, and similarly poor in the general dissemination of information about community services and government programs and schemes, that can assist with making the transition to a life with low vision easier. We therefore recommend in the context of this inquiry, that the Committee also clearly recommend that any development of a service model or information that may be developed for existing services and/or information about the planning options available to people aging with a disability, that clear referral guidelines also be developed to service providers as a means to assisting people to make informed decisions about their capabilities and options. This is not to strictly require that planning services be subject to a person first

engaging a disability service provider, but is simply to instruct standard operating procedure during the course of service provision for planning services, that inform consumers of the range of community services available where they may be able to access other services that they may not have considered. This referral process is especially crucial in the case of someone new to vision loss, who may not be aware of the alternate ways of doing things.

**Recommendation 13**

That the Committee recommend in relation to planning services, that service providers and/or the development of a government funded service model, include as standard operating procedure, referral mechanisms to other disability service providers.

**5.2 Planning services information portal**

To compliment the above recommendations, an initiative that may assist with facilitating the vast range of existing information and the developments of new options as they come online, is an information portal that provides information to registered users specific to a selected set of search criteria. Such a portal would enable the cumulative development of a one-stop-shop of information on options for future planning which may be useful for specific planning service providers now and in the future, but could also provide a stop-gap measure for housing information that could be accessed on an ad hoc basis by organisations such as vision Australia during the course of their work.

**Recommendation 14**

That the Committee consider the possibility of developing a Government facilitated information portal that can be used for storing and disseminating information about planning options for people aging with a disability.

## **6. Additional comments**

Vision Australia would also like to re-emphasise the point that the vast majority of people living in Australia who are blind or who have low vision, have developed vision loss later in life. This is due to vision loss by and large, being an age-related phenomena due to eye conditions such as Age-related Macular Degeneration, cataracts, glaucoma, and Diabetic Retinopathy, which whilst significantly present within the current population demographics, is also likely to increase in prevalence as the population ages. This point is worth re-stating here because of the nature of this inquiry ultimately being about what people do in their later years, although it is specifically concerned with how they actually plan for those later years. If people are by and large losing their vision during the years that they are actually engaged in a future plan, then undoubtedly, these people will need to re-assess and re-calibrate their plan whilst they are in it. In practical terms, this will mean that not only will people be needing to re-engage with the planning cycle mid-plan, but they may be completely new to vision loss as well and be non wiser than the general population about the options for living with vision loss.

Vision Australia therefore emphasises two key points; that any information about future planning and any services, must be cognisant of the fact that consumers with disability may not be aware of the options available to them, both what they can do as an older person, and what they can do as a person with vision impairment; and secondly, that information and services need to be flexible to provide for persons repeated access as time moves forward and their circumstances change.

## **7. Conclusion**

Vision Australia has welcomed the inquiry by the Senate Community Affairs References committee into the Planning Options and Services for People Aging with a Disability. We agree with the Committees over arching philosophy underpinning this inquiry, that people with disability have a right and are owed the dignity of living a life of their choosing in later life and that direct steps need to be taken to ensure

equal participation in this regard. Vision Australia emphasises the importance of any recommendations arising from this inquiry, to be directly mindful of the various inquiries related to the area of aging and disability also currently under review, and have outlined the key considerations for equitable information access pertinent to people who are blind, deafblind, or who have low vision. We have also indicated the importance of developing specialist services in the area of planning for aging with a disability, and have reiterated the need for information and services to be cognisant of the episodic engagement of planning information and services, by both people already engaged in plans and people new to vision loss.

We thank the Committee for this opportunity to provide comment to this inquiry and welcome any opportunity to elaborate further in person should it be required.

Yours faithfully,

Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira  
Policy Officer

---

<sup>1</sup> ABS, (2006), 'Disability Ageing and Carers', applied to the 2006 census.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organisation, (2004), 'Magnitude and causes of visual impairment', Fact Sheet 282.)

<sup>3</sup> Royal National Institute for the Blind (2004), 'Written Off', Mann D., London.

<sup>4</sup> Spriggs, R., (2007), 'Results and Observations from Research into Employment Levels in Australia', Vision Australia, available online at <http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/info.aspx?page=1651>