

Vision Australia Submission

Response to the Inquiry into the Administration and Management of the 2017 State General Election

Submission to: Members of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, Legislative Assembly
c/o Ms Franchesca Walker,
Acting Principal Research Officer

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Introduction

Vision Australia appreciates the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into the administration and management of the 2017 state general election. Our submission is highly relevant to the inquiry terms of reference, and our comments relate to full participation in the electoral process for people who are blind or have low vision, that is, access to information and the casting of a vote.

For nearly two decades, we have been campaigning for accessible, secret, independent and verifiable voting processes for people who are blind or have low vision across all Commonwealth, State and Territory jurisdictions. We would like to congratulate the Western Australian Electoral Commission on the implementation of the iVote system in time for the 2017 election. For Vision Australia, iVote is current best practice in accessible, secret, independent and verifiable voting for the blindness and low vision community.

Eligible Australian citizens who are blind or have low vision have a fundamental constitutional and human right to cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote in a manner comparable to their sighted peers in all Australian elections.

The right to a secret ballot is woven into the fabric of Australia's political and constitutional history, and it is recognised internationally by various United Nations instruments, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and specifically in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We outline our recommendations and position in the following paragraphs.

Vision Australia would be pleased to provide additional information or support to the Committee, and appear at any public hearing, should it be required.

Vision Australia recommendations

Vision Australia asks that the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee recommend:

1. That the Western Australian Electoral Commission be directed and resourced to maintain the iVote system for future elections.
2. That accessible voting options are available for use for the full period allowed for voting including the pre-polling period and on Election Day.
3. That the Western Australian Electoral Commission consider implementing a human assisted call centre voting option, as a component of iVote, to ensure a comprehensive system that meets all stakeholders' needs.
4. That the Western Australian Electoral Commission strongly emphasise to political parties and independent candidates that they have a social and legislative responsibility to ensure that party platform information, candidate information and 'how to vote card' information is made available in a range of accessible formats to people who are blind or have low vision.
5. That the Western Australian Electoral Commission's criteria for determining the accessibility of polling centres should include accessibility features specific to people who are blind or have low vision.

Voting Options for Western Australians Who are Blind or Have Low Vision

We understand that there were 2,288 completed iVotes in the 2017 state general election. Given that this is the first time iVote has been implemented in Western Australia, this is an encouraging uptake. We congratulate the Western Australian Electoral Commission for taking positive steps to ensuring a truly secret, independent and verifiable vote for people who are blind or have low vision.

In the scoping hearing for this inquiry, the Western Australian Electoral Commissioner stated, "[t]he highlight for me in the state election with internet voting was the number of people with disability Vision Australia Submission to the Inquiry into the Administration and Management of the 2017 State General Election

who were so pleased to be able to vote in secret for the first time. There is a United Nations declaration on the rights of people with disability that makes it clear that people with disability are entitled to have a secret vote, but this was the first time that the technology and systems had been available and the legislation to enable us to do that, and they were very pleased, people with disability.”

Furthermore, the iVote system makes use of processes which are already familiar to the community. Familiarity is crucial to an end user’s confidence in using technology to vote; without it, the end user must focus on the technology rather than the function of the technology, that is, voting. Consistency is critical to maintaining a high level of confidence and comfort in accessible voting systems generally among the blindness and low vision community.

In New South Wales, the telephone voting option within the iVote system also provides for a human assisted component, delivered by a call centre. This additional option accommodates the diverse needs of the blindness and low vision community. Human assisted call centres provide an accessible voting option for those who cannot use the internet and for people who are not yet comfortable using an automated telephone system. This is especially important for people who have recently acquired a significant vision loss and who may also be dealing with additional health or lifestyle issues.

Providing more choice in accessible options for those who need it is entirely consistent with principles of universal inclusion in a fundamental aspect of our democratic life. Maximum choice means maximum participation.

It is our strong view that iVote should remain available as an accessible solution for people who are blind or have low vision in future elections in Western Australia, and we urge the Commission to take all necessary steps to this end.

We would also urge the Commission to encourage the Western Australian Parliament to consider amending legislation to expand the availability of iVote to broader categories of voters. The results in the recent New South Wales election demonstrate that where electronic voting systems are made available to broader categories of voters (e.g. people who are overseas, in remote areas, or voting outside their electorate), a critical mass of voters choosing this system can be achieved. This in turn provides greater opportunities for both assessing and improving the use of new technology.

Security

Vision Australia acknowledges that there are valid security concerns that experts need to address. However, these should not be used to exclude people who are blind or have low vision from participating equally, independently and with dignity in the electoral process, especially when the experience in New South Wales is that security has not been compromised by the use of iVote.

Moreover, we note the strident defence of iVote by the New South Wales Electoral Commissioner in relation to public and media positioning by certain stakeholders, aimed at discrediting electronic voting such as iVote. We direct the Committee’s attention to the Commissioner’s piece which is available online at the following link -

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http://www.elections.nsw.gov.au/about_us/plans_and_reports/ivote_reports/response_from_the_nsw_electoral_commission_to_ivote_security_allegations

In particular we note the Commissioner's statement that, "*The iVote internet and telephone voting system allows people to vote who, through disability or location, would otherwise find it difficult if not impossible to do so. iVote also future proofs our electoral system against the very high likelihood that postal voting will no longer be available one or two election cycles from now; the rising cost of mail (a recent increase of 40% just occurred) coupled with decreasing service levels will mean postal voting will not be a viable option. The Commission is pleased with the public acceptance of the iVote system. Some 283,669 electors voted using iVote, with 97% reporting, through an independent survey, that they were satisfied or very satisfied with iVote.*"

And that, "*The Commission takes the security of all its systems, including iVote, very seriously. The Commission welcomes the public's interest in the iVote system and would like to encourage open, unbiased and informed debate regarding the use of internet voting.*"

iVote Statistics

As noted above, the uptake of the first trial of iVote in Western Australia is very encouraging. New South Wales figures suggest that it is likely that as people become more aware of and comfortable with iVote, uptake in Western Australia will increase overtime. In 2011, 47,000 people used the iVote system to cast their vote and in the 2015 NSW election this figure increased to 284,000. The number of blind or low vision voters using iVote increased eight-fold by 2015 (2011 = 668, 2015 = 5,296).

Vision Australia notes that the New South Wales figures captured the usage of iVote by people who are blind or have low vision. This information was helpful in gauging the increase in uptake by the blindness and low vision community. Likewise figures aggregated by disability could assist the Western Australian Electoral Commission to identify the uptake by different categories of voters who would benefit from iVote.

In the final report on iVote (July 2011), the Allen Consulting Group concluded: "*The NSW iVote system...used in the 2011 state election had an average cost per vote cast of \$74 compared to an average cost of all votes cast of \$8. This cost per vote reduces significantly as the system is scaled up to 200,000 voters using the system, with an estimated average cost per vote being approximately \$24*". These data highlight that increased participation leads to a decrease in cost. This evidence suggests there is cost justification for further roll-out of iVote in Western Australia, especially given its diverse population.

In an Overview Report of the 2015 iVote system, prepared by the NSWEC and Scytll Secure Electronic Voting, the organisation who delivered the platform, a comparison was made between iVote figures and postal vote figures for the 2011 and 2015 state elections. Whilst the number of people choosing to use the iVote system grew substantially from 46,864 to 283,669, those making use of postal votes diminished from 245,295 to 203,577.

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These figures support the observations made by the Allen Consulting Group that increased use in electronic voting could reduce reliance on other methods, and represent a further cost saving. The use of the iVote system, where made available to postal and absentee voters, also leads to more promptly announced election results, especially in highly contested electorates.

Response to iVote by People who are Blind or have Low Vision

After the 2011 New South Wales state election, Vision Australia contacted, or was contacted by, clients to find out about their experience using iVote. As with the other categories of iVote users, the feedback from Vision Australia clients was overwhelmingly positive. The following comments are typical:

"I was very pleased to have the opportunity to vote independently and in secret at the NSW State election."

"I used the telephone system, as with the large ballot papers for the upper house it was much quicker and easier for me than the internet."

"I view the system as the best one I have ever used. It provided me with complete independence and I did not have the discomfort of having human intervention in the process. I was able to vote from the convenience of my office, completely in private, and take as long as I wanted to - the benefit of saving and coming back to the vote was very much appreciated. I look forward to this system being in place again at the next State election and encourage other organisations to use the system."

"I found using the telephone keypad to be a very easy way to record my votes for the lower and upper houses of the NSW Parliament when voting in the 2011 State election. As a blind person I found the phone keypad to be much easier to use than is a computer. Please retain the phone option."

Availability of Accessible Voting Options

It is essential that accessible voting methods are available on polling day, and not just during the early voting period. We know that some of our clients, at past elections, took their children to polling centres so that the family as a whole could discuss the election process and how it was conducted, and also so that their children could learn that having a disability does not preclude community participation.

People who are blind or have low vision are part of the general community and must have the option to engage with the rest of the community in shared activities. It is therefore important that some voting options are made available at polling places on election day even if accessible options are provided that allow people to cast pre-poll votes and to vote from home.

Equally, we feel that partners and spouses of voters who are blind or have low vision should be able to take up an accessible voting option so that family cohesion and activity are maintained. Early voting restrictions also deny people with a disability, who need to use these accessible voting options. Vision Australia Submission to the Inquiry into the Administration and Management of the 2017 State General Election

options, the choice to wait until all policy announcements have been made before casting their vote.

Accessible Polling Centres

We recommend that the Western Australian Electoral Commission's criteria for determining the accessibility of polling centres should include accessibility features specific to people who are blind or have low vision, such as:

- Signage of Building Code standard size and colour contrast;
- Good lighting;
- Wayfinding mechanisms such as tactile ground surface indicators and navigational cues for passage to, and within centres;
- Centres located within easy walking distance from public transport; and
- An accessible path of travel from transport to the voting centre, including adequate street crossing mechanisms.

We also recommend that all staff and volunteers who work on polling day be made aware of the reasonable assistance that they must provide for people who are blind or have low vision. This assistance may include competent sighted guiding and assistance with the completion of a ballot paper.

Civics Education: Access to Election-Related Information

Full and equitable participation in the voting process also involves being informed about candidate and party choices, what the candidates stand for and the consequences of preferential voting. Governments and electoral authorities, as well as political parties and candidates, have an obligation to make available in formats accessible to our clients, any information relating to the electoral process that they make available to the general community. This information includes:

- Information regarding electoral roll matters or other electoral authority information;
- Information about an election/referendum, or specific information regarding a proposed constitutional change;
- How to vote cards;
- All advertising material on all communication channels such as news media, social media, and any other web-based platform; and
- Policy brochures.

Generally speaking, party and candidate information continues to be inaccessible for voters who are blind or have low vision. Below is a quote sourced from: *Vision Australia client feedback on 2013 Federal Election*:

"I decided to vote above the line, but wanted to know who the party I was voting for would be distributing their preferences too. I was unable to access this information because the "ticket" and "how to vote" card were presented online as an image-only PDF file that represented a completed ballot paper. This was completely inaccessible to me and I was not able to find an alternative presentation."

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While we realise that the Western Australian Electoral Commission is not directly responsible for the activities of political parties and candidates, the Commission nevertheless does have an influential and persuasive role in promoting best practice in accessibility.

The lack of a legislative mandate should not be used as a justification for inaction. We therefore recommend that the Western Australian Electoral Commission strongly emphasise to candidates and parties, for example, during general briefings, that candidates and parties have a social and legislative responsibility to make their materials accessible to everyone, including people who are blind or have low vision.

The right to be informed about candidate and party choices, what they mean, what the candidates stand for and the consequences of preferential voting, is also crucial to full and equitable participation.

Further, it is within the parties and candidates' interest to ensure their material is effectively communicated to the entirety of the voting public. In this respect, improving knowledge of voting options would be within the Commission's purview of engaging all eligible voters in the democratic process.

Conclusion

Once again, we appreciate the opportunity to submit comments to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee on issues that are of relevance to our clients and the community of Australians who are blind or have low vision. We again congratulate the Electoral Commission for taking positive steps to the realisation of the democratic rights of the blindness and low vision community and sincerely hope this technology is maintained for elections in Western Australia into the future.

We would be happy to expand on any of the comments we have made in this submission, or to respond to any questions members of the Committee have about the issues raised.

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, and Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support
- Seeing Eye Dogs
- National Library Services
- Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds
- Employment services, including national Disability Employment Services provider
- Accessible information, and Alternate Format Production

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- Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped
- Spectacles Program for the NSW Government
- Advocacy and Engagement, working collaboratively with Government, business 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 27,500 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the 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 the 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. Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), to strengthen the voice of the blind community.