

2016 Vision Summits

Summary Report

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Executive Summary

In 2013, Vision 2020 Australia held Vision Summits with the Australian Government and the Australian Labor Party to provide members with a unique opportunity to meet exclusively with Federal Government Members of Parliament responsible for the portfolios that impact the eye health and vision care sector in the lead up to the Federal Election. In light of positive feedback and heading into the 2016 Federal Election, Vision 2020 Australia again arranged a series of Vision Summits to enable the Australian Government, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Australian Greens to respond to the current key policy concerns from the eye health and vision care sector.

Vision 2020 Australia sought senior party representation in the key portfolios of disability, aged care, health and international aid to participate in a panel discussion with the sector and invited members to submit questions in advance to enable the Parliamentarians to deliver informed responses on the day.

Overall, the Vision Summits were well received by members and provided the sector with an opportunity to engage with key Parliamentarians. Highlights of the Summits include:

- All three parties consider health a priority and are committed to continuing their support of eye health and vision care. Additionally, the Australian Greens encouraged the sector to look for opportunities that the party can provide, such as assisting with program costings through the Parliamentary budget office, private members bills and motions in Parliament.
- Minister for Rural Health, the Hon Senator Fiona Nash indicated that the Government is currently considering a successor to the National Framework Implementation Plan (NFIP) and also encouraged the sector to submit a proposal providing more information around a national eye health promotion program targeting areas with populations most at risk.
- All three parties noted an ongoing commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health and vision care. While no commitment was made, Minister Nash indicated that there is funding available in the Federal Budget post-2017 for trachoma. The Minister also announced \$2.5 million for the continued support of Indigenous Eye Health, the University of Melbourne.
- It was acknowledged by the Australian Greens and the ALP that the sector has concerns around access to services which meet the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired within aged care. The ALP in particular highlighted that the legislative review of the Living Longer Living Better aged care reforms, scheduled for 2017, would provide an opportunity to put forward the sector's recommendations.
- Both the ALP and the Australian Greens are supportive of eye health and vision care being recognised within the aid budget. Going forward, Vision 2020 Australia will seek an opportunity for a delegation of member representatives to meet with the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells to put forward the sector's concerns.

This document provides a summary overview of the topics discussed and responses received from key Ministers and leaders as we approach the 2016 Federal Election. Following the Vision Summits, Vision 2020 Australia is now seeking a formal response to the *Towards 2020: A shared vision of working in partnership for eye health and vision care* policy platform from each of the parties, as well as further opportunities to meet and discuss the sector's recommendations.

Attendees

Australian Government

- Senator the Hon Fiona Nash, Minister for Rural Health, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Regional Communications, Deputy Leader of the Nationals

Australian Labor Party

- Mr Stephen Jones MP, Shadow Assistant Minister for Health
- The Hon Shayne Neumann MP, Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Shadow Minister for Ageing
- The Hon Matt Thistlethwaite MP, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration

Australian Greens

- Senator Richard Di Natale, Leader of the Australian Greens, Spokesperson for Prime Minister and Cabinet, Health, Sport and Multiculturalism

1 Prevention and Early Intervention

Australian Government

Minister Nash shed light on the key priorities of the Australian Government in the lead up to the 2016 Federal Election, in particular highlighting diabetes and preventative health. Minister Nash also indicated that the Government is currently considering a successor to the National Framework Implementation Plan.

Importantly, Minister Nash responded positively to the sector's recommendation to establish a national eye health promotion program targeting areas with populations most at risk, and encouraged the sector to submit a proposal.

Minister Nash emphasised that the Australian Government has focused on diabetes, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Australian Government has also initiated a number of reviews into primary health care which highlights the priority placed by the Government on considering the impact of chronic disease and diabetes on the Australian population.

Unfortunately, the Minister confirmed that the Australian Government was unable to support extending the bulk billing incentive program to optometry services.

Australian Labor Party

Overall, it was highlighted by the ALP that key priorities heading into the 2016 Federal Election will be education, health and employment. It was noted early that key announcements around health will occur in due course and it was emphasised that any new commitments for eye health initiatives will need to be costed and funded. The ALP asked that in putting forward proposals or policy positions, the sector will need to consider the revenue side of program funding and not only expenditure. The ALP stressed that their position is that all savings in health should be invested back into health and not spent on other budget areas.

The ALP highlighted their support for the initial *Implementation plan under the National framework for action to promote eye health and prevent avoidable blindness and vision loss* (NFIP). The ALP understands the importance of consulting with and seeking commitment from all states and territories, in the development of a successor to the NFIP.

In responding to questions regarding a national health promotion program, it was acknowledged by the ALP that it is critical to engage at the school education level with health promotion materials. In discussing the impact of diabetes and diabetic retinopathy on the Australian population, the ALP acknowledged diabetes as a major health concern for the nation and noted that the disease cannot be addressed at the time of presentation to a clinician. Rather, diabetes requires a multidisciplinary approach focussed on early detection and prevention.

Finally, the ALP highlighted that ensuring ongoing access to universal health care through Medicare will be a focus during the lead up to the 2016 Federal Election. The ALP also noted that MyHealth Records should not be limited solely to General Practitioners and that their reach should be extended to allied health personnel, including optometry and ophthalmology.

Australian Greens

The sector was reassured that the Australian Greens are committed to supporting eye health and vision care. Senator Di Natale encouraged the sector to work with the Greens to find opportunities where this commitment can be emphasised, such as requesting program costings through the Parliamentary budget office, putting forward private members' bills and raising motions in Parliament. It was emphasised that the Australian Greens consider tax reform to be about raising revenue to invest in health care and deliver services, such as those identified in the policy platform and not only about balancing the budget.

The Senator emphasised that the Australian Greens view prevention as the most cost-effective approach to healthcare and that the people who benefit most from preventative health care are often not aware of it.

In discussing the eye health and vision care sector's concerns about diabetic retinopathy, Senator Di Natale highlighted that there is a need to better understand the barriers experienced by individuals in accessing appropriate healthcare and advice. It was suggested there may be a need to look at where incentives are required. In particular, the Senator noted that if there was a specific proposal being put forward by the sector related to diabetic retinopathy, the party would support taking this to the Parliamentary Budget Office for costing.

2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Australian Government

Minister Nash noted the Government's ongoing support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health, evident in commitments made over the last twelve months. The Minister also acknowledged that announcements regarding ongoing commitments will be made in the coming months.

Positively, it was highlighted by the Minister that the Australian Government is aware there is still much to be done to eliminate trachoma in Australia by 2020 and indicated that there is funding available in the Federal Budget post-2017 for trachoma. The sector was advised that a formal announcement will take place later in the year. Additionally, the Minister acknowledged that the Commonwealth Department of Health is currently considering options for a nationally consistent subsidised spectacle scheme.

Minister Nash announced \$2.5 million in funding to provide continued support to Indigenous Eye Health, the University of Melbourne to build on achievements made to date to bridge the eye health and vision care gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The sector thanked the Minister for the September 2015 commitment to provide the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \$420,000 for three years to support the development of an annual report on Indigenous eye health to assist with national oversight. The sector asked for clarification around whether this report will be submitted to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Council or other high level policy forum. While the Minister was unable to commit to anything at this stage, it was agreed that if it was seen as useful, that course of action would certainly be considered.

Australian Labor Party

The ALP stressed that the Australian Government cannot cut their way to closing the gap. The ALP highlighted its ongoing support for the sector, acknowledging that eye health and vision care is important. Most prominently, it was suggested that statistics and evidence is key and better data regarding how eye health programs are working in communities will help to ensure greater political support.

The ALP stated that blitzes, while necessary, are evidence of broader system failure. If elected, the ALP committed to facilitating a national conversation regarding more efficient and effective conversations with the jurisdictions through the COAG and ensuring an ongoing partnership with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and its affiliates.

When asked about a nationally consistent subsidised spectacle scheme, the ALP noted that ideally, a scheme would be led by states and territories. However, the ALP indicated interest in further discussing the proposed model and invited the eye health and vision care sector to send through additional information.

The ALP strongly supports the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIHP) and its Implementation Plan, and believes the plan should be fully implemented and funded. Further, it was acknowledged that a recent announcement of \$9 million in funding from a Shorten Government would include support and funding to tackle trachoma.

Australian Greens

It was noted by Senator Di Natale that there was a need to identify ‘champions’ in Parliament to push issues forward and the Senator suggested that the Greens would be willing to champion the *Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision* and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health and vision care more broadly.

In discussing the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS) and the Rural Health Outreach Fund (RHOF), the Senator noted that the current system is fragmented and difficult to navigate. Senator Di Natale acknowledged the need to consider how to fund and support the system better to reduce barriers to access. It was suggested that Primary Health Networks (PHNs) may be able to assist, however the Senator accepted that the structure of PHNs is variable and inconsistent across the country.

In responding to the eye health and vision care sector’s calls for the development and implementation of a nationally consistent subsidised spectacle scheme, Senator Di Natale was supportive and encouraged the sector to continue dialogue on this topic.

Senator Di Natale noted that it was simple to support the World Health Organisation-developed SAFE strategy (surgery, antibiotics, facial cleanliness, environmental improvements) in theory, however more information is required about what this looks like on the ground. It was noted that funding for the Commonwealth’s trachoma program runs out in 2017 and Senator Di Natale acknowledged and supported the sector’s concerns about disjointed and insecure funding and the impact of this on service provision.

The Australian Greens support strong, coordinated representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in developing a culturally appropriate and safe health workforce. The Senator agreed there was a need for governments to engage strongly with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) to ensure that workforce pathways and coordination are optimised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Finally, it was acknowledged by the Senator that while the Australian Government has funded the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to develop an oversight report on the eye health and vision care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, no commitment has been made to ensure that this report will be submitted to the COAG Health Council or other high level policy forum. Senator Di Natale suggested that the sector work with the Australian Greens to find opportunities for this to be put on the agenda, including the possibility of Senator Di Natale speaking directly to Minister Nash on this point.

3 Independence and Participation

Australian Government

While Minister Nash was able to briefly respond to questions regarding disability services and advocacy for people who are blind or vision impaired, she was unable to elaborate as this area sits outside her responsibilities. However, the Minister did emphasise that the Australian Government will be working carefully with the states and territories to enable continuity of support for individuals and to ensure that no one falls through the cracks.

In her written response to the questions put forward by members, the Hon Jane Prentice, Assistant Minister for Disability Services, emphasised the Australian Government's dedication to the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and to maintaining adequate funding. The Minister stressed the Government's commitment to finalise agreements on the rollout of the NDIS with all jurisdictions as soon as possible.

In relation to audio description services the Minister acknowledged that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is currently conducting an audio description trial on its online catch-up television service, which is expected to conclude in July 2016. Minister Prentice advised that the results of this trial will add to Government understanding of the delivery options available for audio description in Australia. However, she emphasised that any long term regulatory or other options to provide permanent audio description services would need to be carefully considered in terms of cost, as well as the Government's commitment to deregulation.

Vision 2020 Australia has circulated, through the Independence and Participation Committee, responses from Minister Prentice to the key questions put forward by members. Please contact Vision 2020 Australia for a copy of these responses.

Vision 2020 Australia will continue to seek further opportunities to ensure that the sector's concerns and priorities are put forward to the relevant representatives of the Australian Government.

Australian Labor Party

The ALP is committed to the roll out of the new aged care system and supports the implementation of better referral processes in place to specialist services. The ALP expressed disappointment that the Australian Government had not yet implemented a National Aged Care Workforce Strategy. It was suggested the legislative review of the Living Longer Living Better aged care reforms, scheduled for 2017, would provide an opportunity to put forward the sector's recommendations to ensure the reforms meet the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired within aged care.

It was noted that the ALP are the authors and architects of the NDIS and strongly support the scheme's roll out and funding. It was acknowledged that as the nation transitions to the NDIS there will be a number of significant challenges, particularly as service providers move from block funding arrangements to a model of consumer directed care. The ALP agreed that there was a need to review the interaction between reforms to aged care and the roll out of the NDIS.

In relation to audio description services the ALP advised that they were awaiting the outcome report and subsequent recommendations from the ABC Audio Description Trial which will become available when the trial ends in July 2016. It was noted that the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee is currently accepting submissions in relation to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015.

Australian Greens

Senator Di Natale acknowledged the difference in service access between the NDIS and aged care. It was suggested that case studies highlighting inequity would be helpful to the Australian Greens in supporting moves to adjust policy or guidelines in aged care to better address the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.

The Australian Greens are supportive of audio description and believe this is an achievable outcome.

4 Global advocacy

Australian Government

Minister Nash was unable to respond to questions regarding international development and global advocacy, as these sit outside her areas of responsibility. However, the Minister did undertake to speak to the recently appointed Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells about what the Australian Government will do to support the elimination of avoidable blindness in the region. Vision 2020 Australia will also seek an opportunity for a delegation of members to meet with Minister Fierravanti-Wells to ensure that the sector's concerns and priorities are conveyed.

Australian Labor Party

The ALP expressed disappointment that funding for the Avoidable Blindness Initiative had been cut under the current Government. Mr Thistlethwaite acknowledged the success of the initiative in reducing avoidable blindness and vision loss in the Indo-Pacific region. It was stated that aid spending will be higher under a Labor Government and that eye health and disability inclusive development will be a priority. The ALP has committed a further \$40 million additional spending for Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The ALP criticised the Australian Government for its lack of transparency and for withholding the 'blue book' of ministerial statements on Australia's foreign aid. The 'blue book' details where Australia's overseas aid is allocated by sector, country, regionally and globally and is typically released after the Federal Budget. Without access to the 'blue book', the Australian public cannot know where cuts to foreign aid are coming from and must wait on additional advice from the Australian Government. In lieu of this critical information, Mr Thistlethwaite asked the sector to provide information on how aid cuts will impact the sector to better inform the ALP in responding to the Government.

The ALP is committed to moving towards 0.5 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) over three years to ensure the successful implementation of the SDGs. The ALP acknowledged the cost effectiveness of interventions to improve eye health in developing countries and under a Labor Government will commit to working with non-government and aid organisations within the region.

Australian Greens

Senator Di Natale voiced frustration at the aid cuts and that this issue was not more widely supported and voiced by the Australian public. Senator Di Natale urged the eye health and vision care sector to work together to advocate and make this a priority Federal Election issue in 2016.

The Australian Greens are very supportive of eye health being a priority within the aid budget and believe that priorities should not be determined by political imperatives, but by evidence from those on the ground. The Greens also have a policy to reach 0.7 per cent aid spending as a percentage of gross national income by 2025.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Vision Summits were a positive exercise. Many attendees have acknowledged that the opportunity to meet face to face with members of the Federal Parliament responsible for portfolios which impact eye health and vision care is critical in shaping priorities for the next Parliament. It was recognised that the events, in combination with a comprehensive and clear policy platform and a focused Parliamentary Friends Group event in early 2016, ensured that eye health and vision care is firmly on the agenda in the lead up to the 2016 Federal Election.

The responses received from Australian Government, Australian Labor Party (ALP) and Australian Greens representatives were in line with the sector's expectations and a number of potential future activities were identified, including:

- Providing the Minister for Rural Health, the Hon Senator Fiona Nash with more information around a national eye health promotion program targeting areas with populations most at risk.
- Further advocacy for a commitment from the Commonwealth regarding the second phase *Close the Gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health and vision care: Sector Funding proposal* and continued support for the elimination of trachoma.
- Increased advocacy regarding access to services which meet the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired within aged care, particularly through the legislative review of the Living Longer Living Better aged care reforms, scheduled for 2017.
- Identifying opportunities for Vision 2020 Australia and a delegation of member representatives to meet with the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells to promote a return to Australia's leadership in eye health and vision care in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Working with the Australian Greens to identify tangible opportunities where the party can work with the sector, such as assisting with program costings through the Parliamentary budget office, private members bills and motions in Parliament.

Following the Vision Summits, Vision 2020 Australia is turning its attention to seeking a formal response to the *Towards 2020: A shared vision of working in partnership for eye health and vision care* policy platform from each of the parties, as well as further opportunities to meet and discuss the sector's recommendations.