

Item 4.2

Services and Supports for People who are Blind or Vision Impaired

Position Statement

Our position

Vision 2020 Australia wants all people who are blind or vision impaired to have equitable access to services and supports, regardless of their age, to ensure their full participation in the community. The reforms in disability and aged care under the *National Disability Insurance Scheme* (NDIS) and *Living Longer Living Better* (LLLB), must take into consideration the functional needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. Further, the administrative systems and processes must be developed to acknowledge and cater for the unique needs of blindness and vision impairment.

Vision 2020 Australia considers the priorities for the Australian Government to address over the next two years to be:

- **Ensuring eligibility for the NDIS is based on functional need and not determined by a clinical diagnosis alone at the legal blindness benchmark**
- **Ensuring an equitable offering of supports for people aged 65 years and over that ensures their needs are included as ‘people with disability’ and not only as ‘people who are ageing’**
- **Ensuring holistic specialist assessments are available and funded as a pathway to receiving services and supports under the NDIS and aged care**
- **Ensuring people who are blind or vision impaired receive access to reasonable and necessary supports that help them achieve their goals and aspirations; and**
- **Ensuring clear interface guidelines are developed and implemented for the provision of services and supports for people who are blind or vision impaired across the disability, aged care, health and education sectors**

It is important to also recognise that people who are blind or vision impaired require services and supports generally at times of change. These are episodic by nature, are most effective when delivered early and can reduce the further incidence of disabling eye conditions and vision loss. This in turn can affect the broader health system such as reducing early hospitalisation and access to the mental health system, and delaying entry into residential aged care facilities.

Vision 2020 Australia and members stand ready to assist government to ensure that the reforms in disability and aged care address the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Policy context

The problem

In Australia, it is estimated that more than 575,000ⁱ people are currently blind or have vision loss, projected to grow to over 800,000 by 2020. This rapid increase is due to the ageing population and the fact that the risk of eye disease increases

three-fold for each decade over the age of 40. The situation is worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with six times the rate of blindness and three times the rate of vision impairment in comparison to the general population.

The annual economic cost attributable to blindness and vision impairment is estimated to be \$16 billion, with the social and personal cost to individuals and their families, further adding to the impact on Australian communities. In comparison to the general population, people who are blind or vision impaired have more than four times the rate of unemployment, suffer twice as many falls, have three times the risk of depression, are admitted to residential care three years earlier and often lose confidence to independently manage everyday life.

However, with the right services and supports, people with unavoidable blindness or vision impairment can develop skills to remain independent, participate in the community and live the life they choose.

The policy environment

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), considers that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Australia ratified the CRPD in 2008 and is therefore committed to promoting and protecting the articles contained within it. The CRPD considers a universal access approach to all aspects of civil, political, social, economic and cultural life, and promotes equity and fairness for all people with disability.

Australia and the international community have also strengthened their commitment to prevent avoidable blindness and the impact of vision loss. In May 2013, members of the World Health Organisation (WHO) endorsed a renewed strategy with the *Universal Access to Eye Health: A Global Action Plan 2014-19* (Global Action Plan), and for the first time, places a focus on support for low vision.

Building on the principles of the CRPD, Australia has embarked on landmark reform with the *National Disability Insurance Scheme* (NDIS) which will deliver a new world of support for people who are blind or vision impaired, in which for the first time, consumers will choose the supports they require, when and where they require them and from whom.

In addition, the Australian Government has introduced the *Living Longer Living Better* (LLL) aged care reform package designed to create a flexible and seamless system that provides older Australians with more choice and control. However, across the suite of disability and aged care reforms, there are no specific provisions that provide certainty for people who are blind or vision impaired that ensures their needs are included, as “people with disability” and not only as “people who are ageing”.

About Vision 2020 Australia

Established in October 2000, Vision 2020 Australia is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. Vision 2020 Australia is the peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, representing over 50 member organisations involved in: local and global eye care; health promotion; low vision support; vision rehabilitation; eye research; professional assistance and community support.

ⁱ Includes people with correctable refractive error