Vision Australia

Submission to the inquiry into social inclusion and Victorians with a disability

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**The Executive Officer  
Family and Community Development Committee  
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## Executive summary

Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Family and Community Development Committee’s inquiry into social inclusion and Victorians with a disability. We have an extensive knowledge of the barriers to social inclusion that are currently experienced by Victorians who are blind or have low vision.

Vision Australia is the largest provider of blindness and low vision services within Australia. The organisation was formed in 2004 through the merger of several of Australia’s oldest, most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies. In any one year we currently provide services to approximately 33,000 clients across 28 office locations throughout Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. Clinics are also held in 29 other locations, in addition to mobile outreach services in the Northern Territory and Tasmania.

Our goal is that people who are blind or have low vision have the choice to participate fully in every aspect of life within the community. To help realise this goal, we are committed to providing high quality rehabilitation and enablement services to our clients and their families so that they can maintain their independence in the home and wider community.

We work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens. Furthermore, we empower people who are blind or have low vision by giving them the opportunity to develop self-advocacy skills to advocate for their own rights.

Based on prevalence and census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Vision Australia estimates that there are approximately 357,000 people in Australia who are blind or have low vision that cannot be corrected. This number is predicted to increase to more than 564,000 by 2030. In Victoria alone, we estimate that this number is approximately 89,500 and is likely to rise to around 138,000 by 2030.

Vision loss is, by and large, a disability that is age-related, and the ageing of Australia’s population is a primary factor in this upward trend. However, secondary contributing factors, such as aboriginality and coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, also increases the incidence of blindness and low vision. Certain medical conditions, such as Diabetes, are also linked to an increased risk of vision loss. Therefore, when we look at the barriers to social inclusion it often extends beyond the disability to include other contributing factors.

People who are blind or have low vision are an important section of the community and their needs and perspectives must be taken into account by governments in the development of policy programs and by industry when designing and introducing new technology.

## Section 3 – Definitions and terminology

### What needs to happen to ensure that people’s individual disability and experience are accounted for in efforts to increase their social inclusion?

Improving the social inclusion of Victorians who are blind or have low vision will require a greater understanding of their needs and capacity. It is Vision Australia’s belief that Victorians who are blind or have low vision have the ability to participate in any aspect of life they choose if given equal opportunities and support.

It is also important for policy makers and the wider community to consider the value of education and employment in empowering Victorians who are blind or have low vision and advancing the social inclusion agenda. Increased opportunities for education, in addition to assistive technology training and rehabilitation services, facilitate the transition of people with vision loss from study into meaningful employment. Having access to the financial resources provided through employment is also central to accessing appropriate housing, pursuing recreational interests, and accessing private health care services, all of which are determinants of social inclusion.

### How should ‘social inclusion’ for Victorians with a disability be defined?

Vision Australia’s primary goal is to support people who are blind or have low vision to be independent and live the life they choose by providing opportunities for education, employment and recreation. This approach is consistent with the United Nations (UN) definition of social inclusion, which reinforces notions of equity and opportunity. The UN characterises social inclusion as the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities for all, regardless of background, to achieve ones full potential in life.[[1]](#footnote-1) This includes policies and actions that promote equal access to public services and enable citizen’s participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) (2010) have extended this definition of social inclusion by outlining tangible and measurable resources linked to social inclusion, including: material assets; employment; education and skills training; health and disability; social supports; community services; and personal safety.[[2]](#footnote-2) This list of determinants of social inclusion covers the range of opportunities that Vision Australia strives to offer people who are blind or have low vision.

### What is the difference between the concepts of ‘social inclusion’ and ‘participation’ in the context of people with a disability?

The term ‘participation’ refers to the act of taking part in an activity. However, this is a passive term that does not infer anything about equity, or being able to participate in activities on equal terms, regardless of physical ability. Furthermore, ‘participation’ does not allude to the multitude of ways in which people can be engaged within their own communities, including education, employment and cultural activities. Alternatively, the term ‘social inclusion/exclusion’ highlights potential systemic barriers that may impede equal access opportunities and impact on a person’s mental and physical wellbeing. For example, a person with vision loss may experience social exclusion by not being able to take full advantage of available public transport options due to inadequate audible announcements during their journey.

Overall, social inclusion is a more meaningful outcome for people with a disability, as it recognises that it is a person’s right to actively participate in society at all levels and in the way that best suits them and their level of ability.

### What does social inclusion for Victorians with a disability look like now?

Ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to achieve their full potential in life is the end goal of an inclusive society. While efforts have been made to build the capacity and resources of Victorians with disability to enable their economic, social and civic participation, there are still many impediments in the way of achieving this goal.

Victorians who are blind or have low vision still regularly experience systemic barriers to education, employment, recreation and public transport, which have a flow on effect to all aspects of their lives. For example, without access to accessible information, specialist disability supports, and support from educational facilities, Victorians who are blind or have low vision experience great difficulty in gaining an education. Furthermore, without adequate educational opportunities, many Victorians with vision loss find it challenging to find and maintain employment. This is compounded by a general lack of employer awareness regarding the capacity of people who are blind or have low vision and the availability of enabling supports, such as workplace modifications and adaptive technology training.

As a consequence of the high levels of unemployment amongst people who are blind or have low vision, which includes approximately 58% of Vision Australia’s clients, many lack the economic resources to participate in regular recreational activities. This often leaves people with vision loss socially isolated within their own communities, which can be further exacerbated by inadequate access to public transport.

## Section 4 – Victorians with a disability and social inclusion

### What are the barriers to meaningful social inclusion for Victorians with a disability?

Obtaining information in accessible formats is a substantial barrier to social inclusion for Victorians who are blind or have low vision. Access to published information in Braille, audio and plain text formats is a fundamental right of all children and adults who are blind or have low vision and is integral to maximising opportunities for participation in all aspects of life, including childhood development, education, employment, and recreation. However, less than 5% of all published material is released in an accessible format in Australia due to copyright restrictions.

Access to meaningful employment is another systemic barrier experienced by Victorians who are blind or have low vision. In a 2012 survey of Vision Australia clients of working age, approximately 58% were unemployed not by their own choice due to negative employer perceptions towards hiring persons with disability. Employment is integral to ensuring social inclusion for people who are blind or have low vision, as it provides economic security, allows for independent living, increases recreational opportunities and access to goods, including assistive technologies. However, many Victorians with vision loss experience discrimination in finding work due to their eye condition and have difficulty maintaining their employment once their eyesight begins to deteriorate.

Victorians who are blind or have low vision often lack access to convenient and affordable adaptive technology to assist them in carrying out everyday tasks at home, work and in the community. Given the specialist nature of much of this equipment, the costs are often beyond the capacity of many people to pay. Furthermore, many manufacturers of mainstream equipment do not adopt universal design principles that take the access needs of people with a disability into account. For example, visual interfaces, such as touchscreens, are now on a wide range of mainstream equipment, but are not accessible for people who cannot see visual displays or locate the trigger points on a touchscreen.

Public transport is also vital to improving the social inclusion of people who are blind or have low vision, as it provides them with a connection to local services and social supports within the community. However, there are a number of systemic barriers regularly experienced by Victorians who are blind or have low vision when accessing public transport. The lack of audible announcements on buses and trains is a major area of concern, as people who are blind or have low vision regularly miss their stops or are unaware of route changes. In a 2012 audit of audible announcements on Victorian trains and trams, Blind Citizens Australia, the peak body for blind and low vision consumers, reported a non-compliance rate of approximately 60%.[[3]](#footnote-3) Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSI), which alert pedestrians with vision loss to upcoming hazards, are also often not used consistently or in line with current standards at train stations and bus stops. Furthermore, many taxi drivers do not accept dog guides in their vehicles due to a lack of awareness of the role assistance dogs play in the lives of people who are blind or have low vision.

### In what ways do Victorians with a disability participate in the economic, social and civil dimensions of society?

Victorians who are blind or have low vision participate in all aspects of life when able to access appropriate specialist disability services. Vision Australia supports people who are blind or have low vision to find or maintain employment through its employment services. These services include career planning, workplace assessments and modifications, and on the job and adaptive technology training.

Similarly, through access to specialist supports and resources Victorians with vision loss can increase their economic potential by making the most of all educational opportunities. Vision Australia supports families and children from birth through to school-leaving age by helping them develop life skills, liaising with educators, and providing orientation and mobility training and equipment advice. Students are supported as they progress in school through technology training and peer support programs. Furthermore, Vision Australia assists tertiary students in a variety of ways, equipping them with self-advocacy skills and information on their rights.

Opportunities for social participation are also readily accessed by people who are blind or have low vision. Audio description, which provides verbal information about key visual elements, is available in selected theatres and cinemas and has allowed for the inclusion of people who are blind or have low vision in cultural and recreational life. Victorians who are blind or have low vision also participate in specialised sporting activities, including blind cricket and swish, a modified version of table tennis. Australia is also represented by a number of blind athletes competing in a variety of high profile Paralympic sports, such as swimming, athletics and alpine skiing.

In regards to civil activities, the blindness and low vision community are active in a multitude of ways. People who are blind or have low vision can vote through accessible means, such as telephone and electronic voting systems. Candidates who are blind or have low vision have also run for political office in Federal and State Government and play active roles within their local Governments and communities by undertaking a variety of voluntary roles.

### What do you see as the emerging issues for Victorians with a disability over the next 20 years and how might these influence their social inclusion?

Victorians who are blind or have low vision face a number of future challenges that may have an impact on their inclusion within society. For example, the high rate of unemployment amongst Victorians who are blind or have low vision is likely to persist into the future unless employers are encouraged to hire employees with vision loss. Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE’s), which currently employ many persons with disability, are currently under threat due to the decline in the manufacturing industry. Furthermore, ADE’s often do not support the transition of blind or low vision Victorians into open employment in the public and private sector, which offer more competitive work and pay conditions.

Population growth is another emerging issue facing Victorians with a disability. By 2034, the population of Melbourne alone is predicted to increase up to 8.4 million[[4]](#footnote-4). In order to accommodate this number of people, developments will continue to spread further out to increase the number of low cost housing. However, accessible and affordable transport options are less abundant in outer suburban and regional areas. This poses a challenge for people who are blind or have low vision, who as a demographic are less likely to maintain meaningful employment and are more likely to require low cost housing alternatives.

It is also important that universal access principles, which incorporate the accessibility needs of persons with disability, are kept front of mind in the design of new housing and infrastructure being built within Victoria. For example**,** a continuous and unimpeded path of travel from the property boundary to a level entrance facilitates easy movement for people who are blind or have low vision and use a long white cane. Such features are equally beneficial for people who have a mobility impairment and the community in general.

Universal design principles also need to be considered as technology becomes more sophisticated. For example, touch screen interfaces are being increasingly applied to household appliances, mobile phones and computer technology. However, touchscreens are inaccessible for people who are blind or have low vision, who are often unable to determine the touchscreen trigger points, unless tactile or voice activated controls are available. It is important that accessibility is considered when such technology is adopted in public settings, such as shopping centres and public transport zones.

### How effective have awareness campaign been in improving social inclusion for people with a disability in Victoria?

No comment

### How can social inclusion and the participation of people in the community be effectively measured?

In order to examine the ways in which social inclusion can be measured it is first important to understand the reasons why people feel excluded. Strategies for increasing social inclusion are devised on the assumption that segments within society experience exclusion and are focused on addressing the social problems that cause social exclusion. A 2007 report on Social Inclusion and Exclusion in Northern Adelaide for the South Australian Department of Health identified that social problems occur in the context of both cultural exclusion and structural exclusion:

People living in poverty without the material resources to escape from their situation are bombarded with messages through the media and the education system, which tell them that they live in a meritocracy where anyone can achieve what they want simply by trying. This is a process of relative deprivation whereby the poor come to see themselves as materially deprived in relation to the society of which they are a part. Such relative deprivation causes social exclusion through a subjective experience of inequality and unfairness as materially deprived people seek to obtain the unobtainable”[[5]](#footnote-5)

This understanding defines social exclusion as the result of relative material deprivation. Thus, social inclusion can be effectively measured by testing the list of economic, educational and social indicators outlined by the BSL to establish average benchmarks and track improvements over time.

### What tools can be used to determine if there have been improvements or changes in the levels of social inclusion for people with a disability over time?

As discussed above, the primary method used to determine any improvements in the social inclusion of people with a disability is track movements in the key indicators of social exclusion over time. The BSL and Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (MIAESR) undertook a project to determine the key indicators of social exclusion using longitudinal data from the The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. This research led to the development of seven life domains of social exclusion: material resources, employment, education and skills, health and disability, social connection, community and personal safety.

Across these life domains we selected 30 key components of disadvantage that are measurable. These are called indicators of social exclusion. Using these indicators we created a composite measure that allows us to measure an individual’s overall level of exclusion.”[[6]](#footnote-6)



**\* Developed by The Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Melbourne Institute (2013)[[7]](#footnote-7)**

The table above outlines the indices that Vision Australia believes can be used to measure the degree to which an individual is socially included and may be used to measure improvements in an individual’s position over time. This coupled with our response to section 7 question 2 provides a framework for consideration where actions undertaken by any level of government to create better inclusion can be measured. This can be undertaken by governments using the framework as an approach to systematically address the issues in the indices such as a “marginal attachment to employment” through the provision and funding of job readiness programs for people with a disability. This would assist people to find and keep a job which would in turn influence other indicators, such as material resources.

## Section 5 – Disability Act 2006 (VIC)

### To what extent have the inclusion and participation of Victorians with a disability been advanced following the introduction of the Disability Act 2006 (Vic)?

No comment

### What impact has the Disability Act 2006 (Vic) had on the social inclusion of people with a disability with respect to Victorian government services?

No comment

## Section 6 – Victorian services for people with a disability

### How effective are services and initiatives designed to enhance the social inclusion of Victorians with a disability?

No Comment

### What other sectors and sections of the community should have a greater role in improving the social inclusion of Victorians with a disability?

No comment

### Are there examples of good practice in advancing social inclusion and participation driven by local government and the community sector?

Vision Australia offers many examples of good practice in advancing social inclusion through the services it provides to Victorians who are blind or have low vision. Client consultation is at the core of Vision Australia’s business operations and is a conducted on a three-tiered system covering local, regional and organisation wide consultative groups. This client consultative framework encourages strong connections between clients and staff, with the feedback from clients being used to shape Vision Australia’s services and advocacy efforts. Furthermore, participation in client consultation groups provides clients with the opportunity to make friends, share experiences and develop confidence and skills.

Additionally, Vision Australia provides peer support and recreational services to its clients to reduce the social isolation commonly experienced by people who are blind or have low vision. Telelink is an ongoing telephone based group program that is facilitated by volunteers via teleconference. It provides regular social and peer support, as well as special interest and recreation activities for people who are socially or geographically isolated. Additionally, Vision Australia’s Quality Living Groups provide a free, confidential and supportive environment for people who are blind or have low vision to share ideas, strategies and information about coping with vision loss. Opportunities to participate in recreational activities, such as cooking, gardening, crafts, and sports are also provided.

Both the client consultation and peer support programs operated by Vision Australia are simple, but effective in reducing social isolation and increasing the quality of life and well-being of people who are blind or have low vision.

## Section 7 – Role of Governments and collaboration

### What needs to happen in the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme to improve the social inclusion of Victorians with a disability into the future?

Vision Australia strongly supports the implementation of the NDIS and believes that it will have a positive effect on Victorians with a disability by ensuring a person-centred approach from all disability support agencies. One key issue for consideration by the National Disability Insurance Agency is the need for continued block funding of specific program areas that are often utilised by persons with disability, but are unlikely to be funded by an individual. Examples include Vision Australia’s peer support programs, the provision of information on blindness and low vision, and coordination of the nearly 4000 volunteers who help run the many free services Vision Australia provides, including radio and transport services. There may also be a need to block fund some services that will only by a small number of individuals in areas of regional Victoria.  If funding is limited to individuals packages there may not be a sufficient number of people to fund the provision of that service in a certain area. It would be highly detrimental to the social inclusion of people who are blind or have low vision if they do not have access to services such as accessibility or mobility, because of the area in which they live.

While some of these services are currently included in the second tier of NDIS supports, effective recognition and funding is required to preserve traditionally block funded programs that have a positive impact on the social inclusion of Victorians who are blind or have low vision. For this specific cohort, it would mean funding of information services, coordination of volunteers, peer support programs and dog guide development.

### What should be the role of governments and the community sector in increasing social inclusion for Victorians with a disability?

The Canadian Government’s Policy Research Institute (PRI) has developed an innovative framework to incorporate social capital into policy and program development. In this context, social capital refers to the networks of social relations that may provide individuals and groups with access to resources and supports.[[8]](#footnote-8) Four key approaches to incorporating social capital into public policy making were identified. These approaches vary dependant on the degree of direct government involvement and the issue concerned. Furthermore, they provide a useful guide to how the Victorian Government and the community sector can work together to increase social inclusion[[9]](#footnote-9):

## Intervention methods:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Degree of influence | Option for intervention by government |
| Direct | * Build and support networks where relevant for specific program objectives * Tap into existing networks to deliver services * Establish favourable conditions for desired network formation and maintenance |
| Indirect | * Increase program sensitivity to existing social capital |

## Applying the framework:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Option for intervention by government | **Example of government intervention** |
| Build and support networks where relevant for specific program objectives | Examples already exist in programs like immigration settlement, job search, community crime prevention, public health promotion etc. for example a 2005 study explored how government programs might better support the care networks of older people and promote ageing well policy goals. Older people needing care become increasingly reliant on close friends and family but their care needs may place these networks under stress. It was argued that the care burden can be reduced by providing direct care and support to the older person and by supporting caregiver networks through respite and other programs and through employment-based leave schemes. Levesque (2005) demonstrated the importance of government facilitating appropriate social networks to underpin social capital and labour market re-entry programs for long term social assistance recipients. Levesque noted that many such programs typically perpetuate the formation of networks between social assistance recipients rather than linking them to networks that can assist in labour market entry. In reviewing these studies, the PRI emphasises the importance of a social capital perspective in enabling interaction between a diversity of groups including those normally outside of existing contacts. |
| Tap into existing networks to deliver services | The field of public health and health promotion provides numerous examples of this approach. The PRI identifies health promotion programs that use influential figures to influence health-related behaviours within targeted networks. These include programs designed to change the behaviours of gay men to prevent the spread of HIV in the USA, and anti-smoking initiatives in the UK that used a peer support model in schools. |
| Establish favourable conditions for desired network formation and maintenance | The PRI notes that there will be instances where it is more appropriate for government to invest in establishing favourable conditions for the generation of social capital rather than playing a more direct role in shaping network development. The PRI identifies two key strategies for this approach –   * supporting opportunities for social interaction by providing assistance to disadvantaged people in developing social ties and rebuilding lost relational skills before engaging in more formal network building (eg as part of labour market integration); investing in public infrastructure, such as, public recreational and social spaces, community centres and mixed housing developments that support social interaction; * brokering and facilitating networks and alliances through the use of social ‘brokers’ or ‘entrepreneurs’, for example, local non-traditional leaders, sports coaches, neighbourhood activists etc. Public service representatives are seen to have a potential role in mediating between networks and supporting communities to develop their own networks. In the context of community development partnerships, Charbonneau (2005) found that success involved government representatives leaving the direction of activities to local networks while providing reliable funding and expertise, and building on existing community collaborations |
| Increase program sensitivity to existing social capital | This approach involves collecting and integrating information about existing social networks into policy and program design, implementation and evaluation phases. The goal is to raise the awareness of policy makers about the potential impacts of new interventions on the social capital already present in communities |

**\* This table is adapted from ‘Measuring Social Inclusion and Exclusion in Northern Adelaide: a report for the Department of Health’ pp. 42**

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### In what way could collaboration between government departments, organisations, services and the community sector be improved to enhance social inclusion for people with a disability?

Greater collaboration between Government Departments, local government and the community sector can have a significant impact on improving the social inclusion of Victorians with a disability. Vision Australia has successfully worked with government agencies to achieve better outcomes for Victorians who are blind or have low vision. One such example of a successful collaboration between Vision Australia, Government and the wider disability sector is the establishment of VidKids, an online video conferencing platform that provides services to children with a sensory disability in regional and remote areas. Children living with a sensory disability in remote regions often lack access to specialist disability supports. VidKids uses video conferencing to improve developmental outcomes and engage otherwise socially isolated children through learning.

As seen from this example, enhancing the social inclusion of Victorians with a disability will be dependent upon the Victorian Government developing meaningful and consistent partnerships with the community sector.

**Section 8 – Looking to the future**

### What needs to happen to improve the social inclusion of Victorians with a disability into the future?

Based on the discussion above, increasing the social inclusion of Victorians who are blind or have low vision will require concerted action from the Victorian Government, working in conjunction with the community sector. The first priority is to tackle the high rates of unemployment amongst the blindness and low vision community, as unemployment has a negative impact on multiple indices of social inclusion. Achieving this will require a greater recognition of the needs and capacity of people who are blind or have low vision within the community. Of equal importance are increased educational opportunities and specialist supports for Victorians who are blind or have low vision. Access to information in accessible formats and adaptive technology is vital in ensuring that Victorians with vision loss can make the most of their education and then successfully integrate into the workforce.

While education and employment are key determinants, social inclusion is also influenced by access to community services. Public transport acts as a lifeline to Victorians who are blind or have low vision. Therefore, it is crucial that public transport operators ensure that accessibility features, such as audible announcements and TGSI’s, are provided. It is also important that public infrastructure is designed in accordance with universal access standards to facilitate easy access by Victorians who are blind or have low vision and that accessibility is considered when technology is adopted in public settings.

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4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) Population Projections, Australia, 2012 (base) to 2101 – catalogue no. 3222.0 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Spoehr, J., Wilson, L., Barnett, K., Toth, T. & Watson-Tran, A. (2007), Measuring Social Inclusion

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6. Scutella, R., Wilkins, R. & Kostenko, W. (2009), Estimates of poverty and social exclusion in Australia: a multidimensional approach, BSL & MIAESR, Melbourne. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Retrieved from: <http://www.bsl.org.au/Social-exclusion-monitor/Measuring-social-exclusion.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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9. Spoehr, J., Wilson, L., Barnett, K., Toth, T. & Watson-Tran, A. (2007), Measuring Social Inclusion

   and Exclusion In Northern Adelaide: A report for the Department of Health , Australian Institute for Social Research, Adelaide pp. 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)