INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

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Parliament of New South Wales
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Inquiry into the 2008 Local Government Elections

Response Submitted by: **Susan Thompson**

1. INTRODUCTION

Vision Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry into the 2008 Local Government Election.

Vision Australia was formed in 2004 through the merger of several leading Australian agencies that provided services to people who are blind or have low vision. We are now Australia's largest blindness and low vision agency, with a long history of professional service delivery. Our organisation's purpose is to provide assistance to people who are blind or have low vision so that they can access, and fully participate in, all facets of life. Vision Australia promotes awareness to government, government departments, community services and the general public about the barriers faced by people, who are blind or have low vision in a predominantly sight orientated society.

2. RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP

Vision Australia asserts that its clients, who are blind or have low vision, should have the same rights and responsibilities applicable to all Australian Citizens. These include the responsibility to cast a vote, and the right to do so in secret.

Currently in Australia, people who are blind or have low vision bear the responsibility to cast a vote, but are not universally afforded the right to cast that vote in secret.

For a person who is blind or has low vision, in order to cast a truly secret vote, they must be able to complete the ballot independently, and be able to independently verify their choices.

3. ACCESSIBLE VOTING FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

3.1 Braille ballot papers

Vision Australia was very pleased to see that during the 2008 Local Government elections over 50 people able to read Braille were provided access (through Braille ballot papers) to names of all standing candidates and a facility which enabled some Braille users to mark their chosen candidates, and wishes to acknowledge the significant commitment and effort of the NSW Electoral Commission for this initiative.

By way of explanation for the Committee, The NSW Electoral Commission established a mechanism by which enrolled blind voters wishing to avail themselves of Braille ballot papers registered their name and address with the commission. They were subsequently provided through the post, with a Braille ballot package containing the ballot papers in Braille, and instructions for completion in Braille.

The Braille ballot had a raised tactile square box to the left of each name in which the voter could mark or write the number corresponding to the candidate for whom they wished to vote.

Ballot papers were provided in Grade 1 or uncontracted Braille (the first level of Braille) with the view to it being accessible to a greater number of Braille users.

3.2 Shortcomings of hard copy Braille ballot papers

3.2.1 Relatively low Braille usage amongst people who are blind

Due to the unavailability of accurate statistics, it is difficult to know how many people in Australia use Braille, or use it to a level of proficiency to enable it to provide (when available) access to information of any volume.

While there are certainly a number of people born with sufficiently low vision to mean that Braille will provide them with the key to literacy, blindness and low vision is, in the main, a disability of aging, and Braille use in the population of people who are blind or have low vision is relatively low.

This is not by any means to be taken to suggest that Braille does not play a vital role in literacy and access to information for those who utilize Braille, but is rather meant to suggest that hard-copy Braille is not a long-term solution to accessible (secret and verifiable) vote for the widest number of people who are blind or have low vision.

3.2.2   Grade 1 Braille

Experience suggests that though some people whose vision loss (particularly later in life) is sufficient for them to take up learning Braille, many of these people utilize it for small amounts of text such as labelling, short signage, and smaller amounts of text and often do not progress beyond the first (uncontracted) level of Braille.
Further, many people who learn Braille only to the grade 1 (uncontracted) level, can often struggle with dealing with reading material produced in Grade 1 which is of any length.

Further, for those Braille users proficient in Grade 2 (contracted) Braille, dealing with text of any length in the longer Grade one level can be extremely tiresome, as often pattern recognition in Grade 2 is long entrenched.

For the 2008 Local Government elections, Vision Australia did produce the ballot papers in Grade 1 Braille, in the hope it would afford access to a greater number of Braille users.

Although we don't have the benefit of being able to survey those who utilized the Braille ballot papers, to gather more specific feedback related to the use of Grade 1 versus Grade 2 Braille for this purpose, some feedback would suggest that in retrospect, Grade 1 Braille may not have been the best solution.

3.2.3   Inability to verify vote

The lack of a means to independently verify the accuracy of the vote cast was a major shortcoming with the use of the Braille ballot for the 2008 Local Government elections.

While Braille readers had access to the candidate names, and a tactile raised line box in which to record the selection, any numbers/marks recorded, were required to

be made in print for counting by sighted officials. Thus a blind voter was not able to verify whether their numbers were legible to a sighted reader, or to be sure they were not losing track of the numbering sequence.

For a person living alone this meant they had no way to verify they had cast a valid vote. For a person with access to assistance from a sighted person who could check the ballot, this meant their vote was not secret.

Thus, while a significant step forward by the NSW Electoral Commission in recognizing it's responsibility to provide a secret and independent vote to people who are blind, this method of voting did not, in practice, afford a secret independent and verifiable vote.

3.3 Other Braille voting initiatives

Vision Australia is aware that Queensland recently also trialled a Braille ballot, which additionally allowed for people to record their voting selections using Braille, and Braille readers were engaged to read these votes for election officials.

Though we don't have formal feedback on people's experience with this ballot, Vision Australia is aware that there was some concern about the confidentiality of that vote, given the likely low number of Braille voters per area, and the sometimes small-world nature of such minorities within society. Thus, there is a higher likelihood that a blind person reading ballot papers may be able to easily identify a particular voter's ballot papers based on it's being in Braille and from a particular location.

4. FUTURE ACCESSIBLE VOTING

Vision Australia certainly recognizes the commitment towards providing accessible voting for people who are blind or have low vision demonstrated by the provision of a Braille ballot for the 2008 Local Government election. However we believe that a more universally accessible system of voting would serve a greater number of voters who are blind or have low vision, and if extended to the broader community could be far more cost effective.

As noted in Vision Australia's submission to this committee in its review of the 2007 NSW election, around Australia steps towards accessible voting, such as the use of audio electronically assisted voting systems, for both those who are blind and who have low vision, have already been taken, and in some cases repeated.

These initiatives include:

- ACT – 2008 saw 3 successive elections providing electronic voting with audio output;

- Victoria – 2006 state election - trial of electronic voting with audio output;

- Tasmania – May 2007 legislative council - trial of electronic voting with audio output and enlarged fonts with mouse click completion

- WA – 2007 trial internet voting with some levels of WC3 Accessibility compliance for Docker Football Club elections; and

- Federal - November 2007 federal election trial of electronic voting with audio output and screen enlargement.

The committee would know doubt be aware that at the federal level the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recently released its report in which it recommended against continuing with the electronically assisted voting trialled in the 2007 federal election, due largely to cost.

Vision Australia is still firmly of the view that if a collaborative approach were taken, utilizing the developments achieved in all states and the commonwealth, and if an electronically assisted voting system were available to all voters (as it is in the ACT), then the system could be far more costs effective.

In an accessible voting solution which utilizes audio based information, the one significantly disenfranchised group still remaining would be those who are deafblind. Consideration needs to be given as to how to afford this group access to a secret independent vote.

5. ACCESSIBLE ELECTION INFORMATION

5.1 Accessible Election Brochures

Vision Australia was please to work with the NSW Electoral Commission to provide all NSW voters with accessible information pertaining to the election by the provision of the 'How to Vote' and 'Electoral Information' brochures in audio CD format which was mailed to approximately 5000 people on Vision Australia's database.

The Commission's commitment to providing this accessible information is important in ensuring that those who are blind or have low vision are empowered with the same information as sighted voters.

5.2 Accessible candidate information

Vision Australia gratefully acknowledges the assistance given by the Commission in providing via email, upon request, candidate information for specific wards. This facilitated some voters in casting a more considered vote by having the information to

peruse in advance through use of computers with assistive technologies such as, screen reading software (with Braille displays or voice output) and large print software.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, while the Braille Ballot initiative provided a degree of access to the voting process for just over 50 Braille users in NSW, it does not represent a universally accessible system.

Vision Australia urges:

- the NSW government to make the necessary legislative changes to enable the Electoral Commission the flexibility to implement alternative voting mechanisms to afford those who are blind or have low vision a secret independent vote; and
- that the NSW Electoral Commission works collaboratively with other Australian Jurisdictions and stakeholders including Vision Australia and Blind Citizens Australia to develop an electronically assisted means of accessible voting for future Local Government and state elections.

Vision Australia would be happy to provide the committee with any additional information, or to appear before the committee in person.

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