

**Submission
No 7**

ADMINISTRATION OF THE 2019 NSW STATE ELECTION

Organisation: Blindness Sector

Date Received: 16 September 2019

Blindness Sector Submission to the NSW Electoral Commission following the NSW Election in March 2019

Blind Citizens Australia, Guide Dogs Australia and Vision Australia have welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Electoral Commission's work towards making the New South Wales Electoral process accessible and inclusive for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Through participation in the NSW Electoral Commission's Disability Reference Group we have advocated for the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.

The iVote system has been applauded across Australia by many within the blindness sector recognising the opportunity and facility it provides to enable independent, secret and verifiable voting. We welcome this opportunity to provide feedback from our stakeholders around their experience using iVote in the 2019 State Election.

Following the March 2019 election, feedback was sought from members of the Blind and Vision Impaired community regarding their experience using iVote to cast their vote. 34 people provided feedback. While we recognise this is a small sample size we believe it is sufficient to identify aspects of iVote that could be improved to improve its usability in future elections.

Areas for Improvement

1. Timeliness of Distribution of iVote Information

Information regarding iVote was received from the NSW Electoral Commission more than a week after voting opened. This did not allow time for distribution to people who are blind or vision impaired who do not use email, meaning that many voters were not aware of several changes to iVote; including the option to verify ones vote and, the option to provide a Medicare card or passport number upon registering.

2. iVote – Registration

a) Knowledge / education of call centre staff

Through feedback received from several voters it is evident that some call centre staff would benefit from additional training around iVote and the needs of people with disability. Some examples of concern that have been raised include:

A caller stated to an operator that the reason they were requesting to use the iVote system was because they were blind. The operator responded to this by saying "oh, I'm sorry". This response is totally inappropriate as it is a negative judgment about the impact of the person's disability.

In another instance, a caller identified to an operator that they were blind and the operator proceeded to connect the caller to the National Relay Service to continue the call. The National Relay Service is a service that can be used by people who are deaf, hearing impaired or non-verbal to make and receive phone calls.

b) System Delays / Failure

It appears that at some points prior to Election Day the iVote system, both phone and internet, were not working.

Unfortunately, as this information wasn't made available or clear to those wishing to register or cast their vote, 14 voters reported that they began the process of voting online and the site would crash before they were able to submit their vote. This issue continued across several days and several of the voters reported experiencing it on more than one occasion.

Callers using the assisted and telephone keypad voting options noted that they waited on hold for over an hour, only to have their call answered by a staff member who would tell them that voting was currently not available. This caused a great deal of frustration amongst voters as it was felt that this information could have been provided through a recorded message at the start of the phone call.

3. iVote Online

a) Positive experiences:

- Voters noted that the instructions were straightforward and easy to follow
- Many voters noted they used the practice vote and found this very helpful, especially those using the system for the first time.

b) Barriers / issues:

CAPTCHA

When using the online option of iVote through Internet Explorer, 2 voters provided feedback that they were required to proceed using a CAPTCHA. Captcha presents many accessibility issues, even when an audio alternative is provided. As a result, these voters were not able to cast their vote online and pursued other options to complete the voting process.

Verification process

18 voters discussed their confusion around the verification process. There was uncertainty as to whether this process was to verify a voter's identity when logging in or whether it was to verify the successful submission of their vote.

It is of great concern that two different devices are required to verify the submission of a vote; blindness and vision impairment are correlated strongly with aging. Many older Australians are less likely to have access to multiple pieces of technology. When this is combined with the need to scan a QR code, this process becomes extremely difficult, if not completely unachievable independently for some. This is further compounded by the limited amount of instructions available when using the verification app. Many voters called the contact centre for further assistance to undertake the verification process however were not able to receive any support from the operators who did not appear to be trained in technical support for the verification process.

The verification app was not created in line with Apple's accessibility policy. Various onscreen elements in the app were not identifiable to those using VoiceOver.

4. iVote Phone assisted and *Keypad Voting**

a) Selection of preferences – difficulty and confusion

In the opening days of early voting, 3 Voters noted difficulty when attempting to select preferences for the Legislative Council, repeatedly hearing the message 'press five to select a preference', even when pressing the '5' key on their telephone keypad. This resulted in voters choosing to end the call and call back and request personal assistance to cast their vote. Voters identified feeling frustrated as they valued the ability to cast their vote in a way that they felt was completely independent through the use of the telephone keypad. This issue did not appear to be ongoing as it was only identified in the first 3 days of iVote being available.

b) Perceived pressure to use *the iVote internet voting option when accessing call centre**

While waiting on hold to cast their vote, many voters expressed their frustration at the repeated playing of recorded messages directing them to cast their vote electronically using ***the internet iVote option; voters expressed feeling pressure to move towards this option even though they identified not having the technology or the technical skills or confidence to do so.

c) Positive interactions with call centre staff

Voters found the personal assistance helpful when casting their vote and felt this process was straightforward and easy to use however the excessive wait times made the process time consuming.

Proposed Solutions

It is vital that information regarding iVote is provided in a more timely manner, in line with when members of the public receive information about alternative means of voting. This will ensure the information can be distributed to people who are blind or vision impaired prior to voting opening so they can choose the voting method that best meets their needs and arrange any assistance that may be required. This information should not only be available electronically but also in alternate formats such as braille, audio and large print so that all voters can access it.

The verification process was unclear and caused a great deal of confusion among voters who were unsure exactly what would be verified, at what point and how. It is recommended that this process be explained more clearly in the future and that the scanning of a QR code be removed and replaced with an alternate method for verification. Any app that is developed must be done so in line with accessibility guidelines for the device on which it is to be used to ensure its accessibility.

For voters who are blind or vision impaired it is essential that all print correspondence sent out by the New South Wales Electoral Commission is provided in the person's preferred format. This could include via email, braille, audio or large print. This ensures that voters are able to read the documents and respond appropriately.

It is recommended that if the voting system is unavailable for any reason voters be notified of this as soon as they log in to submit their vote electronically or when calling to place their vote through either of the two telephone based voting options.

We would also strongly encourage that all call centre staff to undertake disability awareness and confidence training so they understand the needs of the people they are supporting and can respond appropriately.

Conclusion

We acknowledge improvements to access and inclusion can take some time and that legacy systems and knowledge barriers can create some obstacles, however the abovementioned organisations are keen to continue working with the New South Wales Electoral Commission through the Disability Reference Group or through other fora to achieve continued improvements and a truly secret, independent and verifiable electoral process for people who are blind or vision impaired.

With this in mind, Blind Citizens Australia, Guide Dogs Australia and Vision Australia request a meeting with the New South Wales Electoral Commission to discuss the content of this submission in more detail and work together to ensure that iVote continues to meet the needs of our community.