

**Submission  
No 16**

## **INQUIRY INTO CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Vision Australia

**Date Received:** 14 July 2022

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# Vision Australia submission



Submitted to: Select Committee Inquiry on the Conduct of NSW Elections

Date: 14 July 2022

Submission approved by: Chris Edwards, Manager Government Relations and Advocacy, NDIS and Aged Care, Vision Australia

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## **Introduction**

Vision Australia is making this short submission to the inquiry into the conduct of NSW elections to draw the Committee's attention to the important role that the iVote suite of accessible voting options has played in increasing the independence and participation of people in NSW who are blind or have low vision, and also to ensure that the Committee is aware of the extreme disappointment that the blind and low vision community in NSW are experiencing now that iVote has been scrapped. We share the view of many of our clients that the scrapping of iVote without an equivalent replacement is completely incompatible with the principles in the NSW Government's Disability Inclusion Act.

## **Background**

iVote is a technology platform that was introduced in the NSW state election of 2011. It comprises a suite of three complementary voting options (online, automated telephone keypad, and human-assisted telephone) that, together, have provided voters who are blind or have low vision in NSW with an equivalent level of independent, secret and verifiable voting to the rest of the community. Between the elections of 2011 and 2015 there was an approximately eightfold increase in iVote usage by voters who are blind or have low vision, which attests to its success in meeting the voting needs of the blind and low vision community. This exponential increase in iVote uptake was not sustained in the 2019 election, but this was largely due to logistical issues in promoting the availability of iVote and did not reflect any dissatisfaction with iVote itself. A number of other Australian jurisdictions have either used iVote or have been considering using it, and it is widely recognised that iVote is the "gold standard" in accessible voting for people who are blind or have low vision.

## **iVote in the 2021 Local Government Elections**

Vision Australia has been at the forefront of lobbying for iVote to be made available for local government elections, and it was therefore very encouraging that two of the three components of the iVote system were offered in the local government elections of 2021. Notwithstanding the reduced suite of options (the NSW Electoral Commission determined that they could not make the automated telephone keypad option available), most voters who are blind or have low vision were able to use iVote to cast an independent, secret and verifiable vote.

It seemed that no sooner had the local government elections concluded than the Commission made the decision to abandon the iVote platform altogether. Barriers to access and participation in all aspects of civic and community life are well-known to people with a disability, including and especially people who are blind or have low vision. It is one thing to experience an existing barrier, but it is another thing altogether to have a barrier removed and then find that it is reinstated. This is exactly what voters who are blind or have low vision have experienced in NSW. We cannot think of any other example, at anytime, anywhere in Australia, where a long-standing discriminatory barrier to

participation by people with a disability has been removed and then erected again a decade later.

## **Limitation to Human-Assisted Telephone Voting**

The NSW Electoral Commission has advised that they will be offering a human-assisted telephone option for people who are blind or have low vision voting in the 2023 state election. A similar option was available in the local council elections in February 2022, and human-assisted telephone voting will also be offered for the local council elections on July 30 2022. This option has always been a component of the iVote suite of accessible voting options, and even though it does not offer equivalent levels of secrecy and verifiability to the other components, it is preferred by some people, especially those who have recently become blind or acquired a vision loss and who are not yet comfortable using other technologies. It is also the option that has been offered by the Australian Electoral Commission from the 2010 Federal election.

Vision Australia has recently conducted a survey to collect data on the experiences of people who are blind or have low vision voting in the 2022 Federal election. While this data is specific to this election, it is relevant for consideration in the context of the NSW inquiry because the human-assisted telephone option offered during the Federal election is, for all intents and purposes, the same as the option that will be offered in the 2023 NSW election.

57% of respondents to our survey said that they use AEC's Blind and Low Vision Telephone Voting Service (human-assisted telephone voting). Given that this service has been offered in five Federal elections now and is thus widely known in the blind and low vision community, it is significant that such a high percentage of voters chose not to use it. Moreover, our understanding from information provided to us in relation to the 2019 Federal election is that usage actually declined from 2016 (we have not yet received usage data for the 2022 Federal election).

In our view, one of the constraints on the uptake of human-assisted telephone voting is that it is not secret, in the sense that in order to use it, a voter has to disclose their voting preferences to another person. While there are separate registration and voter recording processes that minimise the risk of identifying individual voters, it is nonetheless easy to appreciate situations in which there is a higher risk. For example, if a person who is blind or has low vision is acquainted with call centre staff, or if they live close to where the call centre is located, then they may well have concerns about the secrecy of their vote. In any case, almost 25% of respondents to our survey indicated that they were not confident that their vote was secret.

Almost 20% of respondents indicated that they were not confident that their voting preferences had been recorded and submitted correctly. This is hardly surprising, given the difficulty that voters can have keeping track of their preferences when they have to rely on someone on the phone to record them, and also because a voter has no way of verifying that their vote has been submitted.

34% of respondents indicated that there were aspects of using the telephone voting service that they found challenging or inconvenient. One respondent said:

*“As a user of iVote in NSW I am accustomed to being able to vote below the line. To do this using the telephone voting service would have required hours of preparation and a considerable amount of time dictating my preferences to the call centre staff, with no assurance that my vote would be recorded and submitted correctly, not to mention the pressure I would have felt that I was taking up too much of their time when there were other people waiting. So I felt compelled to vote above the line, which is not how I wanted to vote.”*

Another respondent noted:

*“The limitation of registration and voting to weekday business hours made this process more inconvenient to fit around work commitments. Registration, although necessary, was an extra step not required of sighted voters.”*

One respondent said that they used the telephone voting service *“because it was the least inaccessible option”*. Some respondents certainly referred to the benefits (including convenience) of the service compared with other options such as postal and in-person voting, but overall the results of our survey indicate very clearly that a human-assisted telephone option alone does not offer independence, secrecy or verifiability. This is in contrast to the other component of the iVote suite. The deficiencies of the service are inherent to this option and not the result of administrative logistical or organisational shortcomings that can potentially be addressed. Yet this is precisely the option that the blind and low vision community will be offered to assist them vote in the NSW 2023 state election.

## **Conclusion**

The scrapping of iVote has caused immense distress to the blind and low vision community in NSW. It has eroded confidence in the commitment of the Government to the full inclusion of people with a disability in all aspects of civic and community life, and created a feeling that the principles embodied in the Disability Inclusion Act are not adequately represented. Full and equal participation in democracy is seen as a fundamental right in Australia, yet people in NSW who are blind or have low vision feel that, in their case, this right has been violated.

We strongly urge the Committee to recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the NSW Electoral Commission be required and appropriately resourced to implement an enduring replacement for the iVote platform that includes, as a minimum, the equivalent suite of options available in iVote, for all state and local government elections.

## **About Vision Australia**

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia's most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support, Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, Spectacles Program for the NSW Government, Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 30,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment.