



## Blind Citizens NZ

## Issue 9: Accessible Independent Voting

# How Secret Is Our Secret Vote

## Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”

# Blind People Speaking for Ourselves

Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc

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# Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”

## Issue 9: Accessible Independent Voting

### How Secret Is Our Secret Vote

Founded in 1945, the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc (Blind Citizens NZ) is New Zealand’s leading blindness consumer organisation and one of the country’s largest organisations of disabled consumers. Our aim is to heighten awareness of the rights of blind and vision impaired people and to remove the barriers that impact upon our ability to live in an accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

In the context of this document, the word “blind” encompasses all those with a vision impairment who can identify with some or all of the issues described below.

The term “adaptive technology” refers to specialised equipment, and/or software installed on a normal computer or smart phone, that gives blind people access to information. This may include Screen reading software that converts text on the screen to synthetic speech or Screen magnification software that enlarges the image on the screen.

## Introduction

Many blind New Zealanders are unable to vote without sighted assistance, whether at the polling booth or in a postal ballot. Hence the ability to independently cast a truly secret vote is denied to us.

Our independence and well-informed participation is often compromised because information in print forms the basis of much of the material distributed as part of both General and Local Authority elections. This ranges from candidate biographies, election issues, postal voting forms and ballot papers in polling booths.

The Electoral Commission has set itself the goal of developing programmes and processes that, by the year 2020, will enable disabled voters to cast an independent and secret ballot in parliamentary elections and access the Electoral Commission's services and information in ways that meet their needs.

The Electoral Commission has also committed to ensuring materials about enrolling and voting are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use. For the majority of blind people, our inability to access printed material presents as a major barrier to being well-informed about the political process and the candidates seeking our support. This is particularly true in the case of Local Authority Elections which tend to receive less radio and TV coverage than is provided for a General Election. As a result greater reliance is placed on the printed word and the use of visual public promotions such as bill-boards and hoardings to provide the necessary information and foster candidate recognition.

Blind people with internet access and with the necessary adaptive technology should find themselves in a much better position to be able to learn about the issues and the candidates. However, this all depends on the accessibility of web sites used to introduce issues and candidates to the voters. The 2013 Local Authority Election was an instance where the official Auckland Council web site designated to provide information for Auckland voters was inaccessible using screen reading software with synthetic speech. This was in marked contrast to the Wellington Council web site which was fully accessible.

Since blind voters can choose who will assist them, there is less need to seek sighted assistance from electoral officers to read and mark their ballot papers. Even so, such officers still need the necessary blindness awareness training to enable them to perform this task efficiently while at the same time preserving the dignity of the blind voter. The fact that this process is often conducted within earshot of other officials and voters can cause embarrassment and a consequential loss of confidentiality for the blind voter. Regardless of whether this task is carried out by an official, friend or family member, the blind voter still must trust that their wishes have been followed and their directions are understood and applied. Even if this trust is well-founded, this vote has not been cast independently, nor is it secret.

The intention to allow for an on-line voting trial in the 2016 Local Authority Elections should in theory prove a positive move for those blind voters with internet access and the necessary adaptive technology. For the rest however, all the present issues will remain until an alternative mechanism to the existing print-based system is devised. Blind Citizens NZ believes this lies with phone voting and information sharing.

## Phone Voting

Phone-voting options have been successfully trialed in Australia (Victoria and New South Wales) and this option should be developed, piloted and implemented alongside any future developments of on-line voting. It should be noted that, while phone-voting will benefit blind voters without access to a computer, it will also benefit a significant number of the New Zealand population in similar circumstances who may also be print-disabled or unable to independently leave their home.

The Electoral Commission has been successful in promoting legislative change to enable Telephone Dictation Voting to occur. It is committed to running a pilot in conjunction with the 2014 General Election.

This will enable the blind voter, once their voter details have been verified, to dictate their votes to a person not connected with the initial identification process. Although this is a step in the right direction, Blind Citizens NZ would prefer to see a blind person being able to cast their vote without human intervention. With no way to confirm the validity of the transaction, and with the possibility (however remote) that the voter's intentions may be misrepresented or misinterpreted or the voter's voice recognised, these factors all serve to detract from the ideal of a blind person being able to independently cast a secret vote.

## What We Need

Blind Citizens NZ strongly recommends that:

- A fully-automated system of phone voting be introduced, similar in principle to that already in operation by Blind Citizens NZ and the Blind Foundation to conduct their respective board elections.
- In addition to phone voting, that online voting, if and when introduced for use by the public in either General or Local Authority elections, be accessible to blind voters.
- All official election web sites be required to comply with level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) as published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).
- Both the Electoral Commission and Local Government allow adequate time to ensure that election material, including that used to promote the candidates, be available in a range of alternate formats that will meet the needs of blind voters. Alternate formats include large print, audio, braille and electronic media.
- Contact be made with Blind Citizens NZ for information about producers of alternate formats.

## Conclusion

Only when blind voters are enabled to access all electoral information available to those with sight, and to independently cast a secret vote, can it be claimed that blind people enjoy full participation in the electoral process as equal citizens with their sighted peers.

## Resources

The following resources may provide additional information:

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Articles 9 Accessibility and 29 Participation in Political and Public Life
- Electoral Commission Access 2020 Disability Strategy
- New Zealand Disability Action Plan, 2014-2018

## Other publications in this series

- Register of Issues: The Great Barrier Brief.
- Issue 1: Nationally Consistent Total Mobility Scheme / Are we being taken for a ride?
- Issue 2: Accessible Public Transport / Is this the right bus?
- Issue 4: Accessible Banking / Money talks, where does it stop?
- Issue 5: Accessible Telecommunication Services / Are you walking the talk?
- Issue 6: Sharing the Benefits of Technology / Is your website reaching everyone?
- Issue 6: Sharing the Benefits of Technology / Does your website shut the door in our face?
- Issue 7: Audio Description / A sentence paints a thousand pictures, so what's it sound like?
- Issue 11: Access to the Built Environment / Lost in the Urban Jungle



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