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Focus

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Where do we go to from here? Editorial, by Allan Jones

I will begin this editorial by mentioning some issues regarding COVID-19. COVID-19 is a major talking point at present and there are many questions!!!

Around the country we are experiencing different Alert Levels. Was the second lockdown in Alert Level 4 easier for people than the first? In my opinion the second lockdown was much harder the first time around. The weather was finer, and I could take my breakfast outside on a tray. However I am Wellington-based, and those still experiencing tighter limitations will likely have a different view. Second time around I feel as a blind person my independence has been eroded. Initially I believe we played lip service to distancing with the Delta variant. We are learning this needs to be taken far more seriously!!! I am a person who enjoys grocery shopping and cafe visits. At Alert Level 2 in Wellington, one of my favourite cafes is too small to allow the necessary distancing, so it is either sit outside or “takeaway”.

We were all wondering if Blind Citizens NZ's Annual General Meeting and Conference would go ahead. As we are later with our “September” issue than planned, we know it went ahead. Distancing and face mask wearing were very well observed. For someone like myself with a compromising medical condition, this made my experience in a larger gathering more enjoyable!!!

Working through COVID-19 I have become very aware of the authoritative nature of peoples' voices. The leader of this group for me was Chris Smith. Chris is a virologist, and a member of a group of Cambridge scientists calling themselves the Naked Scientists. His calmness and ability to explain difficult concepts really appealed to me. Others I found worthy of mentioning are Michael Baker, Ashley Bloomfield and Siouxsie Wiles. I hope Kim Hill will have Chris Smith on her show again soon.

One last issue on COVID-19 - I heard that an agency (not Blind Low Vision NZ) refused a blind service user information as to whether their support workers were vaccinated. Apparently the agency was using the Privacy Act for taking this course of action. When brought to its attention, the Ministry of Health stated very strongly that a support worker from an agency it funds, coming into a disabled person's house, must give information if requested, regarding their COVID-19 vaccine status. I feel using the Privacy Act in this manner is a travesty and I trust this won't happen again. As a part time support worker myself, I will have no hesitation in telling service users what my COVID-19 jab status is.

Transport is an interesting one from an audible announcement point of view. The vexing question from my perspective is whether we should opt for apps on our cell phones, or an audible system controlled by the bus company. I opt for apps coming through to my cell phone as bus routes can change and drivers can switch the audible announcements off. Perhaps this is a time when all parties should get together and nut out a solution!! It is interesting to hear that the Telcoes are offering free phones for those who may need urgent services. Maybe the next challenge for our community is advocating for the wider provision of cell phones for blind travellers. In Wellington, using the rear door for getting on and getting off the bus and distancing comes up again. Getting on a bus at the rear door for me, doesn't present a problem. However getting off can, especially if the bus isn't close to the kerb. I haven't used a bus since before 17 March 2021, and I think it will be a while before I do so.

I had a quiet laugh to myself when I received a survey asking how I found transport over COVID-19. I was tempted to reply "I didn't", as it is only since mid-September that I have started using taxis again.

I have to wonder why bean counters haven't woken up to the fact that enabling Total Mobility to be used with Uber, would save a lot of money. For me, from home to Blind Citizens NZ / Blind Low Vision NZ in Wellington in a taxi would be just under \$10.

That is with Total Mobility. The full fare in Uber is just over \$10. If Total Mobility applied it would be \$5.

I have noticed some taxis now have a Perspex screen separating the front and back seats. This presented a bit of a problem when passing my Total Mobility card and cash to the driver, until I realised I could pass it under the screen between the two front seats.

The final point about taxis is that sitting in the back there isn't access to the Braille label. This is partially offset by receiving a text telling me what number the cab is. This happens when I use my cell phone to order the cab.

I want to mention a cover version, a stage play, and a film.

The cover version was released in June this year it was Tami Neilson singing Joni Mitchell's song River, perhaps one of the finest covers I have heard. It is interesting to note that Joni Mitchell released the album Blue in 1971. I had a vinyl copy 50 years ago. The track to remember from this album is Carey, but there are several other good tracks.

The play I want to mention is "Up Down Girl". The play was a dialogue between a mother and her teenage daughter packing a suitcase for the daughter to go to a sort of finishing school sheltered workshop. The daughter was born with Down Syndrome and portrayed a mixture of impishness and seriousness. I came away feeling not sure whether the mother believed in what she was telling her daughter about where she was going. For me it wasn't until teacher Jim Havill came on the scene that I began to think of alternatives to the then Blind Foundation for my education.

The film I want to share with you is called Poppy, produced here in New Zealand. Also about a young woman with Down Syndrome, this is a great film about determination. Poppy wanted to be a motor mechanic. She had to deal with an overprotective brother and a desire to learn to drive.

Any petrolheads out there will enjoy this film. The only thing missing is the smell of oil. I understand the director of this film was the same person who directed the film Second-hand Wedding, which was released about ten years ago.

As I close off my final editorial, and as we continue to adapt to the impacts of COVID-19 around the country, there are four pieces of music I share. These come to mind as they have assisted me when the “chips have been down and the “brown stuff has been flying”. I include these as I detect the diversity of feeling of anger, frustration and depression coming through...

There are two versions of the first song “Don’t Give Up”. Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush followed by Leonard Cohen and Jennifer Warnes’ versions of “Famous Blue Raincoat” followed by a new version of the Neil Young song “After the Goldrush”, sung by Reb Fountain - I won’t try and interpret what this song is about. The fourth song is Coldplay’s “Fix You”. This song was played at a friend’s daughter’s memorial service that I recently attended. It’s a real “tear jerker”, but an amazing song.

Finally, for your December issue of Focus you will have a new editor. I have enjoyed my three years as editor, but it is time for change. When I took the editorship on I decided I wouldn’t make it a stressful occupation. In the main this has worked. Meeting deadlines for me at times has been a little challenging. The way I have approached the writing of Focus is usually to have two sessions of drafting paragraphs followed by a few days doing some tidying up. I have enjoyed working with Blind Citizens NZ’s Chief Executive, and we have often enjoyed working over an early morning coffee. Focus’s previous editor Carolyn Weston was helpful and gracious to me when we changed editors three years ago. I hope I can be the same to the incoming editor Kylee Maloney.

Are we subject to Brandolini's Law or McNamara's Fallacy: You be the judge

From Jonathan Godfrey, National President

I used Brandolini's Law and McNamara's Fallacy in a statistics lecture given to first year Science students recently, and I think it's time to introduce them to you. I'm keen to hear what you think of some of the decisions people are making that affect disabled people, and whether you think either of these notions rings true.

Rather than just cut and paste the content from my lecture, and just for a little entertainment value, I asked my Google Home about Brandolini's Law. I was directed to Wikipedia. My Google Home did give a small introduction though.

It said:

“According to Wikipedia, Brandolini's Law, also known as the BS asymmetry principle, is an internet adage that emphasises the difficulty of debunking false, facetious, or otherwise misleading information: ‘The amount of energy needed to refute BS is an order of magnitude larger than to produce it.’”

Now I confess that this adage features in lectures in order to wake the students up a bit. That audience doesn't mind that I expanded the letters “BS” out, but my Google Home was kind enough to bleep out the profanity.

The lecture that I was giving is about the need to produce meaningful evidence to support scientific hypotheses. I introduce examples when people have made claims without evidence, or decided not to seek the evidence needed to make decisions. I talk about the “science” that makes the news.

I ask my students to question what really is “newsworthy”.

In another lecture I note that forest fires seem to be quite newsworthy, but given how frequently there is a forest fire somewhere, we ought not to be surprised that there are forest fires on the news. Ditto for earthquakes, floods, and supposedly unexpected snowfalls in winter. I draw attention to expected but unknown outcomes (more on those below).

The McNamara Fallacy is named after the US Secretary of Defence from 1961 to 1968, who, in his evaluation of the Vietnam War, is supposed to have dismissed the relevance of factors that were not easily measured. I'll shorten the Wikipedia content as follows:

“The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. The second step is to disregard that which can’t be easily measured. The third step is to presume that what can’t be measured easily really isn’t important. The fourth step is to say that what can’t be easily measured really doesn’t exist.”

The real problem exposed by this fallacy is that the useful information obtained at the first step is made useless by not obtaining all relevant information needed to make an informed decision. Let’s look at a couple of examples I found on the internet that expose situations where the fallacy holds true.

The weight of a bicycle features in the promotional material, implying it is a significant factor in its performance. A bike that is really lightweight but has wheels that don’t go round easily isn’t going anywhere fast, but it is extremely difficult to convey how easily wheels go round compared to the bike’s weight.

Evaluating the benefits of medical options are often reported in terms of how much longer the patients have to live. They do not always compare the quality of life those patients will have.

And now, let’s think about some examples affecting the lives of disabled people in New Zealand.

Finding employment for disabled people is an ongoing challenge. A primary yardstick for success is a count of how many disabled people have been placed in employment. Does the evaluation check to see if those disabled people are better off as a consequence? Does the evaluation look into the job satisfaction of those people after six months or a year? Does the evaluation ask if those people find themselves underemployed, or how they feel about themselves?

A service provider asks the people using its service how satisfied they are following that service on a scale from 1 to 10, without asking those people if the service is meeting their needs. Does the service provider actually check to see what needs the clients have, or are they hung up on checking in on the satisfaction ratings of the services that are provided? Do they look at what they do not provide and think about how to meet this unmet need?

I encounter McNamara's Fallacy far too often in the work I do for disabled people with respect to data and evidence.

Getting feedback from disabled people is harder than getting feedback from non-disabled people. It takes effort to make sure the forms being used to elicit people's opinions are able to be used by all of us, and let's face it, we're not a high priority. It doesn't matter if the forms are printed or digital, there are people who cannot use them. It staggers me how frequently the decision makers who rely on the data from these surveys overlook the failings of these surveys. Those decision-makers are victims of McNamara's Fallacy.

The problem is that because it's so easy to get feedback from non-disabled customers using internet surveys, the rest of us are ignored. Even worse, there is little to no effort made in ascertaining how many of us are being ignored. As an aside, there are ways to correct the weight of evidence between disabled and non-disabled people but this relies on knowing how many people fall into each category, and actually having enough information from disabled people to be sure they represent all disabled people.

Our local councils regularly seek feedback from the residents of their cities, districts, or regions. Very few of those local authorities have representation from disabled people, and very few of them have the ability to seek the views of their communities in a way that includes the voice of disabled people. That means they are falling into McNamara's Fallacy.

I would go further to say that decision-makers that do not make sure they seek the views of disabled people have already fallen into McNamara's Fallacy. They have already dismissed the need to get that information even though it might be hard to get. I accept that many of those decision-makers do not even know they're letting us down; that they're letting their communities down; that they are letting themselves and their employers down. I have to accept that they just don't know. In the end though, the disabled people in those communities are then victim to Brandolini's Law as they try to remedy the inequities that got created.

One of my very real concerns is that decision-makers are not adequately considering the differences between what they know and what they do not know. At the risk of being accused of a certain fixation, I'd like to recall the words of another US Secretary of Defence. Donald Rumsfeld is noted for describing information falling into three categories: known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. This was a slight modification of "We don't know what we don't know." This is perhaps why I am so comfortable praising Government officials who realise they need to seek the views of disabled people. They've worked out that they don't know, and they're doing something about it.

In contrast, the decision-makers that choose to ignore the needs of disabled people and the service providers that ignore the views of their consumers and clients are at risk of creating more problems for us. We must ask how we will ever have equity in our communities while we do not contribute to the decision-making processes. Some people might say that electing the Board of a service provider is

sufficient. However, as the mounting evidence suggests, electing the RNZFB Board has not saved us from having to have an independent inquiry into how BLVNZ treats blind staff and consumers.

This is why it is crucial that Blind Citizens NZ and other Disabled People's Organisations exist. It is crucial that we get under the noses of the decision-makers at all levels of society. We need to make it known that we are part of the communities those decision-makers serve. We need to make it known that we count, and that we need to be counted.

If we don't get to raise our concerns at an early stage, we are at risk of being put in a situation somewhat akin to Brandolini's Law. The amount of energy needed to overcome disabling situations is an order of magnitude larger than needed to create them. The energy of disabled people and their representatives is far from infinite.

There have been too many occasions in 2020 and 2021 when the work of Blind Citizens NZ has been affected by having to deal with other matters. We spent numerous hours resolving our funding for the last financial year. Again, I thank the RNZFB Board for its insistence that BLVNZ work with Blind Citizens NZ in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Blind Citizens NZ has been wanting to work with senior staff at Blind Low Vision NZ on a range of issues that affect the services we receive. This is because members told us there was a need to make sure those services are fit for purpose. Unfortunately, our willingness to work with BLVNZ has not been matched by willingness from BLVNZ. One such problem is unfolding right now. We've known for years that the end of CDs was coming. We are told the physical resource is getting harder and harder to source. For numerous BLVNZ library users, that means shifting to a different option for receiving books and magazines. We knew that the Alexa option was going to have its supporters.

We also knew that there would be a lot of users who could not enjoy the same quality of service if they were reliant on Alexa or interacting with the library database via the internet. We refer to this issue as the Digital Divide in a lot of the work we do. We constantly remind Government officials that they cannot and should not expect to communicate with everyone using a digital medium. Some people need hardcopy - whether Braille, large print or audio on a CD or thumb-drive.

A significant proportion of BLVNZ clients need to receive information in audio, and cannot make use of an internet-based service. The solution that has been rolled out is to replace the CD service with a memory stick service, but that service is not the same. CDs were distributed every week to magazine subscribers. Memory sticks will go out once a month. Maybe that isn't going to be a problem for the more than 1000 library-users requiring a physical medium. However if the information that is recorded is to be of use to those recipients, then surely it must arrive before it goes stale.

I suspect the monthly supply of weekly magazines will lead to a decrease in satisfaction with a much-loved service.

The magazine service started with a committed group of blind people putting time and energy into establishing and growing a service that gave other blind people information in a timely manner. It was an initiative that remains a proud period in the history of Blind Citizens NZ. Blind people wanted a service. The service provider didn't want to provide it, so those people made it happen. Once it was obvious that the demand for the service exceeded the ability of that collective, the magazine service was handed over to the RNZFB. For 35 years, the RNZFB Library Service ran a magnificent service. I ask you to ponder where that service is now heading.

The tragedy of the recent changes to the BLVNZ Magazine Service is that it best serves the people who need the service the least.

Those people who do have the skills and the tools to retrieve magazine articles through the internet can do so without the BLVNZ service. The people that cannot get the articles and rely on the Magazine Service are the people that are now going to get the lesser service on offer.

Maybe you're reading this column by way of the Magazine Service. Now that I know you won't get it until possibly one month after it was published, I might need to alter what I put in my column. After all, I don't want to tell you of the exciting upcoming events that you missed out on. More importantly though, is that we must get the election material we need to participate in the upcoming RNZFB Board elections, and many voters used to get this on CD. Have people been assured that they will get the information in the audio format they need, at a time they can actually use it?

Numerous agencies want to get information to everyone in the blindness community, really important stuff like all that COVID-19 information that we needed in order to play our part in the lockdowns and the vaccination programme.

Blind Citizens NZ continues to point out that there are more than a thousand people relying on a physical medium to move the audio from provider to reader. If BLVNZ decides it can no longer provide blind people with the information we need, then perhaps BLVNZ will lose more of those lucrative Government contracts. Blind Citizens NZ will then have to recommend use of other providers, perhaps creating a business opportunity for another organisation. In the end, Blind Citizens NZ's first commitment is to blind people, not to a particular service provider.

I can see a time when Government agencies have enough information on file to know which New Zealanders need information from them in a given alternative format.

Maybe in a year or two's time, the Ministry of Health might send out the information we need for another public health programme directly to us, without relying on any disability service providers. Times are changing, but the principles that guide the work of Blind Citizens NZ remain relevant. We used to be confident in recommending the RNZFB as the service provider to get information to blind people. We'd like to continue doing so but we need cooperation from BLVNZ senior management to do that.

A critical part of being able to speak on behalf of a community is to know what that community needs. The Blind Citizens NZ Board has made a commitment to update the material which supports our advocacy efforts. This will make it easier for every one of us to speak to decision-makers about our own personal experiences, and to share what is needed by others from our community. These materials were developed because of our people, for our people, by our people, and with our people. They are informed by the remits and resolutions discussed at our branch and network meetings, and ultimately at our annual conferences. They weren't developed on vague theories. They are based on the lived experiences and aspirations of real people, people like you.

Tell Me About TellMe from Clive Lansink and Mary Schnackenberg

TellMe is a new innovative information service being developed by two Blind Citizens NZ members, Clive Lansink and Mary Schnackenberg, through their company Accessible Information and Communications Limited (A I Comms). We came up with the idea of TellMe during the lock-downs last year.

We were aware that numerous people we knew were missing out on current information about COVID-19.

We already know disabled people often miss out on critical information, and we decided that perhaps we were in a good position to find new and perhaps innovative ways to address that.

Mary and Clive are both semi-retired after long careers in the blindness sector. Mary trained as a librarian and held management roles in the library and accessible format production at Blind Low Vision NZ (BLVNZ) from 1984 to 2008. Clive started out as a software developer working in the then Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). Later he managed the IT services for BLVNZ before going off to do a law degree.

We started A I Comms in 2008, first doing general disability consulting but in more recent years focusing on producing braille and helping others make their information accessible to blind and low vision people. Again as a result of COVID-19, we knew the information we were producing for our clients. We thought why can't we go one step further and actually help our clients get that information to the people who need it? Hence the idea of TellMe.

Many of you reading this will know about BLVNZ's telephone information service (often known as TIS). Clive was the brains behind that service, which he first developed in 1994. By 2012, long after he had left BLVNZ, we thought TIS was probably becoming outdated as people were switching to other technologies. So we were surprised that BLVNZ wanted to keep it going and A I Comms got the contract to completely refresh the software that provides that service.

Here we are now in 2021 and although other exciting new technologies are still developing, we know a lot of people still rely on the humble telephone and services like TIS for current information. But we are also aware of a growing technology divide, not just between people who have access to newer options like smartphones, but even within that group people are dividing between those who use email, those who visit websites, and those who only use social media like Facebook and Twitter.

Our thinking behind TellMe is that you should not only be able to get the same valuable information through either a conventional telephone or any online device such as a smartphone or conventional computer, but you should also be alerted in the most appropriate way for you when new information is available that matches your interests. We already have our own internal process for converting information to accessible formats, including braille and various well-known computer formats. But our plan is that TellMe will allow us to easily get that information to people like you who need it, in the best way that suits you. With our knowledge of phone systems, websites, messaging and accessibility standards, we think we're in a good position to give this a go. We're not putting significant money into TellMe, but we are willing to give it significant time to see just how well it might work.

You can phone TellMe on 0800 TellMe (0800 835-563). But just be aware that it might direct you to phone a local free calling number in your area instead, which it will tell you if needed. So you'll soon learn your local number.

Obviously TellMe is still in its early stage but in the near future there will be a website offering the same information.

This will be fully accessible and our plan is that it will make the same information available through any computer or smartphone that can browse the internet. Other plans are also on the drawing board. We won't give too much away but yes, smart speakers are in our thinking.

One feature of TellMe we're quite proud of is our use of a synthetic voice. We won't go into much detail but we are using a cloud-based synthetic voice that automatically converts text to speech. Digital voices are still not perfect but they are getting better all the time. The voice we are using gives us a lot of control over how it pronounces words so we can readily fix pronunciation errors. This is particularly important when it comes to te reo Maori.

Te reo is a very phonetic language and we have our own internal automated process that turns words in te reo into a phonetic language the voice understands. It is not absolutely perfect and we wouldn't use it for a full text in te reo, but we think we are setting a new high standard for synthetic voices speaking te reo Maori.

We're not sure where TellMe will take us but it adds some excitement to our work and does give us the opportunity to be a little experimental. We are blind ourselves and we have excellent rapport with our end users who are also blind or low vision. We'll soon learn what works and what doesn't and in the end that will influence the decisions we make.

Updates from Work and Income

Winter Energy Payment

Winter Energy Payment ended on 1 October 2021. This means for people paid weekly (on main benefits) that:

- payments for the week beginning 4 October 2021 will have five days of Winter Energy Payment included;
- the first payment with no Winter Energy Payment included is the week beginning 11 October 2021.

For New Zealand Superannuation and Veteran's Pension clients, the payment due on 12 October has three days of Winter Energy Payment included. The first payment with no Winter Energy Payment included will be on 26 October 2021.

Anyone concerned about how they'll manage when the Winter Energy Payment stops, please get in touch with Work and Income. They recognise everyone's situation is different, and are well aware this continues to be a very tough time for a lot of people. You can contact Work and Income on 0800 559 009.

The Winter Energy Payment will restart on 1 May 2022.

Support Funds – transport assistance for essential workers who have a disability or health condition

Job Support Funds is available to provide transport assistance – taxis, Driving Miss Daisy or other commercial provider (not Uber) during lockdown levels 4 and 3.

To apply:

- Complete the Job Support Funds application form located at <https://www.supportfunds.co.nz/how-to-apply/>
- Attach confirmation of your disability.
- Attach confirmation from your employer that you are an essential worker.
- Email completed application to sfs@supportfunds.co.nz
- include Essential Worker in the email header so your application has priority.

Note that:

- Workbridge Support Funds team can be contacted by phoning toll free on 0508 967 527.
- Disability confirmation can be a doctor's medical certificate, or letters that you have on hand.

Help with putting food or kai on the table, and financial support

If you need help now with putting food or kai on the table or paying an overdue bill, Work and Income may be able to help.

Work and Income may be able to help you with financial support - if you're on a low income or not working. If you have internet access, you can use Work and Income's [check what you might get](#) guide (or take the following link <https://check.msd.govt.nz/>). It helps you find out the ways they can help you and your family.

You'll be asked some easy questions about your costs, then you will be told about Work and Income payments you might be able to get. You can ask a friend or family member to help you use the guide.

You can call on: 0800 559 009. If you are over 65, then call 0800 552 002.

If you are Deaf or hard of hearing, you can make contact by one of the following mechanisms:

- Deaf Link free-fax: 0800 621 621
- Text: 029 286 7170
- Email: MSD_Deaf_Services@msd.govt.nz

Dedicated Team to Support Disabled People to Access COVID-19 Vaccine

Government has established a team to support disabled people to access transport and get vaccinated in a way that suits their needs. This is a great outcome that Blind Citizens NZ and many others across the disability sector have been advocating for many months.

There is a 30-strong team who are tasked with answering calls and questions, and who will assist disabled people and their carers to get the information and support they need. Phoneline team members are either disabled themselves, or are allies of the community.

They work from their home offices across Aotearoa. Allies are people who have experience working with members of the disabled community, have close whanau in the disabled community, or who identify as a member of the disabled community.

To speak with a support specialist, people can call the COVID Vaccination Healthline on 0800 28 29 26 for free 8 am to 8 pm Monday to Friday. Select option 2, to speak to one of the team.

Support includes sites have mobility assistance in place, arranging New Zealand Sign Language Interpreters, providing transport options, ensuring 1737 phone counsellors are available to support people with needle anxiety, and other bespoke solutions developed for individuals alongside District Health Boards.

Transport options will focus on existing District Health Board services and non-government providers such as St John Health Shuttles. Where transport cannot be provided through existing services, the team can arrange transport through over 150 providers across New Zealand.

The team can support people with a range of disabilities including:

- Blind, Deafblind, vision-impaired and low vision;
- Deaf and hard of hearing;
- Physical impairments;
- Learning Disability / Intellectual impairments;
- Neuro diverse;
- Long term health conditions.

Member Led? Or Members Led? From George Taggart

Note to readers: in this article, Blind Citizens NZ member George Taggart shares his opinions...

I have been actively involved in Blind Foundation affairs since the beginning of this century. Prior to this time, I had been a recipient of services as I transitioned from the sighted world to that of a world where vision loss became a dominant feature.

I received incredible support and services at the time, from two key Wellington-based staff, as I struggled with a new job and part time study at Victoria University.

I became disillusioned with the Blind Foundation after being asked to come to a fundraising event to demonstrate my use of a CCTV machine to potential donors. This event was my first experience of having my head patted as a poor blind person.

However, after retirement and applying for a guide dog, I felt a need to contribute as I was about to become a guide dog handler. I helped with fundraising with street appeals, and with my dog I spoke at community group gatherings. I also joined Blind Citizens NZ. As a result of joining Blind Citizens NZ I was made aware of the Wellington building upgrade that would result in members losing access to spaces within Braille House permanently and for us to find our own accommodation for our recreational activities. Blind Citizens NZ, along with other groups of users of the facilities objected to this high-handed approach by management. As a result Rose Wilkinson and I were amongst those appointed to negotiate with management on behalf of numerus user groups to retain our use of the facility.

Three years plus later (2015), we retained our access to a gold-plated facility thanks in the end to the intervention by the then chair of the RNZFB Board Rick Hoskin. The salt in the wound is that after a few years the Wellington building has been sold – perhaps in order to help fund the “six-star retirement village” in Parnell. However this building scheme was just the beginning of what I have seen of an organisation becoming profligate. In my view there are many examples that can be shown...

My purpose in relating this sorry tale is not to dwell on the past except to say, that we the members of a hard won “Member Led Organization” were not paying attention, nor were we holding our elected RNZFB Board to account. This latter point is certainly not helped by any substantive matters being dealt with “in committee”.

I have to say that it was with a great sense of relief that I heard of the resignation of our previous Chief Executive and like a breath of fresh air Mr Mulka came breezing into the Blind Foundation, now Blind Low Vision NZ (BLVNZ). I heard Mr Mulka speak of regional management and less of head office control of the regions and I thought good that will save on all that travel etc. Little was I to know of the revolution that was to follow. A massive loss of front-line staff trained specifically in blindness related challenges and the contracting out of what originally I was told at a “Let’s Talk” meeting last year, that only less important Adaptive Daily Living tasks would be handled by the contracting company Habit. Little did I know that the worst was yet to come.

To be fair I have to admit that Mr Mulka inherited an organisation whose leadership in my view, had failed miserably. However, to hold front line staff responsible for the inefficiencies, who were well trained in the challenges faced by both our young and elderly members, was in my view, entirely the wrong way to go about righting the build-up of mistakes of the previous regime. At first I thought that Mr Mulka had just rushed in without taking the time to understand the situation. However I now think that Mr Mulka came to New Zealand with a previously formed ideological view of the role of management.

Some of you will remember the havoc created by Roger Douglas, (following in the footsteps of Milton Friedman, Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher) when he gutted the public service and then hired many of them back as contractors, at significantly increased salaries. Will the RNZFB / BLVNZ follow this pattern? Remember the organisation is already on the road of contracting out our core services, not just the simple tasks of Adaptive Daily Living.

Our own counselling service, disestablished by Mr Mulka, has now been contracted out to Habit who own the company called EAP Services. This company provides services to newly let go employees of BLVNZ. They are now providing counselling services to our members.

One has to ask just how qualified are these counsellors in dealing with people with sight loss challenges.

The thing that strikes me is even if this company is as wonderful as we are led to believe, they are in business to make a profit. I am not against profit making but is not the RNZFB / BLVNZ a charity? As such does it receives substantial donations on our behalf because it is seen as a service provider and a kind and caring organisation. How long will this public perception last if the organisation is seen as dispenser of cash to the people who do the real provider of services to the blind. BLVNZ employees are trained to uncover the real reason for a call for help to solve what might appear as an apparently simple problem when it was really a call for help with a much more serious difficulty. I do not think a person allotted so many visits in a day in order to meet a schedule would have the time to do this, so what will happen? Either the members cry for help remains unanswered or BLVNZ may receive unexpectedly large bills for the apparently small problem.

Back to the heading of my concerns. Is our RNZFB Board paying attention to the organisation's core business, that of service provider, or are they being "led"?

I recently saw included in the information to prospective RNZFB Board candidates, that part of the RNZFB Board's function was to partner the chief executive in his endeavours of managing the efforts of staff to provide services that allow members to live their lives as functioning members of our society. I thought the relationship of the Board to the chief executive was to provide direction through policy direction and to monitor the results of the policy in regards to the aspirations and concerns of members and other stakeholders.

So are we allowing ourselves to be Led? Do we need to scrutinize more rigorously the candidates for positions on our board? And do we need different information from them to do this?

In past elections I have rarely seen candidates mention an understanding of the challenges faced by our members. For example, finding employment and opportunities for members to maintain social relationships. The focus seems to concentrate on technical skills. Of course their technical skills are important but do we the voters need more? Maybe together with the technical skills we need our RNZFB Board Members to know of the mistakes of the past. That patting us on the head is no longer acceptable. I do applaud the RNZFB Board instating a Cultural Review and I can only hope that the reviewer will consult as widely as possible.

Right now all I can see is that we and our RNZFB Board are being led. This was not what our previous members had intended for us when they fought and won the right for the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind being Member Led. Remember to vote we can make a difference.

Announcing the Outcome Blind Citizens NZ Member-at-Large Election From the Returning Officer Rose Wilkinson

Voting in Blind Citizens NZ's election closed at 4pm, Tuesday 5 October. The two successful candidates each serve a three-year term, concluding at the end of Blind Citizens NZ's 2024 Annual General Meeting and Conference. In alphabetical order by surname the placing of each of the four candidates is:

- David Allen: polled 4th;
- Wendy Chiang: polled 1st;
- Tewai Halatau: polled 2nd;
- Carl Halliburton: polled 3rd.

Congratulations go to Wendy Chiang and Tewai Halatau. Should a vacancy occur prior to the next scheduled election, Carl Halliburton as the third highest polling candidate, will be asked to fill the vacancy.

Please Support Our Income Generation Efforts

Blind Citizens NZ has both Charitable and Donee status. This is important for anyone thinking about the mutually beneficial outcomes of payroll giving and making us your charity of choice. Income received through donations, bequests and payroll giving for example, go a long way towards supporting the many facets of our work i.e. our advocacy, promotional campaigns, and communication and community education. Making Blind Citizens NZ the recipient of a bequest or legacy, is another way you can support us. Here is information about each of these options.

Payroll Giving: this is an easy way for an employee to donate to a charity of their choice, such as Blind Citizens NZ. When an employee donates to a charity through their payroll, they receive a tax refund immediately. For all other types of donation, the donor must wait until the end of the tax year to receive their tax refund. One of the key benefits of donating through your wages (Payroll Giving) is that as an employee you may decide to donate your refund to the charity as well.

Charitable Payroll Giving is optional and not all employers will participate. Blind Citizens NZ has Donee Status, and is eligible to receive payroll gifts. Talk to your employer to enquire if payroll giving is an employee benefit. Your employer will guide your approach for payroll giving to Blind Citizens NZ.

Making a Bequest: Through our efforts and your financial support, we are working on the removal of barriers faced by blind, deafblind, low vision, and vision impaired people. Blind Citizens NZ has been extremely fortunate to benefit from legacies, and we take this opportunity to recognise generically, the generosity of those people and their families. Your Will can make a lasting gift and Blind Citizens NZ would be extremely grateful for any contribution. If you choose to leave a gift to Blind Citizens NZ, suggested wording for your will is:

I give and bequeath (_____) percent of my estate to the **Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Incorporated** to be applied for general purposes. A receipt taken by my trustee as being given on behalf of Blind Citizens NZ will be a complete discharge to my trustee for the legacy.

To find out how we inform those who have pledged their support to us, if you have questions or you wish to make a contribution contact:

- Rose Wilkinson 021 222 6940 / 0800 222 694
- **Email:** bequest-info-blindcitizensnz@groups.io

Membership Renewal Reminder

Membership renewal falls due 1 July annually. If you are uncertain whether you are financial, please check by contacting our National Office (0800 222 694) or your local Branch Treasurer.

Cheques are being phased out which means less banks are using them. This in turn means that many of our Branches, and our National Office are unable to accept cheques. While paying your annual membership subscription at a branch or network event remain an option, there is also internet and phone banking. You can also set up an annual payment for your membership renewal to be paid on the same date each year. If you are uncertain about what is involved for any of these three options, we encourage you to talk with your local banking team.

To make payments through your bank, or via the internet, Blind Citizens NZ bank account details are: 06-0230-0002634-00. There is also an option to renew (or join as a new member) online. Here is the link <https://abcnz.org.nz/join/renew-your-blind-citizens-nz-membership/>

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact us here at National Office, phone 0800 222 6940, or email admin@abcnz.org.nz

Large Print Calendars Produced by Blind Citizens NZ

Our 2022 Large Print Calendars are now available. These are ideal for anyone who needs, or prefers to have the largest size print dates possible. They are A3 size (approximately 59 cm wide and 42 cm long). You can purchase these through our National Office, or your local Blind Citizens NZ Branch or Network. If posted out from our National Office, then there are additional costs for postage. The most cost-efficient option for members is to therefore purchase direct from your Branch or Network.

Phone our National Office on 0800 222 694 if you would like to purchase one of our Large Print Calendars. We can put you in touch with your local Branch or Network, or arrange delivery to you direct. Posting will incur additional costs - these vary depending on the amount you require and where in the country they are being sent. If you haven't seen our Large Print Calendars before, then here is the first month for 2022... Although somewhat smaller, this should give you a great indication of how useful our calendars are.

JANUARY							2022	
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT		
30	31	1st New Year's Day (Observed 3rd) 2nd Day after New Year's Day (Observed 4th)					1	
2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
9	10	11	12	13	14	15		
16	17	18	19	20	21	22		
23	24	25	26	27	28	29		
JANUARY								
For information about Blind Citizens NZ contact our National Office on 04-389-0033 or 0800-222-694 Fax 04-389-0030 Website: www.abcnz.org.nz								
Ground Floor, 113 Adelaide Road, Newtown, Wellington PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242								
We have branches and networks around the country. Your support for our voice is vital to ensure we can play our full part in the community.								
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Blind Citizens NZ – Board and National Office

Board

- **National President:** Jonathan Godfrey: a.j.godfrey@massey.ac.nz
- **Vice President:** Christine (Chrissy) Fern: fernmeek@gmail.com
- **Members-at-Large:**
 - ✓ Martine Abel-Williamson: martine.the1@xtra.co.nz
 - ✓ Wendy Chiang: wendy.chiang@gmail.com
 - ✓ Andrea Courtney: andycoute@gmail.com
 - ✓ Tewai Halatau: tewaihalatau@gmail.com
 - ✓ Paula Waby (& WBU Representative): paula.waby4@gmail.com

Focus Editor, Kylee Maloney

Email articles to: focus@abcnz.org.nz

Post: PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242

National Office

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- **Phone:** 04 389 0033; 0800 222 694.
- **Fax:** 04 389 0030.
- **Website:** <http://www.blindcitizensnz.org.nz>
- **Facebook Page:** <https://www.facebook.com/BlindCitizensNZ/>
- **Email:** admin@abcnz.org.nz
- **Chief Executive, Rose Wilkinson:** rwilkinson@abcnz.org.nz

Blind Citizens NZ is appreciative of donations received from our members and supporters, and for funding from Blind Low Vision NZ.