



Blind Citizens NZ

Focus

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In this edition

Áine Kelly-Costello - Focus Editor

Welcome to the first edition of Focus for 2023.

In this edition, my editorial reflects on Blind Low Vision NZ's organisational culture and values. Jonathan Godfrey's President's column asks a philosophical but central life question: How do I know. A contribution from accessibility advocate Thomas Bryan brings us up to speed with the state of play in the accessible (or not) home appliances area. I report on some of the impacts of January and February's extreme weather. And we have updates on the upcoming Blind Citizens NZ election, membership criteria review, World Blind Union delegates and more. Enjoy!

As always, your ideas for topics to be covered in Focus and your contributions are most welcome.

Email me at focus.abcnz@gmail.com, or get in touch with the full Focus committee (Board Member Paula Waby, Chief Executive Rose Wilkinson and me) by emailing focus@blindcitizensnz.org.nz

Pitches for the June edition are due by 15 May 2023.

Saying the quiet part out loud

Editorial - Áine Kelly-Costello, Focus Editor

Over the past few years at Blind Low Vision NZ, since the current Chief Executive commenced in 2019 and installed a mostly new management team, I have felt wave upon wave of concern and sadness about the direction of the organisation, about the treatment of staff, and about the downstream effects on the blind, vision-impaired, low vision and deafblind people the organisation is meant to serve. This feeling is one mutually shared by a huge many within the blindness community who have either worked at, or been following goings-on within BLVNZ during this period.

Focus is the magazine of record of the country's largest blindness advocacy organisation. If any publication ought to hold our community's primary service provider to account, it's this one.

It's time to say the quiet part out loud. A systemic, no-holds-barred overhaul of BLVNZ's management style and values cannot come soon enough. BLVNZ can and must be a service provider, managed with integrity, whose bread and butter are high quality blindness services delivered by staff, including staff from our own community, who are happy in their work and have the skills and training to excel at their jobs. This ask is far from radical, but the change needed to implement it is radical indeed.

Across the board, the sheer quantity of redundancies, restructure, redeployments and staff feeling unable to work at BLVNZ any longer have combined to run down the institutional knowledge many long-serving staff held which served as the bedrock of consistently high-quality specialist blindness services.

Over the past couple of years, most of the BLVNZ members who worked at the organisation have left. To my knowledge, the remaining number stands in the low teens.

What's more, none of the Executive Leadership team (BLVNZ Management) are blind. For a blindness service provider, creating a work environment which is untenable for people who come from the community the organisation supposedly serves is shameful.

Many staff, clients and members who've been directly impacted have shared their feedback in detail with appropriate channels for doing so, including with the Independent Inquiry, with BLVNZ Management or with the BLVNZ (RNZFB)Board including by posing questions to the 2021 and 2022 AGMs. According to the 2022 AGM Minutes, in the year to 30 June 2022, a total of 39 staff also accessed Employee Assistance Programme Services. However, feedback directed to BLVNZ Management and to the \$250,000 Independent Inquiry has been largely ignored or overlooked.

Over these years, so many of us have worked hard to be constructive in the accountability process. Indeed, this is my fourth issue of Focus as Editor and only now am I writing such a direct call for an overhaul. First I tried reporting in issue-by-issue fashion on the equipment shop, on the counselling service losing its way, on accessing the library, and by publishing a piece from Mary Schnackenberg about the disregard for the perspectives of Auckland consumer organisations and groups during the demolition of Awhina House and shifting of premises.

This time, I was planning to write about the funding cuts and managerial dictums which over the past year have decimated Accessible Format Services (AFS). I will stay light on detail for the privacy and safety of past and present staff. But it is relevant to members to know that most of the Ministry of Education contract for accessible formats moved from BLVNZ to Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ (BLENNZ) mid last year, significantly reducing available funding. The AFS team currently stands at less than half of its previous staff numbers and member requests for transcription are now at the bottom of the priority order behind paid requests.

In addition, when the Braille library lost its Awhina House home and moved to the smaller Homai premises, an opportunity to give away scores of Braille books to countries with fewer Braille resources than Aotearoa was not taken up. All these books were thrown away. Now hard-copy Braille is produced on-demand and members can choose to return or keep the books. In another move not notified to members, the youth library, which also houses children's books, has moved to BLENNZ.

Meanwhile, the Contact Centre, set up at the behest of members back in 2013 so that they could talk directly to other human beings and not wade through automated menus, is (re)trialling an automated menu system. You'll hear that menu if you call BLVNZ on 0800 24 33 33.

That said, referring to this change as a "trial" is questionable as there appears to have been no communication or process requesting member feedback nor consultation prior to the change. In recent times, not all vacated Contact Centre staff roles have been refilled.

Staff leaving without replacement is not a phenomenon unique to the Contact Centre. Pacific Services had long been a thriving cultural service with strong relationships with Pacific clients, aiga and BLVNZ staff. But it is now a shell of its former self thanks to managerial restructuring decisions which have depleted its ability to take a holistic approach essential within the Pacific community. Now only one staff member remains in the service to serve the entire country. Over in Adaptive Communications and Adaptive Technology Services (ACATS), the entire Auckland team--comprising five staff at the time--left between mid-2021 and 2022, and ACATS staff capacity for serving the in-person training needs of the country's largest city remains depleted.

The sighted management team have not done enough to build their relationships with the blindness community in Aotearoa. On the other hand, many members of the governing Board are BLVNZ members and indeed some are also Blind Citizens NZ members.

They have more power than any of us regular members, or past or present non-managerial staff, to steer the organisation in a direction managed with integrity. An example of their aiming to do so can be inferred from the 4 March Board meeting minutes, under which the BLVNZ Board rejects Management's (alarming) recommendation to introduce a remuneration model linked to a "performance-based pay system". Equally, we, as members of Blind Citizens NZ and BLVNZ, must hold the BLVNZ Board to account. Recent BLVNZ AGM and Board meeting minutes both demonstrate that Blind Citizens NZ as an organisation, as well as many individual members, are making a considerable effort to do so through the volume of correspondence and questions the Board has received, many regarding concerns about the structuring and funding of core blindness services.

Blind people fought long and hard for gaining self-determination in the governance of the Royal New Zealand Foundation **of** the Blind. The BLVNZ Board and the rest of us as members need to honour that history now. Let us do so, with love for those working within or governing BLVNZ within our community, as well as an unstinting vision of the high-quality, integrity-driven service provider BLVNZ can and must again strive to be.

How do I know?

Jonathan Godfrey, National President

They're tearing up the street around the corner from my home; it's been going on for about three months so far, and it won't be done until May apparently. The question you might ask is "How did I know?" Well, I know the work is happening because the traffic is being diverted, we're running over extra bumps, and the surface is broken up and there are some big holes. I know all that because I am a passenger in a vehicle using this stretch of street at least six times a week.

I also know, though, because the local council officer in charge of communicating what is happening has me on his email list.

I'm somewhat fortunate to be there though. I only get the information because I made myself known to the council as a person who made a submission on the proposed upgrade to the closest intersection to my home, the removal of the pedestrian crossing, and the installation of lights at the next intersection about 150m further away. The proposal includes turning this road from a fairly busy wide two-lane thoroughfare into a 4 lane, dual carriageway, which is why the pedestrian crossing has been removed. In the other direction there is another set of lights, but if the original proposal had been put in place, I wouldn't be able to get across this road without walking more than 250m in either direction.

This monumental change is definitely going to have an impact on my life, but how did the people seeking feedback from local residents expect me to give them that feedback if they didn't tell me about the proposal? The footpath outside my house is not going to be affected, so the documents that went out did not need to come to my home. Even if the documents had been delivered, there was no effort made to ensure that I would be able to read them, let alone understand the plans laid out by the engineers.

I only learned of the proposal because a local advocate for pedestrian access knew it is so close to my home. I was motivated to contribute and while I don't like all the changes that were made, one new part of the updated proposal is definitely important to me. Courtesy of submissions made, they decided to add in a third set of lights about 30m away from my street's intersection which will help people get across the four lanes of traffic.

What matters right now though, is that I am getting the information I need to make sure I can plan my walking in such a way that minimises problems I might encounter as the street, the footpaths, and all the hidden water systems are being modified. At the time of writing this column, I know that even if I could get across the street, I would find the footpath over there is totally unusable; I know not to even bother crossing over, and I won't plan to walk there until I learn it's all fixed up and ready for pedestrians.

There are so many aspects of what I've described that relied on humans, not systems, to make sure the information I needed has found its way to me. One person reached out to me to tell me the proposal was being considered by council; I needed council staff to explain some of the information they were providing to the public so that I could make my submission; and, I still need that council staff member to keep sending out the updates to his list of interested people. But, how would I know about the impact of the road works otherwise?

Like many of you, I've been following the plight of people whose lives have been turned upside down by Cyclone Gabrielle and other extreme weather events over the season that is supposed to be called "summer". Unlike many residents of Palmerston North, I learned that we were being asked by our council to "conserve water"; I found out because an email went out to all staff at work telling us why we were asked to work from home. I didn't get any information from the council directly on this topic, and everyone I asked about conserving water that doesn't work for the university didn't know about the council's request. I decided to look at the Palmerston North City Council website to find out more, and discovered that it had nothing to do with our drinking water, but the waste water treatment plant was under pressure and minimising our waste water would help. The website said not to use washing machines, dishwashers, or for us to take showers until further notice. But, if it wasn't for the efforts of one person at work, how would I know that we were being asked to take any action? Furthermore, how would I know to have looked at a website to learn what the owner of that website wanted me to know?

You might think I'd hear about the council request on the radio, the TV, or perhaps even Facebook. Well no, I didn't, because I wasn't looking for this sort of information. Thankfully, our rainfall in town was little different to what we got in December. Why would I worry about drinking water if the sun is shining enough to hang out the washing?

After I'd received the email from work, I was chatting with friends; they were utterly oblivious about this situation, but again, how would they have known we had a waste water problem? Our conversation was focused on the perils being experienced by friends, family, and plenty of complete strangers in places that aren't all that far away really.

There must have been hundreds of blind, deafblind, vision impaired or low-vision people among the hundreds of thousands of people in the north and east of the North Island whose lives were dramatically, sometimes tragically, affected.

When it comes time to review how well we did as a country in protecting our people from another weather-related emergency, will we find out that getting information to people was, yet again, a problem? We know that the Civil Defence warning systems that are supposed to send alerts to our mobile phones did not work in Auckland well enough.

By the time you read this edition of Focus, we're all supposed to have completed our Census forms. This is an obligation on everyone, and if you think back to last time, you'll remember that Census 2018 was a bit of a mess to say the least. Census 2018 had the lowest response rate of all censuses conducted in NZ. The plan was that we'd get better response rates because more of us would complete our forms online. In short, some lessons were learned, and chief among them was that there is a massive digital divide in NZ. The reliance on people using the internet to complete their census obligations was deemed a resounding failure by the international experts. What is good news is that Statistics NZ started to listen to the right people, including Blind Citizens NZ, and your experience should have been much better in 2023 than it was in 2018.

We've got Braille (note the capital B there, it matters), large print, audio, and supposedly better trained Census workers. What we have not seen is widespread notification of the ways in which blind, deafblind, vision impaired and low-vision people could be supported by the extra efforts made by Statistics NZ.

Some people might think sending out public information is a responsibility of a service provider, while others say it is the responsibility of the providers of the information. What is more important though is that there is still a chance that blind and low-vision people did not get the information they needed to make the census a less troublesome, perhaps even enjoyable, experience.

What is increasingly evident is that we are needing to find ways to make sure that we each are able to get the information we need in order to exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens. How will I know about the next issue? Would I have been able to receive the information needed to look after my family if we'd been caught up in the path of Cyclone Gabrielle? How would I know anything if the internet wasn't' an option for me, or if the cellular network was down, like it was for many kiwis in recent times?

Having just one source of information is probably not going to be good enough. We're going to need good networks, options for communications, reliable and timely alerts and notifications, and that means we'll also need the skills to use those different methods for getting information.

It seems to me that we all need to use Cyclone Gabrielle as a bit of a wake-up call, and we need to be clearer about our needs in this technology-driven world we are living in. For example, so many Government agencies and companies are putting information on their websites or using their own apps. If we don't have a decent computer with the adaptive technology we need, as well as a modern smart phone, are we being put at risk by the very systems that are supposed to support us in times of need?

Making sure other blind, deafblind, vision impaired and low-vision people are going to be safe when the next civil emergency comes along is an important part of the work Blind Citizens NZ is doing. You can play your part in keeping our people safe by passing information onto people before they need it.

Climate change is making floods and storms more frequent and intense, so let's all get better prepared for the next one now.

Blind Citizens NZ 2023 Scheduled Election From Rose Wilkinson, Returning Officer

This year's Blind Citizens NZ Board election is for two Member at Large positions. In alphabetical order by surname, individuals whose terms conclude at the end of this year's Annual General Meeting and Conference (13-14 October) are Andrea Courtney and Paula Waby.

Call for nominations

Rule 10 Elections, clause 10.1, directs Blind Citizens NZ in its election procedures. In publicising this year's scheduled election and the call for nominations, members are advised that:

- people currently in these positions are eligible for re-election;
- the term of office for both positions is three years;
- successful candidates will commence their term immediately following the conclusion of this year's Annual General Meeting and Conference (13-14 October);
- the election for the two positions happens at the same time, by a ballot of all eligible Ordinary (voting) Members;
- nomination forms and | or email nomination procedures are available upon request from National Office.

Anyone standing for election is encouraged to take the time to ask for, and become familiar with, the duties and responsibilities of Blind Citizens NZ's Board Members. This information identifies the skills, experience and knowledge needed as a Board Member. In addition, there are details that will identify specific skills and expertise required of candidates in this year's election. This information will be available by early May and can be obtained from Blind Citizens NZ's National Office. Details will also be published in our June Focus Issue. Contact details for National Office are at the end of this Focus issue.

Here are the details about timelines and procedure for the election of all positions.

To be eligible for nomination for any position, you must:

- a. live in New Zealand; and
- b. for at least 24 months of the past five years up to and including 24 August 2023, have been a (financial) Ordinary Member of Blind Citizens NZ.

Nominations require two people to support you i.e. move and second your nomination. There are two ways nominations can be completed and submitted. You can use a paper form, or the email process. If using the paper form, signatures of all three members involved in the nomination are required. Email procedures similarly require the same people to confirm their respective role in the nomination process. If you choose the email procedure, you are required to contact the Returning Officer at National Office prior to commencing this process. This is important, as there are instructions unique to the email procedure that must be followed. The email procedure mirrors requirements for the paper-based option as closely as possible.

Ordinary Members, financial as at 24 August 2023, are eligible to stand for election to these two positions.

The closing date for nominations is 4pm Thursday 24 August 2023. Candidates are required to provide their CV at the same time as their nomination is submitted to the Returning Officer. Nominations and CVs should be sent to the Returning Officer at one of the following:

- **Post:** Blind Citizens NZ, PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242;
- **Fax:** 04-389-0030;
- **Email:** election@blindcitizensnz.org.nz

Once nominations close, if the maximum number of nominations for the two positions is received, no election will be needed. Candidates will be declared elected unopposed. Should nominations exceed the number of positions being elected, an election will then be held.

Voting in the election

Ballot material (names of people standing for election, information they have provided about themselves etc.), will be sent to all Ordinary Members recorded as financial on the member database at National Office as at **4pm, Thursday 24 August 2023**. No later than **Thursday 14 September 2023**, ballot material will be distributed in the voting member's preferred format.

When does voting close? Completed ballots (votes cast by voting members) must be received at National Office no later than **4.00 pm, Tuesday 3 October 2023**. Vote counting will take place no later than Wednesday 11 October 2023.

Ways to cast your vote in Blind Citizens NZ's election: there are several options available for members to participate in the election process. Election (ballot) material about candidates standing for election is available in large print, audio, Braille, by email, and via our National Feedback Line bulletin on TellMe. If you are in any doubt about what your preferred communication option is to receive information and vote in Blind Citizens NZ's election, please contact our National Office to check.

You choose your preferred voting option: When voting in Blind Citizens NZ elections, you can choose one of three options. It is important to remember that the way you vote, can be different from the way you choose to receive your election (ballot) material.

You can cast your vote using the large print form, the Braille-card option, or TellMe. For many reasons we encourage members to try TellMe. This offers a truly independent, confidential, and empowering voting experience. Using TellMe means you can independently do all the things you need to do in an election – you hear about the candidates standing for election, and you can cast your vote.

Casting your vote by TellMe means you are in control. This includes certainty that your vote will be received by the due date and time.

There is no worrying about whether a postal ballot will reach its destination in time to be counted.

Postal votes offer less certainty that your vote will arrive by the close of voting. If you would like to know more about using TellMe and casting your vote using this option, please contact our National Office.

The endless hunt, and fight, for accessible home appliances

By Thomas Bryan

Editor's note: Thomas Bryan is an active Blind Citizens NZ member and an experienced accessibility advocate across many domains of technology, information and getting around. He hosts a radio show No Labels on Wellington Access Radio and is a trustee of the Media Access Charitable Trust (Able). He keeps abreast of developments in the accessible home appliances space. Contact Thomas at tsbryan@outlook.co.nz

When did you last buy a new appliance – a washer, oven, television or even a heat pump? If you ever have, you will most likely have noticed that there are an alarming number of makes and models to choose from. From my own experience, just trying to get your hands on a working model to see if it will meet your needs--and most of all if you'll be able to use it--is not easy.

The problem

Many home appliances sold in New Zealand have become harder for many in our community to use confidently, and independently. The old days where one would plug in a washer or dryer, or set up a new oven, and be able to work it with little adaptation--have almost gone.

Today, many home appliances often come without standard controls such as buttons and knobs.

When they do, there are often multi-level visual menu systems which then make them almost impossible to use, unless you work out a system that works for you. This might mean you being able to recall the number of clicks or pushes you need to carry out to select the option you're after.

You may have to develop your own user instructions, along with marking up the control panel with bumpons or Penfriend tags. You might develop your own recording, or a large print or braille reference sheet, to be able to confidently change a number of settings.

Whatever we need to do, it's often not that easy and sometimes we may resort to limiting the options we use.

Some readers may recall the days of the old top loader washer with a row of buttons, sliders, or switches and large rotary knob. Appliances such as this are still out there but they are harder to find.

The majority of new appliances come with a myriad of functions and variations all controlled either by a touch screen, touch sensitive pads, or up and down control buttons which have different settings to choose from. All too often, you need to be able to see what the menu options are to be able to make the choice that meets your needs. Even finding ways to figure out what we need to do or select, means we are reliant on someone seeing what is there and providing useful information to assist us.

The heart of the problem is that designers don't realise that all too often, their designs result in a product that may not be fully accessible or usable for everyone, especially for some in our community.

Getting hands-on

When trying to get your hands on a working appliance, in my view it's not all bad. There are some stores that go the extra mile. They may have some models plugged in so you can at least turn them on and off and change some of the settings.

If you're lucky enough to get to fiddle with menu options or talk to store employees--which I make a point of doing whenever I can because I like to know what's out there--you can quickly find ways the manufacturer and distributor can do so much more. Some stores may have a person specialising in kitchen or laundry products. Some offer a home service where they will come and check out the space you have and look for products that might meet your needs.

Some manufacturers even have 'experience centres' where you can talk to a product specialist and try out some of their appliances. Guess what! Some even offer cooking sessions too and I'm all for that!

For me, Harvey Norman were great when looking for a new TV, washer and dryer, as they had models plugged in that I could explore. Noel Leeming offered a home service when we needed to replace our oven and dishwasher. They even arranged for us to visit one of their stores to see if I could use the oven. Plus the kitchen specialist showed me models that I had thought would not be accessible and to my astonishment, they were.

Both Miele and Fisher & Paykel have 'experience centres' where you can check out current and soon to be released products. The new Fisher & Paykel Centre in Auckland is great to just walk around as there is no pressure to buy. A great experience was the fact they actually don't sell from the 'experience centre' they just demonstrate their appliances. If you're looking to buy or have bought a new oven or hob, you can attend one of their cooking sessions.

The other development is the introduction of appliances where you can access them using WiFi or via an app on your Smartphone. As you can tell, you need to have WiFi and | or a Smartphone in the first place. Even when you do, let's not forget that the app must be accessible and user-friendly to our community of people.

Staying entertained on our terms

Huge progress has been made in the area of home entertainment. Many TVs now have an accessibility menu including a screen reader, magnification options and they will support audio description. This is an area where Blind Citizens NZ has had significant impact with its advocacy over many years, calling for ways our community of people can access menu options and turn audio description on and off.

Streaming devices such as Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV and Google's Chromecast with Google TV all have accessibility features such as magnification and a screen reader built in.

However, there is no guarantee that all apps will be accessible using these built in functions like the screen reader.

Unfortunately, paid TV services using a set top box still have a long way to go to catch up with streaming devices, whereas in the UK and USA, there are set top boxes that are accessible. Sky NZ has started rolling out a new set top box, which we are hearing about but don't know yet how accessible it will be. So watch this space for an update.

Advocating for change

Manufacturers need to think more about everyone's needs by making sure their appliances are accessible and usable by us all.

I follow what's new to market in respect to appliances both here and internationally by subscribing to newsletters, monitoring websites and some YouTube channels. When I go looking for an appliance and find something that meets my needs, but I may not be able to use it, then I provide feedback to the manufacturer. I have also over the years suggested to manufacturers that they work with Blind Citizens NZ to get a more rounded view of the world and not just mine. From my own experiences, I don't think obstacles are deliberately put in our way and I believe that we can make a difference in their thinking.

Internationally, the regulatory landscape is sparse, but there are moves by some appliance manufacturers to improve the overall design of their appliances to make them more usable for all.

Many manufacturers have worked alongside disabled people's organisations such as Blind Citizens NZ, and other international organisations to come up with some fundamental principles to improve the accessibility of their appliances. However, I understand these are ad hoc for now--they are new, and may not be across all manufacturers or all of their product range.

Also, many overseas developments in this area aren't yet available on our shores. For instance, Miele have released a washer in the UK and Europe that has tactile markings, great colour contrast and beeps and clicks but it's not sold in Australia or New Zealand.

Some of us want our appliances to talk, while some of us want to be able to control them via a Smartphone or Smart Speaker, or perhaps a mixture of clicks, turns, and beeps. Regardless, there will be simple steps that manufacturers could do to make their appliances usable the minute they're installed.

Some areas manufacturers need to be reminded about are:

- having an accessible user-guide;
- improved colour contrast for controls and visual displays;
- clicks for rotary knobs including a tactile pointer to identify when you're back at the beginning of a cycle or at the top of the dial;
- beeps and tones where the volume can be adjusted;
- beeps and tones that indicate when you have reached the top or bottom of a menu, so you are not continually going around in a loop;
- ensuring all apps are accessible and provide local support for smart speakers.

In the blind community, we can support Blind Citizens NZ with its lobbying with local appliance designers so they incorporate features that will make their products accessible.

If you are on a Blind Citizens NZ email list, share information when you come across a great product or if you have had a great experience with a supplier. You can also leave information on Blind Citizens NZ's National Feedback Line bulletin on TellMe, or send information through to the National Office. Many in our community have shared hints on how they used their new appliance, and how they have made it more usable for them. If only it was as simple as turning a knob and pushing start.

We should all be ready to make our needs clear to manufacturers and also give a thumbs up to stores that go the extra mile.

Notice of Special Meeting of Members Membership Subscription Review by Rose Wilkinson Chief Executive

This notice of Special Meeting of Members is conveyed to Ordinary (financial voting) Members on behalf of the Board of Blind Citizens NZ. The purpose of the Special Meeting of Members is to enable further discussion about the Board's Membership Subscription Review proposal.

The Board is grateful for the feedback received from members, Branches and Networks in response to its discussion paper. All feedback was considered by the Board at its meeting on 26-27 March 2023. Following consideration, and recognising the proposal cannot be supported without significant alteration, the Board is upholding its commitment and calling this Special Meeting of Members to enable further discussion and perhaps a decision to occur.

This Special Meeting will be held via **Zoom at 6pm, Tuesday 6 June 2023**. You can join using the Zoom option that best works for you. Note that you do not need to have a computer or mobile phone to join. A landline telephone works just as well.

Here are the options from which you can choose to join the meeting by ZOOM:

- if joining by phone (landline or mobile), you can call either 04 886 0026 or 09 884 6780;
- if joining by internet, the link you will need is here:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84440986850?pwd=MGIGNCtoSk5Ea2NNcURFaVB0K3d6UT09>
- if prompted for a meeting ID at any time, enter **844 4098 6850** and press # (hash right of zero);
- if prompted for a participant ID at any time, just press hash;
- if prompted for a passcode at any time, enter **427971** and press hash.

Reminders will be provided via Branches, Networks, Blind Citizens NZ's bulletin on TellMe and email lists.

2023 Annual General Meeting and Conference Challenging Others, Challenging Ourselves

The Board has confirmed the dates and venue for this year's AGM and Conference. We will be at the Naumi Hotel Auckland Airport. To make the most of everyone's availability, and mindful of people's travel time and the success of last year's event, this will again be held over two days. We start at 9am Friday 13 October and will finish following our Conference Dinner the evening of Saturday 14 October. Business sessions and guest presenters will be spread across the two days.

Financial assistance for 'first time' attendees

The Board is allocating funds to support 'first time' attendees. Funding for 'first time' attendees is about providing financial assistance for Ordinary (voting) Members.

Other than attending the entire event for the first time in-person, there are three conditions that a ‘first time’ attendee must meet before they can be considered for financial assistance.

The first is the requirement to make a financial contribution (determined on a case-by-case basis).

The second is the commitment to attend the full two days of the AGM and Conference, whether on a daily basis, or staying at the Naumi Hotel Auckland Airport.

The third is that you are an Ordinary (financial voting) Member.

If you meet these requirements and would like to take advantage of this opportunity, please contact the Chief Executive for further information via one of the following options:

- **Email:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz and put “2023 first-time attendee” in the subject line;
- **Post:** PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242;
- **Phone:** 0800 222 694;
- **Fax:** 04-389-0033.

Applications for financial assistance for first time attendees close 4pm, Thursday 3 August 2023. The Board will make a final decision about the number of members it can support following the close of expressions of interest.

Registration details (costs etc.), will be publicised in our June Focus issue. They will also be available from our National Office, Branches and Networks by the end of April. To lighten the load a little with paying your registration costs, you can take advantage of the option to pay by instalment. You can find out more and put a payment plan in place by contacting National Office. Each situation is considered on a case-by-case basis.

In the meantime we hope you will save the dates and start planning to come along.

Leadership | Advocacy Workshop

We're calling for expressions of interest

For the first time in several years, Blind Citizens NZ is holding a combined Leadership | Advocacy Workshop. This workshop will have a strong focus on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It will be held Tuesday 10 to Thursday 12 October 2023 at the Naumi Hotel Auckland Airport. Ideally, participants will be keen to stay on for the AGM and Conference where you might even be a first-time attendee.

Are you interested in developing your leadership and advocacy skills and knowledge? If so, we encourage you to send through an expression of interest for the workshop. Highlight the skills and / or knowledge you bring. As well, tell us what you hope to achieve from the workshop.

If successful with your expression of interest, expenses for travel and accommodation will be Blind Citizens NZ's responsibility. If you stay on for the AGM and Conference, full registration costs would be your responsibility.

Details for the workshop which will include up to eight participants will be finalised mid-June 2023. In the meantime, expressions of interest are welcomed. We will publicise this opportunity again in our June Focus issue. Expressions of interest should be received by 9am, Monday 31 July 2023. Please send for the attention of the Chief Executive to:

- **Email:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz and put "Expression of Interest, Leadership | Advocacy Workshop" in the subject line; or
- **Post:** PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242;
- **Fax:** 04-389-0033

When the rain doesn't stop by Áine Kelly-Costello

The evening of January 27, Rhonda Comins' daughter found her mother's Mount Eden driveway neck deep in flood water. She was forced to turn around without going in and told Rhonda, who has low vision and lives alone, that she should call 111 if she felt unsafe and needed to evacuate.

The inside of Rhonda's flat was fairing comparatively better--the water had soaked through the carpet which was acting as an absorbent sponge. But Rhonda says the stress was immense, trying to remove everything from the floor, settle her young guide dog in the bedroom and figure out whether they would be okay inside or needed to evacuate, given that opening the ranch slider front door risked letting substantially more floodwater in. She was okay to stay in the end, though is still managing the ramifications a month on.

Floodwaters, strong winds, prolonged power outages and landslides are just some of the manifestations of extreme weather which Aotearoa's north island has had to withstand in the first two months of 2023. Between the Auckland flooding and Cyclone Gabrielle, 15 people have lost their lives. Many have lost homes, belongings, pets, and seen their livelihood affected. People, including many from the disability community, have been shunted into temporary accommodation which often does not meet their needs, and have had to jump through hoops to access financial assistance. But it's also important to acknowledge the distress caused by the smaller-scale impacts of these events.

Sally Britnell, similar to Rhonda, lives alone with her guide dog Sienna and two cats. On January 27, her North Shore backyard turned into a knee-deep pond, her driveway flooded and the water in her laundry room reached ankle level. The most immediate source of stress was the disorientation of going outside. There was no apparent way for Sally to evacuate if she needed to. Family support wasn't an option.

Ubers were not running. Sally has just a small bit of usable vision. Travelling on foot would have been unsafe in floodwaters, as well as extremely challenging with all three animals.

Besides, guide dog Sienna did not want to walk through the water and refused to toilet outside for two days. Sally was also apprehensive about the risk of her hearing aids getting wet while charging.

Afterwards, Sally needed to navigate the logistics of a floating broom breaking the laundry room window glass, damage to shelves and other items, gib needing replacing and cracks in the concrete carport, as well as traversing footpaths strewn with flood debris. A fortnight later in preparation for the cyclone, Auckland Council provided information about where sandbags could be picked up, but there was no system for sandbag delivery for those who needed it. Sally also got a print letter in the post about checking her property's drainage, though says that, to their credit, a council staffer was receptive to her subsequent feedback about the need for accessible formats.

Sally found connection with both other guide dog users, local information, and a member of the Civil Defence team on social media to be beneficial. But she also worries about those in our community who weren't on social media, or even online at all. The information vacuum was notably more acute in the floods than in the cyclone even for those who were well-connected. Observing the social media feeds of response agencies, most of the updates about evacuation centres didn't include info on their accessibility, phone numbers often came without an alternate email address and videos weren't always captioned or transcribed. Text was frequently posted inside images with minimal contrast, without being copied into a description or alternative text field.

That said, there were proactive disability response efforts within the community and sector.

Over the weekend after the Friday flooding, [Whaikaha](#) | Ministry of Disabled People (<https://tinyurl.com/2r4bk82f>) and [Disabled Persons Assembly](#) (<https://tinyurl.com/35wvdas3>) both created and kept updating webpages rounding up useful information for the disability community, including info in alternate formats. Blind Citizens NZ also distributed information via email and worked to support the on-the-ground response from Civil Defence.

Whaikaha also brought key stakeholders together in an effort to help get community concerns to the appropriate agencies and had a team working to ensure disabled people and whānau could access support.

After the floods, the Ministry's Deputy Chief Executive Operational Design and Delivery Amanda Bleckmann [told Stuff](#) (<https://tinyurl.com/4t6xrxbu>) they were prioritising the wellbeing of disabled people who were impacted. The Whakarongorau Aotearoa telehealth help-line was also stood up for disabled people and whānau who were seeking support, needing information, or passing on concerns for someone's safety.

Blind Low Vision NZ also made an effort to reach clients in impacted areas after the extreme weather. Staff member Tristin Ireland led the service provider's effort for the cyclone. These calls were completed by 13 staff within four days, with a process for contacting clients' nearest of kin, trying to contact the client multiple times and for safety referring the names of those who weren't reachable to Civil Defence. Tristin says that most people did not need cyclone supplies but took advantage of being in contact with BLVNZ to request other blindness-related items. He says that moving forward, BLVNZ's primary service providers, who are the first port of call for new clients, will be attentive to raising the topic of disaster preparedness.

Still, there are lessons to be gathered and learned for the inevitable "next time". A thorough response review to hear from those most marginalised in the disability community who were impacted would be beneficial.

Focus asked Whaikaha whether there was any review of the response planned from a disability perspective and the Ministry replied that they would contribute to the evaluations other agencies undertake from a disability perspective. So far, lessons which shouldn't be surprises but which the extreme weather has reinforced (<https://tinyurl.com/4t6xrxbu>) include ensuring people with medical needs can reliably access back-up power during an outage, as well as providing prompt, informative and accessible communication and support for all aspects of emergency response, from evacuation to supply delivery to follow-up processes. Disability-inclusive response should be embedded as a whole-of-government and local government responsibility, and a human rights framework (<https://tinyurl.com/3sjsu3hp>) should underpin it.

Meanwhile at ground level, literally, the stress Rhonda experienced was avoidable. Not only was the flood risk at her apartment previously known, but a builder neighbour had also proposed a concrete barricade solution for managing that risk. Rhonda says her landlord did not act on the suggestion till after this year's floods and also did not disclose the flood risk when the place was on the market. Rhonda says it should be incumbent on landlords to keep housing safe for tenants and there should be a process for independently auditing properties to make sure that's happening. She reminds us climate breakdown only makes this imperative stronger. "We've been given a kick up the ass because this is what's being predicted with global warming and a tiny taste of the extreme weather to come."

Appointment of Blind Citizens NZ World Blind Union Country Delegates

The Board made appointments to each of the Primary and Secondary WBU Country Delegate positions during its March 2023 meeting.

In the interim, National President Jonathan Godfrey is appointed as Blind Citizens NZ's Primary Delegate.

The Board will review this decision during its November 2023 Annual Planning Meeting. Congratulations go to Thomas Bryan on his re-appointment as Secondary WBU Delegate.

The Board also extends its thanks to Paula Waby. Paula's representation of Blind Citizens NZ at international WBU events, and contributions during her time as Blind Citizens NZ's WBU Delegate and more recently as Primary WBU Delegate are recognised. Paula's term as Primary WBU Delegate concluded on 31 March 2023.

Stats NZ Census update for the disability sector

Note to readers: the information that follows is provided by Stats NZ. Blind Citizens NZ is pleased to acknowledge we have been actively involved offering information and advice to Stats NZ since the 2018 Census...

We are pleased to report that over 4 million people have now completed and returned their Census Individual Form. Most people are completing the Census online (83 percent), while 17 percent of the returns have been on a paper form.

We have had positive feedback about the performance and accessibility of the online Census form and the range of formats that have been made available to help disabled people take part.

There is still time to complete the Census

We are currently working on updating the information we have available in alternate formats to let disabled people know what to do now that Census Day has passed.

Census Day was **Tuesday 7 March 2023** but you can still complete the census after this date. When people complete their census forms, they just fill them out for where they were on 7 March.

Census collectors are visiting households to follow up with people who have not yet completed their census forms and to offer support.

Collectors will be in the field until **3 May** in most areas, and **1 June** in cyclone-affected areas.

People do not need to wait for a census collector to visit. They can complete the census online using any access code provided to their household, or by requesting a new access code through the website www.census.govt.nz.

Alternatively, people can call **0800 CENSUS** (0800 236 787) for help or to request information in Audio, Braille, Large Print or Easy Read. The Census Helpline is open from **8am to 5pm**, 7 days a week until 30 June.

NZSL videos with captions in English can be viewed online here:
<https://www.census.govt.nz/new-zealand-sign-language/>

Reminder letters

A second reminder letter will be mailed to some households this week. Some people may have already completed their census forms by the time the letter arrives. If they have already done the census, they do not need to do anything else and can ignore the letter.

Cyclone affected areas

For people in areas impacted by Cyclone Gabrielle, there will be more time and support to do the census. We are working together with iwi leaders and community groups to help people to take part in the census when they are ready.

This means:

- communities will be involved in planning the census approach in their area;
- there will be more community locations and events that people can go to for help;
- people will have guidance on how to fill out their census forms if they have had to leave their homes;

- census collectors will be in affected areas offering help until **1 June 2023**;
- we will revise the prosecution process for people affected by Cyclone Gabrielle who have been unable to complete the census.

Feedback received from disabled people

Some people have told us they are worried about being prosecuted or fined for not doing their Census by 7 March.

Fines are sometimes given to people who do not fill in their census, because it is a legal requirement. But this is the last thing we want to do. We want everyone to be counted in the 2023 Census and are working hard to provide the support and assurance that they need.

We have noted some general feedback from disabled people about the confusing language used in the Census. Concerns that neurodiversity is not represented have also been raised. These concerns have been shared with the relevant teams at Stats NZ.

Thank you

Thank you all for your continued support for the 2023 Census. We would like to acknowledge the support received from Disabled People's Organisations, particularly Deaf Aotearoa, Blind Citizens NZ, and People First who have contributed to the development of our accessibility approach.

Ways to Support Blind Citizens NZ's 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.

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, we suggest the following will assist your legal advisor...

“I give and bequeath to the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Incorporated (CC41040):

- \$ (a specific dollar amount); or
- A specific percentage of my estate; or
- The whole or a specific percentage of the residue of my estate.

Free from all duties and charges, as a contribution to the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc to be applied for general purposes only, for which the receipt of the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc shall be sufficient discharge to my trustees.”

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; or
- **Email:** bequest-info-blindcitizensnz@groups.io

Blind Citizens NZ – Board and National Office

Board

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

Focus Editor, Áine Kelly-Costello

- **Email** articles to: focus.abcnz@gmail.com
- **Post:** PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242

National Office

- **Physical:** Ground Floor, 113 Adelaide Road, Newtown, Wellington.
- **Post:** PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242.
- **Email:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz
- **Phone:** 04 389 0033; 0800 222 694.
- **Fax:** 04 389 0030.
- **Website:** <http://www.blindcitizensnz.org.nz>
- **Facebook Page:** <https://www.facebook.com/BlindCitizensNZ/>
- **Chief Executive:** Rose Wilkinson:
rwilkinson@blindcitizensnz.org.nz

Blind Citizens NZ is appreciative of donations received from our members and supporters, and for funding from the Lotteries Grants Board, and Blind Low Vision NZ