



Blind Citizens NZ

Focus

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In this Edition

Rose Wilkinson, Chief Executive

Welcome to our December Focus, the last for 2025. Readers will see from the contents that we have a mixture of items, including a few operational topics, some of which are really important to know about. We encourage you to read through, as each of these is relevant in some way to everyone.

While not intending to comment on all items, the President's contribution highlights that the Board will shortly begin working on a new organisational Strategic Plan. He also reflects on the past and future of Blind Citizens NZ and how members might contribute to a Strategic Plan that will embody Blind Citizens NZ's needs to remain vibrant into the future.

Preparation for our 2026 AGM and Conference is underway – dates, venue, theme, etc, are all in place. Then we include an 'In Brief' section, where updates and | or information are provided about several items relevant to Blind Citizens NZ. Special Interest Networks are amongst items that get a specific mention, so do check this out.

We continue to call for expressions of interest for a Moderator for our organisational email lists – this is not an onerous role.

A reminder that we welcome member contributions for consideration and inclusion in Focus. You'll find our 'season's greetings' towards the end of this Focus issue. Happy reading...

Where do you think we're going?

Jonathan Godfrey, National President

The world around us is changing—how blind people connect, advocate, and organise is changing—and Blind Citizens NZ must decide whether to adapt boldly or drift quietly. I'm hoping that some of what I write below is therefore seen by some people as somewhat provocative. I think it needs to be, because Blind Citizens NZ needs everyone reading this column to ask what the future of a membership organisation of blind people speaking for ourselves will look like in the future. You will get your chance to respond when we formulate a new Strategic Plan in the first half of 2026.

It seems to me that if we don't like what the status quo offers, we must find ways to change it. I'm not talking about minor tweaks here and there; I mean doing things that help redirect effort, to find a reset button that sets us up for a long and proud future.

I share the following personal story not to compare people to sheep, but to illustrate how sometimes the systems we build with care still need radical reshaping to meet our future needs. I signalled the need for change in my address to the AGM this year. I didn't mention in that speech what was happening for me behind the scenes to make me want to talk about change. Shearing sheep is hard work. While Amy and I have proven we can do it, we've also worked out we don't want to be doing it.

We'd invested a lot of time and energy into building a small flock of sheep that are well-suited to our constraints. We do not want to spend the rest of our lives rounding up sheep. We want them to come to us because they enjoy us as much as we enjoy them. Our flock definitely needed some new blood if we were to transform it into the flock we want in five years. We started a strategic direction which would see us gradually work towards a flock that has less shearing and less dagging. What we learned, though, is that we needed to make more change than we first thought, and some ruthless decisions had to be faced. This experience made me reflect on Blind Citizens NZ too. What will our 'flock' look like in five years? And what must we change now to make that possible?

I want to use the three years given to me by way of re-election to promote change without straying from our fundamentals. I believe the reasons I found Blind Citizens NZ an attractive proposition for my time and energy are as true today as they were when I paid my life membership, but membership only formalises commitment. It is engagement that creates momentum. Without momentum, even the best structures or organisations will fail.

I keep hearing people say that all membership organisations are in trouble. It isn't that people don't value the existence of organisations like ours, but that people just don't pay membership fees to as many organisations as we used to.

As it happens, I pay more memberships today than I've ever done before, but only to organisations that I see having benefits to my future. I am also guilty of freeloading off the good work of organisations I don't actively join or actively engage with.

Hundreds of people know that Blind Citizens NZ exists, but for some reason, they choose not to engage with our work, either at a local level or with issues we face at a national or even international level. Some of those people say they don't want to join an advocacy organisation. That's okay, but many of them also join with our members to discuss issues they face in life. They value the connections and benefit from the work done by our Branches, Networks, and yes, our National Office. They follow our Facebook page; they read this magazine. They participate in email lists, which we moderate. I observe other organisations uplift content we create, or that we share with our members, and pass that on to people who are not our members.

This is why I continue to claim that Blind Citizens NZ is actually benefitting many more people than our membership database suggests we do. That wider community represents a silent majority, though. We assume they're content with what we do and say, but I'd actually like to meet more of them and know why they aren't more actively engaged with our movement.

I seriously doubt the need for blind people to voice the needs of the wider blindness community will magically disappear any time soon. There will be opportunities for a new generation of leaders to emerge in the coming decade, and I have every intention of those leaders inheriting an organisation that is well placed to do what we have done well for eight decades thus far. I don't pretend to know who will stand up above others, but I have met plenty of people who remind me of my former self; people who are doing OK in life, but want things to be better for themselves and other blind people around them.

I know what ongoing value Blind Citizens NZ could play for my future, but I need to be sure that once I end my time as President, the organisation will carry on delivering for blind people. That poses some challenges related to succession planning, but for the purpose of this column, let's assume there are people willing to commit to being Board Members and that they are as committed to our advocacy agenda as others have demonstrated in the past.

To lead, though, requires followers. In the case of a membership organisation, that means having members who contribute to discussions, either locally, online, or at specially organised events away from home. The more people we have contributing to our collective movement, the stronger our organisation will be.

This is why I believe the most critical issue facing us today is to make sure that all blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired people who want to participate in our discussions are getting the chance to do so, and maybe I don't care enough that they aren't financially committed. Even social media influencers (individuals who share information that is valued by hundreds to thousands of other people) need a following. Their success is not accidental. It is earned, but their following doesn't pay a subscription either.

I suggest that our Branches are not recovering. Networks work in some places but not others. We need more sustainable structures. The question for us is not how to revive the past, but how to structure ourselves for the future we actually live in.

In the 20th century, we had 15 branches that held regular face-to-face meetings. We didn't need any other structures because the Branches were doing well for our people. By the end of the 20th century, though, our membership was already falling, and the future of many Branches was on the line. Today we have just six Branches, and if we are honest, none of them is as strong as they were 20 years ago. It is the Branches which I liken to my sheep. Some are bigger than others, and some are louder.

Networks are working in some places (for example, Taranaki and in my area, Manawatū and Districts).

We also have functioning Special Interest Networks for guide dog handlers and people interested in Braille. One of the best outcomes from our AGM and Conference in October was the group of women who collectively decided that they'd like to see a women's network formed. The Otago network returned to Branch status after years of effort to keep the movement alive in the years following the demise of the Branch there. At this point, Otago is the only Geographical Network to Branch success story. Unfortunately, most of the Branches that became networks have continued to decline, and members living in those areas are now without coordinated activities. The centres that have had a Branch in the past, which now have no Branch or Network, form a disappointingly long list: Waikato, Rotorua, Gisborne, Napier, Hastings, Nelson, and Canterbury. That's a lot of blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired people not getting the benefits of community, which many longstanding members sought when we came to Blind Citizens NZ and continue to enjoy today.

It is clear to me that the Branch model is only sustainable in a small number of places, but that Networks aren't necessarily a perfect solution. Some Branches continue to truck along, but even the Branch with the highest number of members has a very low proportion of the potential membership in their area. Even the strongest of our Branches cannot afford to sit back and relax. They must find new members before they too dwindle. Networks are like the second breed of sheep we tried on the farm. They haven't been uniformly successful.

So, where are the people who might be our future members? What would bring them to our events and activities? Are we doing enough to maximise our outreach and make sure we welcome all comers? Are we still too hung up on people coming to physical spaces? After all, our Special Interest Networks don't just survive, they thrive, and do so primarily online. I'm not sure, though, if a virtual organisation is what many of us want. I know my kids play online farming games, but I would find that unsatisfying to say the least. Maybe, though, I need to look further afield (okay, bad pun) for other types of sheep. Maybe Blind Citizens NZ needs something different to Branches and Networks, which create productive spaces for blind people to share our aspirations and lived experiences.

About half of the paid-up membership Blind Citizens NZ has today are Members-for-Life. These people decided that a large lump sum payment was justified because Blind Citizens NZ offered a value proposition, and they had enough disposable income to make that investment. I do accept that we also have members who cannot afford that lump sum payment but are just as committed to the longevity of our organisation as any life member. They make sure they pay what they can afford, when they can afford it. The number of Members-for-Life has remained relatively constant over the last 20 years or so. It is in decline, but nowhere near as much decline as the number of people who pay an annual subscription.

Is our future in trying to continue to seek annual subscriptions? We don't see each other as much in a face-to-face setting as was common in the 20th century, and many people just don't carry the cash that used to change hands at Branch meetings. The ability to pay subscriptions by way of a cheque is a thing of the past, and not everyone in our community is able to use online banking with confidence.

A subscription does reassure us that a person is committed to the kaupapa of the organisation. In future, we need to check in with all Members-for-Life to be sure that they continue to support our work. Finding the best way to do so to meet the new legal requirements must be found, and we must remember that not all of our existing members are digital citizens.

Some people might work out that getting a person's subscription actually creates costs to the organisation. If a person receives this Focus magazine in print, Braille, or audio, the cost of producing and posting the four issues per annum exhausts the annual subscription people pay. In effect, a person who pays a subscription and lives in a Branch area gets this magazine for free because their subscription goes to that branch. They are supposed to get Branch newsletters to keep them informed and included.

Geographical Networks also send out newsletters.

This process may well be part of the list of things people think or have found too onerous and therefore dissuades them from more active involvement in a Branch Committee or taking a Network Coordination role.

I challenge every Branch and Network to think about what makes them sustainable, and how much we are each doing to make sure our Branch or Network is remaining sustainable. I invite every one of you, whether you are a paid-up member or just an interested bystander, to tell us what you want for the future of Blind Citizens NZ. What would make you more engaged, active, or interested in what we're doing for each other as a community? Please do provide feedback. Details on how and when are elsewhere in this issue.

Blind Citizens NZ has been a powerful voice for eight decades—not because we stayed the same, but because we adapted with purpose. Obviously, I believe we must change our organisation, and that we must get on with this job now. Change cannot be a single event; it must be a sustained process, and every former, current and future member can play a part in helping shape what Blind Citizens NZ will be in 20 years' time when we turn 100. Will you be there? I hope so.

In the meantime, I hope your summer finds you in places you want to be, with people whose company you enjoy, and the kinds of pleasures that get you ready for an exciting 2026.

For me, summer means deciding which sheep to back as the winners and which will be replaced. I'll continue to enjoy my time on the farm, getting plenty of fresh air and exercise. I expect many of you are hoping for a more relaxing summer. All the best.

**Preparation for Blind Citizens NZ
2026 AGM and Conference | Times are
changing – Are we surviving or thriving?
From Rose Wilkinson, Chief Executive**

Preparation is already underway for our 2026 AGM and Conference event. The Board finalised dates, venue, and the theme during its November Annual Planning Meeting.

Theme: 'Times are changing – Are we surviving or thriving?' is the chosen theme. This stems in part from the declining rate of Ordinary financial Members and is intended to focus on what Blind Citizens NZ needs to do to remain relevant and sustainable into the future. A key outcome of the Board's decision is to engage with members, asking for ideas about guest presenters and topics, along with a request for additional input that could be utilised towards the work happening on a new organisational Strategic Plan.

For example, when thinking about the digital divide, in our communications with members, and our organisational advocacy with government agencies and others, we do all we can to remove challenges that contribute to the digital divide. In a world where Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming more and more a way of working and communicating, this can add to challenges. At the same time, it may well assist in removing them. This may be an area to comment on. Therefore, in addition to sharing your thoughts about topics and presenters, let's know 'what is changing in your world that we should all know more about?' Ideally, the Board would prefer to receive your thoughts and ideas in time to consider them at its first meeting in 2026. You are encouraged to send these via one of the following options no later than Sunday, 8 February:

- Phone: 0800 222 6940 (leave a message if you reach voicemail, and we will return your call); or
- Email: admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz; or
- Post: PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242.

Venue: The Ascot Hotel in Invercargill is the confirmed venue for the 2026 AGM and Conference, and is a facility Blind Citizens NZ has used on a couple of occasions. The aim is to have registration costs available no later than 31 March 2026.

Dates: Held over two full days, the AGM and Conference will start at 9:00am on Friday, 9 October, finishing at the conclusion of the Conference Dinner, on Saturday, 10 October. As in the past, attendees are encouraged to arrive the day prior and leave on Sunday.

Side Events: This is a heads-up that side events are planned. These are in-person opportunities for those people travelling to attend the AGM and Conference event. Although there is a little time to go before these are finalised, the aim is to hold those we've held previously, while potentially including some new options that may be held in parallel, such as for men and women, and older and younger people. Advanced information about side events assists people with early travel bookings. On this basis, information on the finalised side events will be published no later than 30 May.

Leadership | Advocacy Workshop

We're calling for expressions of interest

In May 2026 Blind Citizens NZ is holding our next combined Leadership | Advocacy Workshop. This will have a strong focus on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, linked across leadership and advocacy.

Board Member Maria Stevens and Chief Executive Rose Wilkinson will be co-facilitating this workshop.

The workshop will be held from Monday 11 to Wednesday 13 May 2026 inclusive, at the Brentwood Hotel Wellington.

Are you interested in developing your leadership and advocacy skills and knowledge? If so, and you are a financial Ordinary Member of Blind Citizens NZ, 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. You will arrive on Sunday, 17 May, and return home late afternoon | early evening, Wednesday, 19 May.

Details for the workshop, which will include up to eight participants, will be finalised in mid-March 2026. In the meantime, expressions of interest are welcome. These must be received by 9am, Monday, 30 March 2026. Please send your expression of interest 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

Some 'In Brief' Items

Adoption of Constitution: A formal process to introduce the proposed new Constitution to Ordinary financial (voting) Members began on 8 September this year. An eight-week engagement period that ended on 2 November 2025 included a scheduled korero during this year's AGM and Conference. The Board considered all aspects of feedback during its November Meeting. This led to two further amendments being made. The first of these removed the President's right to have a casting vote at Board Meetings.

The second removed the requirement for anyone standing for election to the Board to have been financial for 24 months cumulatively during five consecutive years. At the Special Meeting of Members on Tuesday, 9 December (held via Zoom), Ordinary financial (voting) Members unanimously adopted the new Constitution. This meets all requirements of the Incorporated Society Act 2022. All that remains now is to register the new Constitution with the Incorporated Societies.

2026 Award Nomination Timeline: The closing date for receiving nominations (and supporting information) for all awards to be considered for presentation at the 2026 AGM and Conference has been set. These must be received no later than 5:00pm, Wednesday, 5 August 2026. This applies to:

- Extra Touch Award;

- Beamish Memorial Medal;
- Johnston Cup for Leadership;
- Memorial Hall of Honour.

Information concerning these awards will be publicised in each of the 2026 March and June Focus issues.

Establishing a Women's Special Interest Network:

If you're a blind, deafblind, low-vision or vision-impaired woman, or you identify as feminine, you're invited to join our online hui from 5pm to 6pm on Thursday, 12 February 2026. This is a welcoming space, open to both members and non-members of Blind Citizens NZ. This hui builds on the initiative and momentum from our AGM and Conference in October. With Network Coordinator Judy Small, participants will decide on a name for the Network, identify key focus areas, and agree on any additional membership criteria. Once there is agreement, decisions will be shared with the Blind Citizens NZ Board to enable the Network to be formally established.

If you meet the criteria mentioned above, you're warmly invited to register using any of the options provided. If you're interested but can't make it on the day, we still want to hear from you.

- **Phone:** 0800 222 6940 (leave a message if you reach voicemail, and we will return your call); or
- **Email:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz; or
- **Post:** PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242.

National Information Line Coordinator: Kathryn

Stevenson has been appointed as our new Coordinator. The Board is appreciative of Kathryn's expression of interest and looks forward to the influence she will bring to this important information mechanism. It may be towards the end of January 2026 before Kathryn is up and running, so please do bear with us as we work to revitalise the National Information Line.

Join one of our Special Interest Networks: Blind

Citizens NZ has two Special Interest Networks for people who are blind, deafblind, low vision or vision-impaired. One of these is for Guide Dog Handlers, anyone aspiring to be one or who may have retired their Guide Dog. The Braille Special Interest Network is for anyone from the blind community who is a Braille user or who aspires to learn Braille.

You do not need to be a member of Blind Citizens NZ to join our Special Interest Networks. Meetings for the 2026 Special Interest Networks are scheduled as follows. Each of these is typically held from 6pm to 7pm. Any changes are advised on a case-by-case basis:

- **Guide Dog Handlers:** 26 February, 28 May, 27 August (AGM), and 9 November.
- **Braille:** 18 February, 15 April, 17 June, 3 September (AGM), and 18 November.

Moderator, Blind Citizens NZ Email Lists

Expressions of Interest Welcome

Blind Citizens NZ is seeking expressions of interest from Ordinary Members for the role of Moderator for two of our email discussion lists. The position is re-advertised. The Board's approach is consistent with the practice of periodically opening up long-held roles to call for expressions of interest. Carl Halliburton has been the moderator of Blind Discuss since 2020 and of the Member Forum since its inception in 2022. He is eligible for reappointment and may also express interest.

The Moderator is responsible for:

- Monitoring activity on the email lists;
- Ensuring all communications are respectful;
- Supporting members to follow established list guidelines.

The two email lists for which we are seeking expressions of interest are:

- **Blind Discuss:** This is open to anyone in the blind community to join. It is a place for wide-ranging discussion on blindness-related topics. It assists in keeping members and interested people informed about blindness issues and events.
- **Member Forum:** This is exclusively for members of Blind Citizens NZ. Topics are specific to organisational matters relating to Blind Citizens NZ.

If you would like to learn more, or put yourself forward, please contact us by:

- Email: admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz (put “Moderator” in the subject line);
- phone 0800-222-694.

For sale - Large Print Calendars Produced by Blind Citizens NZ

We still have some of our 2026 Large Print Calendars available. These are ideal for anyone who needs or prefers larger print when checking dates. The calendars are approximately 59 cm wide and 42 cm in height. They can be purchased for \$13 through our National Office, or your local Blind Citizens NZ Branch or Geographical Network. When posted from our National Office there will be additional costs.

The most cost-efficient option is to purchase these directly from your Branch or Network. Phone our National Office on 0800 222 694 if you want to purchase one of our Large Print Calendars. We can put you in touch with your local Branch or Network, or we can arrange delivery to you directly. As mentioned, postage incurs additional costs that vary depending on the number you require and the destination.

Below is an image of the first month of 2026. This gives an indication of what our large print calendars look like. While a somewhat smaller version, this indicates the size.

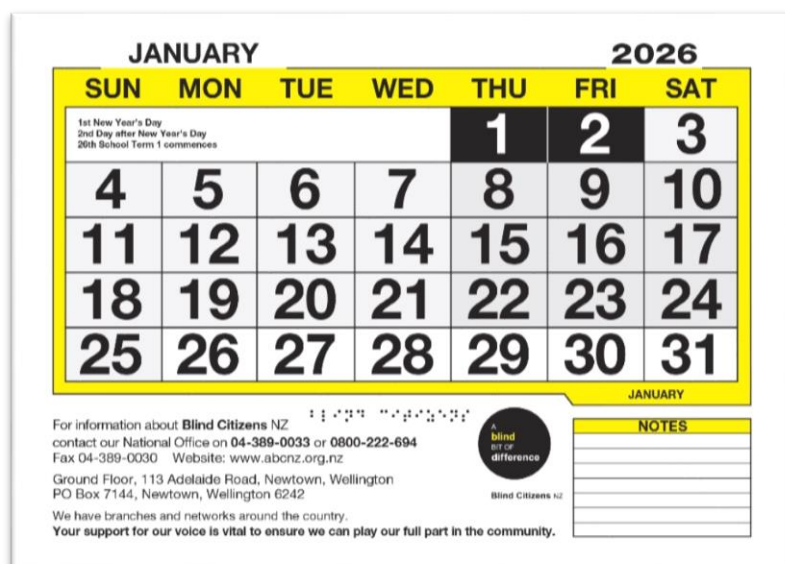


Image description:
Blind Citizens NZ
large-print calendar
page for January 2026.
January appears top
left and the year is top
right. A yellow border
frames the calendar
grid. Below the month
and year, days of the week are shown in black text on the
yellow background using the first three letters (Sun–Sat).
Public holidays are marked with a black background and
white numbers. Greyed-out dates indicates school holidays.
Beneath the grid organisational information is to the left, with
a notes section on the right.

Opportunities to engage with the President

The President Jonathan Godfrey aims to regularly set aside time to engage with members on topics you might like to raise. These opportunities are quite separate from any others that might be offered for a specific reason. Dates for these regular opportunities with the President are via Zoom, where people can join by phone or using other technology. These will be routinely held from 5pm to 6pm on the following Tuesdays commencing 17 February, 31 March, 12 May, 23 June, 4 August, 15 September, 27 October, 8 December. Timely reminders along with Zoom details will be provided.

Season's Greetings| National Office Closing and Opening Dates

As we each reflect on the past year, there will be highs and lows. While this will always be the way it is, because that is life, hopefully, we will each find some truly positive moments and outcomes that motivate us as we move forward into 2026.

Blind Citizens NZ works across so many issues, advocating for the removal of barriers and challenges that impact the lives of people who are blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired, and we do make a blind bit of difference. This is not about self-praise, but rather reflecting on, and bringing to the fore, the positive feedback we hear from those with whom we work. This includes comments offered by presenters during this year's AGM and Conference.

Remember the Board's request slotted in the item about next year's AGM and Conference, for Blind Citizens NZ members to provide thoughts and ideas, etc, for it to consider.

Bringing our final Focus for 2025 to a close, Blind Citizens NZ Board and staff take this opportunity to wish you and yours seasons' greetings. Our National Office closes at noon, Monday 22 December 2025. We reopen on Tuesday, 20 January 2026. In between times, and although on annual leave, the Chief Executive remains available for emergencies. Stay safe, and we look forward to engaging and | or working with you in 2026.

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
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- **Email:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz
- **Phone:** 04 389 0033; 0800 222 694.
- **Website:** <http://www.blindcitizensnz.org.nz>
- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/BlindCitizensNZ/>

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

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