



Blind Citizens NZ

Focus

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In this edition

Áine Kelly-Costello - Focus editor

Welcome to the final edition of Focus for 2022. I hope you have time to relax and connect with loved ones over the holiday period. I start off this edition with some reflections on the logistics behind doing what should theoretically be simple but often isn't: tracking down a book of our choice in a format of our choice and diving in. The National President's column reflects on what makes a good partnership. Also look out for thoughtful reflections from Mary Schnackenberg on what the original design of the Awhina House Blind Low Vision NZ site got right in Auckland--namely, good practices which are missing in action as the new facility gets designed now.

Between the September edition of Focus and this one, Blind citizens NZ's Annual General Meeting and Conference took place in Invercargill. I couldn't be there but many members sent in their appreciation for a Conference well-run. If you were unable to join in and you'd more information about the AGM and Conference, contact Blind Citizens NZ's National Office (contact details at the end of this Focus issue).

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@abcnz.org.nz

Pitches for the March edition are due by 13 February 2023.

The logistics of reading a book of your choice

Áine Kelly-Costello, Focus Editor

As another turbulent year winds down, I hope that you can spend time with good friends or loved ones and enjoy some time to recharge. If you want to, I hope you can curl up with an excellent book and get lost inside. What you choose to read should be up to you, which is why having equitable access to books for our blind community is crucial. Here are some anecdotal reflections on where we're at on that front, where we may be going backwards, and a sampling of the large variety of blind-friendly reading access options internationally.

Setting the scene

I'm 27 years old and blind from birth. I've lived pretty much all my adult life, and some of my childhood, with an extensive collection of books in an accessible format to me available for my perusal on demand. This is largely because I'm a smartphone native, and came of age just as e-books, and some years later audiobooks, went from a niche that blind people especially pushed for and relied on, to a mainstream option. I'm comfortable downloading and using a variety of apps and reading catalogues so the chances I'll find my book of choice *somewhere* are high. I've also been able to read Braille from a young age, opening up access to reading by touch, in my own time. But we know this ready book access reality I'm describing doesn't currently apply for many folks in the blind community in Aotearoa.

What's happening with the BLVNZ Library?

Dating back to the early 1900s, what is now the Blind Low vision NZ (BLVNZ) library has been a mainstay of book, magazine and newspaper access for our community. This has been predominantly through audio narration but also includes hard-copy Braille, large print, twin vision (print and Braille side by side) and e-books.

Efforts are made to include books relevant here in Aotearoa, and the library also has a growing collection of books in te reo Māori, including some to help with learning the language.

While the book selection is impressive and continues to expand, it's not much use if accessing it is difficult. For those who aren't as at home as I am on a smartphone, BLVNZ's is now providing library users with an Amazon Echo smart speaker and strongly encouraging reading via its Blind Low Vision NZ Alexa Skill. But Blind Citizens NZ has repeatedly heard from members that they're not finding Alexa to be the easiest reading partner to get on with, that the Echo isn't a portable reading solution, and that they'd like the previously widely-used DAISY players back. BLVNZ, however, says that receiving USB sticks with books for use in DAISY players is only an option to people who don't have internet access. This excludes everyone who is online but currently struggling with Alexa.

The organisation is aware more options are needed. At the BLVNZ AGM on 2 December, the Board advised that trials of a battery and solar-powered talking book player, known as the Envoy Connect, would be starting here early next year. Many libraries now also connect to another portable and WIFI-enabled book player manufactured by Humanware, called the Victor Reader Stream. The Stream lets you read e-books and audiobooks, listen to podcasts and music, and even record. I know quite a few of us in Aotearoa already own one and it would be great if the BLVNZ library was added so that we could also download its books onto the Stream.

Once you have registered with the BLVNZ Library, other options for accessing its contents include:

- Requesting hard-copy books, including Braille, by emailing library@blindlowvision.org.nz
- Finding and listening to books online at <https://apps.blindfoundation.org.nz/booklink/web/#/> and
- Using the EasyReader app on iOS, Android or Windows.

Outside of BLVNZ's offerings, there are numerous other reading access options, both regarding what devices you read on and also where you source books. Like the BLVNZ library, many book sources give you quite a bit of choice about which device you use as well. Here's a selection of examples.

Bookshare

Bookshare is the largest and most established international online library for people with a print disability. There's a flat annual subscription fee of \$50USD which once paid, opens up access to its entire selection which, according to its *about* page, currently comes in at 1,168,867 books. The reading options are extensive and most books are available for download in multiple formats including Word, BRF (Braille Ready Format--good for Braille notetaker users), DAISY and more. Unlike the BLVNZ library which focuses on audiobooks, Bookshare's primary offering is e-books.

You can read the books on a computer (either online or downloaded), on a smartphone, using a Braille notetaker, or with any book reader which supports DAISY books including the Victor Reader Stream. Bookshare also has an Alexa Skill, but so far, Bookshare says that's only available to amazon.com customers based in the US.

Global Book Service

Aotearoa has signed up to an international agreement called the Marrakesh Treaty which makes it easier to produce books in accessible formats without being blocked by copyright restrictions. As part of this, the Accessible Books Consortium hosts the Global Book Service, through which you can access an expanding catalogue of e-books, audiobooks and Braille music scores from participating libraries, which includes BLVNZ. This collection is a good bet for international titles including thousands in French, Spanish and other languages.

The registration process is done online and requires BLVNZ to certify that you're a member of its library. Sign up at <https://www.abcglobalbooks.org/create/account/request>

Kindle, Audible, and other mainstream options

While I'm loath to recommend giving your money to the corporate monopoly which is Amazon, it's a key mainstream provider of books which does mean it gives you instantaneous access to that latest best seller or to a first-time author self-publishing on Kindle. There are a range of accessible options for reading its e-books and audiobooks alike on a PC, a smartphone, via Alexa, or on Amazon's own products including a Kindle and Fire tablet - both of which make use of Amazon's built-in screen reader VoiceView. Both Kindle (e-books) and Audible (audiobooks) also have various pricing options, from single book purchases to subscriptions.

Apple Books and Google Play Books are similar to Amazon's e-book and audiobook offerings, though they focus more on purchasing books outright. In addition to using their respective smartphone apps, Google's audiobooks are accessible via a Google Nest Speaker.

Another mainstream option, which for screen reader users I'd recommend predominantly for its very good international audiobook offering, is Scribd. This is a subscription service available online or via its smartphone apps, which also gets you access to e-books, magazines, sheet music and more. On the iOS app, I find myself using it only for its audio content.

Read e-books and audiobooks from your local public library

If you have a smartphone or PC and are up for getting a slightly more complex, but ultimately fairly usable application set up, you can access an extensive range of e-books and audiobooks free through your city's public library.

This takes a bit of setting up, but has the advantage of providing a better selection of Aotearoa-specific as well as international books, including a lot of very recent ones, for free.

To get set up, you'll first need to join your library to get a library card. Depending on the library, that may be doable online, or you may need to visit in person and bring some ID. Next, download an app called Libby, on your smartphone or PC. Alternatively, you can read a book in your web browser directly by Googling "Overdrive" and the name of your library. Either way, you'll then use your Library card barcode number to join.

The system then functions as a lending library, in that you can borrow a certain number of books, usually for up to four weeks, and when that period expires, the e-books or audiobooks will disappear off your device and return themselves to the virtual library.

Another accessible app with e-books and audiobooks available through the library system is called BorrowBox. It's got a smaller selection than Libby, at least through Auckland Libraries, but it has a lot of Australian content and some from Aotearoa too, which in my experience can be challenging to locate elsewhere.

Calibre Audio

Calibre Audio is an online audiobook library based out of the UK but available worldwide to anyone with a print disability. It's accessed at calibreaudio.org.uk/. You can download or stream from its collection of over 14,000 audiobooks, either on a PC or via third-party applications like Dolphin Easy Reader or Libby. This is a library service where you can borrow four or five books for three or four weeks (the details vary depending on how you listen). Its website says overseas members pay a fee (£3 per month or £30 per year), though at least some people in Aotearoa with accounts, including me, are able to stream and borrow books without issue and have thus far not been prompted for payment.

Incidentally, as with the Global Book Service, it's thanks to Aotearoa having signed up to the Marrakesh Treaty that we can access this library.

A library of friends

Booklovers, sighted or not, have borrowed books off of each other since time immemorial. When it comes to swapping anything digital, which after all is often the only way we as blind people have access to a book, the topic is a bit taboo in the public arena. Many authors are understandably wary of its effect on their hard-won income.

Helping authors, especially lesser-known ones, to earn a living from their craft matters, yes, but so does pushing back against accessibility and cost barriers that limit our community's informal access to great books, in ways that sighted people passing around their dog-eared hard copy versions couldn't--and wouldn't--ever be penalised for.

This summer, hopefully a spot of leisure reading is on the agenda. If you're struggling to figure out how you can connect with books again, or can't figure out how to access that exact book you're after, another Blind Citizens NZ member or a blind friend might just be able to help you out. Let's hope that blind people's equitable and convenient access to books, and indeed to magazines, news media and the rest, only increases from here.

What is partnership?

Jonathan Godfrey, National President

Editor's note: In this column, Jonathan Godfrey reflects on the essence of successful partnerships, when applied in particular to Government working with Disabled People's Organisations.

When two people decide they are going to form a partnership, they generally do so as equals. They won't be totally equal of course; each of them will have their own strengths and weaknesses to bring to the relationship.

A successful partnership takes advantage of the strengths, and often uses them to overcome the weaknesses. In short, they work as a team. There aren't many partnerships that work well where one party is completely dominated by the other.

The same is true in many of the relationships Blind Citizens NZ has with Government agencies, our DPO Coalition colleagues, and our partners in the Independent Monitoring Mechanism (IMM). We benefit in our collective work that promotes the rights of disabled people because we each bring our strengths to the table, we respect each other, and we get the job done, often with a lot of pleasure thrown in for good measure.

Disabled people have chosen their representatives in these settings. We have an election for the Board of Blind Citizens NZ, and the National President. I might have been elected unopposed, but I'm sure if there was sufficient feeling to replace me, the members of this Disable People's Organisation (DPO) would let their feelings be known through the ballot box.

A healthy DPO also invites constructive criticism and dialogue about the performance of its leadership, and rightly so. In recent times, we've managed to have a number of sessions on Zoom for members to share their views on topics which can influence the Board in its deliberations, help members to speak up for themselves, but ultimately to make sure the view put forward by Blind Citizens NZ as a DPO reflects the broad spectrum of member aspirations and lived experiences. We also have our AGM and Conference where the voice of individuals gets a good airing in our effort to find a consensus-based outcome.

Our organisational motto of "Blind people speaking for ourselves" existed well before the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Disability Convention).

But the Disability Convention and the General Comment statements issued by the UN Committee from time to time, all speak of the right for disabled people to be heard as individuals and in particular “through their representative organisations.” But let’s tease that out a bit...

In the preamble to the Disability Convention which describes the background principles, there is a statement that reads, “Considering that persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them,” The Disability Convention then goes on to say how the Government must work towards achieving the long list of principles using clearly articulated obligations in numbered articles.

The way we work with and for our members is what gives life to Article 4.3 of the Disability Convention. It is here that the word “consult” first appears in the text. Article 4.3 says: “In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Disability Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations.”

To make my point that this article is about DPOs, not individuals, let’s remove the words relating to children; it would then oblige close consultation with and active involvement of “persons with disabilities through their representative organizations.” This does not exclude the Government from needing to work with individuals, disabled or non-disabled, but it explicitly obliges the Government to work with DPOs.

So, the Disability Convention explicitly empowers DPOs, and does so ahead of individuals.

The second reference to DPOs appears in Article 29 on Participation in political and public life; the third is in Article 32 on International cooperation; and the last reference is Article 33 on National implementation and monitoring.

We must look to the General Comments issued by the UN Committee to see how disabled individuals are to be empowered by Governments. In every reference to individuals I've found, the reference also mentions DPOs. In contrast, there are specific statements about DPOs. For instance, paragraph 1 of General Comment 7 says: "The effective and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, through their representative organizations, is thus at the heart of the Convention."

General Comment 7 is crucial for us as a DPO because it is about DPOs. I like paragraph 56 which states, "States parties should ensure that the participation of organizations of persons with disabilities in monitoring processes, through independent monitoring frameworks, is based on clear procedures, proper time frames and previous dissemination of relevant information. Monitoring and evaluation systems should examine the level of engagement of organizations of persons with disabilities in all policies and programmes and ensure that the views of such persons are given priority. To fulfil their primary responsibility for service provision, States parties should explore partnerships with organizations of persons with disabilities to gain inputs from the users of services themselves."

"Given priority"! That's massive. It rather suggests the views of DPOs should trump those of our Independent Monitoring Mechanism (IMM) partners. That said, I would say that the IMM is strong because we do work collaboratively as equal partners. In addition, the ability we have in NZ to play an active role in our IMM is unusual and seems to be viewed with some scepticism by other countries whose disabled people are less actively involved in their IMM. I'm proud of the partnership we have with the IMM; it is working well for the disabled people of NZ.

It's hard to find any references to the idea of partnership in the Disability Convention or in any of the General Comments, at least not in the context of disabled people working with Government. Article 4.3 didn't suggest partnership, so every time we hear the word "partnership" in this context, we really need to stop and ask what sort of partnership is meant.

Partnership in the context of DPOs is about representing the views of disabled people, and doing so on the basis of collectivism over individualism; that means I must, as your National President, reflect the collective views of blind, deafblind, vision-impaired and low-vision people, not my personal opinion. Individuals don't have that responsibility, and they aren't answerable for their actions either.

Government wants to have a partnership with disabled people. Partnership is not about contracting or employment of disabled people. It is about having disabled people speaking for ourselves on issues that affect our lives. Individuals get jobs as individuals and we do need more disabled people taking up employment across Government. Giving contracts to organisations run by disabled people is laudable, but only if those organisations are capable of delivering on the contract.

In the New Zealand context, the word "partnership" is often used to describe the relationship between Tangata Whenua and the Government. There's plenty of active debate outside disability circles on this particular topic, but one point I hear in that debate rings out very strongly for me. Tangata Whenua claim the right to choose their representatives, not to have them chosen by the Government. There might be a lesson we can learn in disability circles from that debate, and make sure that Government continues to consistently partner with DPOs, and not get too committed to a strategy of choosing which disabled people it will work with.

Membership Subscription Review Blind Citizens NZ Board

At this year's Annual General Meeting and Conference, attendees considered a paper from the Board of Blind Citizens NZ about Blind Citizens NZ's membership.

In its paper, the Board was very clear that bringing the topic to the AGM and Conference for discussion was an initial step in its process. That initial discussion supported the approach offered in the discussion paper. This enabled the Board to firm up next steps during its November 2022 meeting.

Here now is how the Board is progressing its discussion paper and related proposal:

- publicising the discussion paper | proposal in this December Focus Issue;
- seeking feedback from members, Branches and Networks by 9am 16 March 2023;
- the Board will consider all feedback at its meeting on 26-27 March 2023;
- in the event the Board receives feedback from individual members, Branches and | Networks who feel the proposal cannot be supported without significant alteration, the Board will call a Special Meeting of Members sometime from April 2023 to June 2023 (this will enable further discussion and perhaps a decision to occur);
- if feedback from everyone is consistently supportive, the Board will release a final policy statement before the end of June 2023 that clarifies its collective obligations and expectations, without the need to hold a Special Meeting of Members.

All feedback to the discussion paper | proposal must be received at Blind Citizens NZ's National Office no later than 9am, 16 March 2023. Feedback can be provided via the following options:

- **Phone:** 0800 222 694;

- **Email to:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz;
- **Post to:** PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242

Here now is the discussion paper and proposal...

Introduction

In recent years there has been criticism about the number of people from our community of blind, deafblind, vision-impaired and low vision (referred to as blind), that Blind Citizens NZ can claim to represent. No matter how we state that all blind people can benefit from our work, this can be misinterpreted to mean that we speak for all blind people.

Our membership numbers are low in terms of our long and proud history of promoting the interests of blind people. Only Ordinary Members (those who are financial) are included in our elections. However, in pretty much all other aspects, we reach out to a wider membership base. We do send Focus to people whose membership is not current; we do not check people's membership for participation on our email lists and we definitely do not discount the aspirations or lived experiences of anyone in our community because they haven't paid a subscription.

Our organisational work is bound to be improved if we can state with confidence that we do have a larger number of blind people showing commitment to our cause. The more active our membership is in determining our organisational positions through discussion of issues at branch and network meetings, the more authority we can assert on behalf of our community.

There are numerous reasons why people do not retain membership of any organisation. The reduction in face to face events in recent years and the reduction in the use of cash and cheques means some people are finding it difficult to retain membership even when they do want to stay financial.

Changes introduced during 2020 means it now proves difficult to gain access to the entire pool of RNZFB members and / or Blind Low Vision NZ (BLVNZ) clients. This is not a new problem, but the current management at BLVNZ, having introduced the changes, have done little to help resolve what has become a longstanding issue. We are therefore somewhat reliant on our own ability to attract new members to our organisation.

This paper sets out a proposal which has a financial impact on Branches, Networks, and National Office.

The proposal is put forward in the hope that the cost is also seen as a sensible investment in the long-term sustainability of Branches and Networks.

The proposal

In order to get more members onto our database, the Board believes we should offer free membership to anyone who has not yet joined Blind Citizens NZ, or whose membership has lapsed for more than five years.

We propose that anyone coming to Blind Citizens NZ after 1 July 2023 who meets the simple criteria above, be given that financial year (i.e. to 30 June 2024) and one more following that (i.e. to 30 June 2025) without having to pay a subscription in order to become linked with their local Branch or Network.

Such a person would not have rights to participate in our elections, but would be able to participate in every other respect as if they were a member who had not yet paid this year's subscriptions. They couldn't be a Committee Member at a Branch either.

Our hope is that by reading Focus and being a part of a network or branch, these people will want to more fully participate in our organisation's future.

Discussion and implementation

This paper is being presented to the 2022 AGM so that it can be discussed. There will be a further period within which the Board will receive feedback on the proposal. The dates for this will be determined by the Board at its November 2022 meeting if the initial discussion leads to sufficient support to proceed.

If the Board receives feedback from Branches, Networks or individual members who feel that the proposal cannot be supported without significant alteration, then the Board will call a Special Meeting of Members sometime from April 2023 to June 2023 so that further discussion and perhaps a decision can occur.

If, however, feedback from everyone is consistently supportive, the Board will release a final policy statement before the end of June 2023. This will clarify our collective obligations and expectations, without the need to hold a Special Meeting of Members.

Call for Applications | Expressions of Interest in Blind Citizens NZ World Blind Union Country Delegate Positions Rose Wilkinson, Chief Executive

Blind Citizens NZ is New Zealand's country member to the World Blind Union (WBU). The number of delegates (representatives) assigned to country members is based on the country's population. As New Zealand's country member to the WBU, Blind Citizens NZ holds two delegate (representative) positions. While each of these positions differs in terms of the status given to them, it is important to recognise the work these two delegates carry out is complementary and requires them to work together. Each of the two positions must be held by an Ordinary Member (voting | financial) of Blind Citizens NZ.

The Board is calling for applications for the primary Delegate | Representative position and expressions of interest in the secondary Delegate | Representative position. The status of these two positions is explained below. The closing date for both positions is 9am Friday 10 February 2023. You can apply for one or both positions. However, if applying for both positions you are required to submit separately for each position.

At its February meeting, the Board will finalise its approach and timeline towards addressing each of the two delegate positions. This will be conveyed to those who have submitted applications and | or expressions of interest. The Board will also determine the term of office for each of the two positions i.e. one to three years.

Applications – Primary WBU Representative | Delegate Position

Applicants must be aware the successful person appointed to the ‘primary’ position, if they are not already on the Board of Blind Citizens NZ as an elected member in their own right, that they will be co-opted to the Board. This is a constitutional requirement which in turn means the successful person becomes a Board Member and is obliged to attend Board meetings etc. The point of reference for this constitutional provision is Rule 6.3 “Co-opting Additional Board Members”.

Applicants should be certain to request in the first instance, the position description. It is also advisable to obtain a copy of the position description for Board Members. Each of these documents set out the respective skills, requirements and attributes the Board believes necessary for the person in this role. Applicants shortlisted for this position will be interviewed by a sub-committee of the Board of Blind Citizens NZ.

Expressions of Interest, Secondary WBU Representative | Delegate Position

When submitting an expression of interest in the secondary position, please be certain to request the position description from our National Office. This sets out skills, requirements and attributes the Board believes necessary for the person in this role and should be aligned to your expression of interest. As set out in the position description there are reporting requirements to the Board of Blind Citizens NZ.

However, there are no governance implications – these apply only to the primary position. Interviews are not a requirement of those people submitting an expression of interest in the secondary position.

Where to send applications and expressions of interest: these are to be submitted to Blind Citizens NZ's National Office via either of the following two options:

- Email to: admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz
- Post to: PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242

Awhina House Lessons Not Learned by Mary Schnackenberg

Editor's note: Mary Schnackenberg is a long-serving member of Blind citizens NZ and secretary of Auckland Branch. She takes us through the history of Awhina House, Blind Low Vision NZ's main Auckland premises for the past 26 years or so. Awhina House is set to be demolished and, as you'll read, disappointingly little has been communicated about its replacement.

As I write, Awhina House may still be standing. I don't know because communications to members about it and its replacement are next to non-existent. So why am I feeling so devastated? Why should I care?

From about April 1996 until the end of September 2022, Awhina House was the head office of the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind.

The RNZFB is now trading as Blind Low Vision NZ so I will refer to them as BLVNZ in this article. But first, a little pre-Awhina House background.

Prior to 1964, the BLVNZ head office and the school for blind students were located in the Jubilee Building at 545 Parnell Road. In 1964, the school moved out to Homai. Adjacent to the Jubilee Building was the gymnasium which in 1976 was knocked down and replaced by a social hall. For many years, these buildings provided spaces for what we often refer to as peer support, blind people helping each other to live full and independent lives.

During the early 1990s, plans were made for what became known as Awhina House. At the time Awhina House was designed and built, I was Manager Library Services, and I followed the process closely. It took place prior to the UN Disability Convention, the New Zealand Disability Strategy and the creation of the RNZFB Constitution that upholds the principle of self-determination (Tino Rangatiratanga) of blind people. But in formulating the design of Awhina House, I remember exemplary engagement and consultation with management, staff and consumer organisations.

“Nothing about us without us” was in action. The entity responsible for property in those days, the Bledisloe Estate Trust (now Foundation Properties Ltd) went offshore to look at some blindness facilities and produced a report, available in all formats, that discussed design considerations and features. I even remember being part of the team who selected the architect from the companies who pitched for the chance to design the new building.

The design of Awhina House was to be in two separate and distinct parts. In one, there was space for the Library, Equipment Services, the computer department, rehabilitation and administration, and shared bookable meeting rooms. Several blindness consumer organisations, including Kāpō Māori Aotearoa (previously Ngāti Kāpo O Aotearoa) and Blind Citizens NZ, also had space.

In the other part of the building, the Recreation (Rec) Centre and the Cafeteria served as social and recreation areas. These spaces were perceived from the outset as common areas available for use by staff and consumer organisations, large and small. They were a place where people could meet, including their families and sighted supporters when appropriate. The gym, previously on the top floor of the sheltered workshops was relocated into purpose designed space in Awhina House where it was used by staff as well as members and clients.

One group, the blind indoor bowlers, wanted recreational space. Surely, it was argued, there were suitable facilities around Auckland to accommodate them. Senior management went on the hunt and could not find anywhere close to public transport that blind bowlers could congregate in, play their bowls, store their equipment, access kitchen facilities, and feel safe and included. So, their needs were respected and formed the basis of the size of the Rec Centre with lockable storage cupboards along one wall.

Other sports groups recognised just how close the Parnell site is to the Auckland Domain and asked to be able to congregate, store their gear, and be able to access the domain for outdoor sport if necessary. Later Goalball was introduced and the space designed for the bowlers was used for goalball training and games. A whole range of social activities took place after hours and at weekends, not disturbing working staff.

There was a store room in the basement, known to some as The Boys' Room or the bunker. Inside, down a six-inch step designed to catch any sighted person who did not switch on the light quickly, was a massive refrigerator that held all kinds of bottles and cans of this and that with two door locks to secure the contents owned by the two major clubs who needed this storage.

From the outset, Awhina House was designed to be an appropriate building for accommodating staff and delivering services, as well as providing club rooms for current and future blindness groups to easily be able to run their activities. The two functions did not impact on each other, as simple security cards would let people go only where they were allowed to go.

That design proved to be fantastically successful. Blindness groups, run largely by blind people on our own, could continue to function much as we have done on the Parnell site as far back as people could remember. We could run regular events knowing that the gear we needed would be safely in a lockable storeroom or cupboard and we would not have to worry about transporting stuff in and out. Blind people volunteering for these roles could get on with running the activities without having to jump lots of hurdles which we would have faced if we were using community facilities. BLVNZ clients could also become familiar with the building so could come and go and use building facilities with a maximum of independence.

The whole design process meant everyone knew what was coming. There were models and diagrams openly available. The groups were so excited to see what was created that a number of them made significant donations to buy tables, chairs and so on. The Auckland Branch of Blind Citizens NZ put up \$5,000 in cash which paid for one third of the PA system in the Cafeteria and Rec Centre. A couple of us as consumers worked with the senior audio technician in the library to choose what we felt would be a great PA system for that facility.

So why am I devastated about what has happened?

In September 2018, the RNZFB Board announced that BLVNZ premises would be moving to the retirement village complex. Awhina House would be pulled down, and BLVNZ would move to the ground floor of the first building with its frontage on Parnell Road.

In November 2020, BLVNZ management agreed to several requests made by Auckland consumer organisations and we were promised ongoing engagement as design progressed. There was a sense of optimism that although the needs of our groups were changing, we could expect great things from the new facility. We were also promised Awhina House would not close until the new building was ready for us to move into. These promises have not been honoured and we have told this to the RNZFB Board.

Even while Awhina House remained standing, the Auckland Branch of Blind Citizens NZ has in recent times faced restrictions carrying on our meetings and regular activities. In 2020, COVID-19 government restrictions caused BLVNZ management to withdraw our security card access to Awhina House. That was reasonable at the time, but our access has still not been reinstated even though Government relaxed those measures in February this year.

We were also confined to using the Rec Centre and banned from the Cafeteria, which had previously been a common area. That was said to be so staff could have a secure social space because COVID-19 was still in the community, even though there was already plenty of secure space elsewhere in the building for staff to use.

We thought the security guards that were originally employed to check vaccine passes would no longer be needed, but they remained, now to keep an eye on us when carrying out our normal group activities. No evidence has been produced to show blind people are in some kind of danger if not supervised. If our meetings lasted more than four hours, we had to pay for the guards' time at \$50.00 per hour over and above the four hours. At least that decision was overturned by the RNZFB Board. New Zealand employers who are being urged to employ blind and low vision people should be safe in the knowledge that BLVNZ management does not trust us to manage our own behaviours and security as we have done for many years.

In the 90s, such care went into designing Awhina House for its diverse groups of users. Now, while its replacement is being established, our Branch has seen none of that. The lack of consultation and information is appalling. I fear the learnings from the collaborative process that stood Awhina House in good stead all these years won't be carried through.

I'm the Branch Secretary and about this time, I have in previous years known and booked the dates of our general meetings. I like to be organised and take pride in keeping Branch members up to date. But I haven't a clue when the new facilities will be open next year. We've been told it's February.

Will the facilities be suitable? Will they support all our activities? Will we have simple secure access like we used to? Will we have storage so we don't have to taxi stuff in and out for each event? Will we be scrutinised by security guards? Can we have a quiet drink after our meetings as we used to? When I find out, I'll be able to let our Auckland Branch members know.

Note: Focus approached the BLVNZ Chief Executive John Mulka to give Management an opportunity to comment on the points raised in the article about a lack of engagement and consultation regarding the new premises and restrictions the Auckland Branch has faced in its activities.

John Mulka responded as follows:

“It would be unfair and inappropriate for me to comment on all the noted items without first having dialogue with the groups in Auckland so at this point I cannot comment in some detail. What I will share is that Awhina House was decommissioned on 1 October and the structure is due to be demolished so many of the items you noted are now not relevant, and do not apply to new spaces going forward. Further the presence of a third party on site during usage of all Blind Low Vision NZ facilities across the country is at the full expense of the organisation and has no linkage to the former Covid mandates and

restrictions, but has everything to do with the health, safety and wellbeing of the groups who use our buildings in non-business hours.”

The response also conveyed excitement about multiple new facilities and renovations throughout the Auckland region, including regarding the Parnell site: “we are excited by the new modern, fit for purpose space that we will move our offices into in the early part of 2023.”

A new or refreshed Strategic Plan for Blind Citizens NZ Rose Wilkinson Chief Executive

The life of our organisational 2021-2023 Strategic Plan (Plan) is nearing an end. This work has been on the Board’s radar for some time noting the Plan is considered in some way at every scheduled Board meeting. At its November meeting, the Board set time aside to reflect on the entirety of the current Plan. Its initial thinking on this occasion is that incremental as opposed to major change is required. However, the Board wants, and needs to hear from members, Branches and Networks before it makes any decisions.

The current Strategic Plan is included in this Focus issue for your reference. The Board is asking if this was to be refreshed, what are the areas you would see needing to be addressed? Alternatively, if you feel an entirely new Plan is the way to go, the Board needs to hear reasons for this approach and suggestions as to what would be included in a new Plan.

The Board is setting time aside at its March 2023 meeting to receive and consider feedback, and determine its approach. Timing is everything! To be considered by the Board at its March meeting, all feedback must reach Blind Citizens NZ’s National Office no later than 9am, Wednesday 1 March 2023.

Aside from the usual feedback mechanisms (details below), there will be two ZOOM hui where members can join in and share their feedback. If you are interested in joining one of these ZOOM hui, contact our National Office and let us know. You do not need to have a computer or mobile (smart) phone to use ZOOM. A landline phone works just as well. The dates the ZOOM hui will be held are:

- Thursday 16 February, 4pm-5pm; and
- Tuesday 21 February, 6pm-7pm.

Feedback can also be provided and is welcomed via any of the following options:

- Email to: admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz;
- Phone: 0800 222 694, selecting option 1;
- Post: PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242.

Here now is the Strategic Plan 2021-2023...

Blind Citizens NZ Strategic Plan, 2021-2023 Implemented 1 July 2020

Purpose

Blind Citizens NZ exists to give voice to the aspirations and lived experiences of blind, deafblind, low vision, and vision-impaired people living in New Zealand.

Vision

Every blind, deafblind, low vision, and vision-impaired person is choosing the life they live.

In the context of this document, the word “blind” encompasses all those who are blind, deafblind, low vision, or vision-impaired, or who use any other blindness term that describes them, who can identify with our goals.

Values

We value:

- respect for the different ways each of us responds to the challenges of blindness;
- the shared learning and support received from the lived experiences of others;
- adherence to democratic principles that ensure our representations are broadly based;
- commitment to sustained effort in our advocacy;
- constructive, cooperative and mutually supportive relationships with other disability organisations;
- the principles and opportunities afforded by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the New Zealand Disability Strategy;
- our history and the role we have played in the lives of blind people since 1945.

Goal 1: Blind people live in an accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

- We will advocate on the grounds of human rights and equity to those whose laws, regulations, operations, activities, attitudes or products create barriers to our full participation in society.

Goal 2: The community's response to blindness is reflected in affirmative actions and attitudes.

- We will create greater community awareness and education around the abilities and capabilities of blind people to participate fully in society;
- We will always portray blind people in a positive light.

Goal 3: Blind people advocate on both a personal and systemic level.

- We will provide and support advocacy training;

- We will demonstrate through collective action, how blind people can improve their life, and the lives of others.

Goal 4: Blind people receive the services they need to approach everyday life with independence, confidence and dignity.

- We will assess blindness and disability services to ensure they are meeting the needs and expectations of blind people;
- We will advocate for a better experience for blind people using publicly available services;
- We will advocate for improvement in both quantity and quality of service where there is evidence of unmet need.

Goal 5: Blind Citizens NZ is recognised for its leadership in the blind community, and as a leading Disabled People's Organisation.

- We will work with Government and our disability sector partners (including the Disabled People's Organisations Coalition) to translate the rights conferred under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Disability Strategy and the Disability Action Plan into tangible and practical outcomes;
- We will actively support like-minded international organisations that advance the cause of blind people throughout the world (including the World Blind Union).

Goal 6: Blind Citizens NZ is a listening, receptive and responsive organisation that encourages people to belong.

- We will maintain a consistent flow of information to the blind community, and seek every opportunity to engage with them about the impact of blindness on their lives;
- We will promote and provide a safe and welcoming environment within our branches and networks for activities that encourage social interaction, peer support and the sharing of information and advice.

Goal 7: Blind Citizens NZ is recognised for what it adds to the blind community and society.

- We will actively promote the benefits of joining our organisation to the blind community;
- We will demonstrate that we are a dynamic and constructive Disabled People's Organisation worthy of everyone's support.

Cyril White Memorial Fund Closing Date for Applications – 1 February 2023

The Cyril White Memorial Fund facilitates funding opportunities that encourage and cultivate leadership skills and qualities among blind, and vision impaired people. Blind Citizens NZ, together with Blind Low Vision NZ, is responsible for publicising these opportunities. The next round for applications closes 4pm, 1 February 2023.

To provide some context about the fund, Cyril White was a pioneer in the blindness advocacy movement. His passion and legacy led to the establishment of the Cyril White Memorial Fund following his death in 1984.

Eligibility of applicants is primarily for those people who meet the requirements for full registration with Blind Low Vision NZ. In addition, projects that are likely to be of direct benefit or interest to blind and vision-impaired people are eligible for consideration.

If you have a project or activity and want to find out whether this meets the fund criteria, do not hesitate to contact us for full details. Then if you do make an application you can be confident you have ticked all the required boxes. Most of all, that eligibility criteria are met.

Applications to the Cyril White Memorial Fund must be received by 4pm, Wednesday 1 February 2023. These should be for the attention of: Cyril White Fund, C/ Blind Citizens NZ, PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242.

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. 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
- **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
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- **Website:** <http://www.blindcitizensnz.org.nz>
- **Facebook Page:** <https://www.facebook.com/BlindCitizensNZ/>
- **Email:** admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz
- **Chief Executive:** Rose Wilkinson:
rwilkinson@blindcitizensnz.org.nz

All the very best for Christmas and the New Year to our readers, from the Board and staff of Blind Citizens 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

If undelivered within 14 days please return to
Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand inc.
PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242.

