



Blind Citizens NZ

# Focus

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## **Welcome to the October 2023 Focus** **Áine Kelly-Costello - Focus Editor**

We're three quarters of the way through 2023, where did that go? Aotearoa celebrated Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori the week of 11 September. I was thinking how much I appreciate the growing number of audio resources which make learning te reo, and learning about the connected foundations like tikanga, the country's history of colonisation and Te Tiriti o Waitangi much more accessible for many in our community. I'd like to delve into these in a future edition so if you have recommendations or would like to write something on this kaupapa please email [focus.abcnz@gmail.com](mailto:focus.abcnz@gmail.com).

In the middle of October, two events of high interest to us happen pretty much on top of each other, those being the Blind Citizens NZ national AGM and Conference and the 2023 General Election.

Regarding the former, it's not too late to register for the AGM and Conference. Ways to do this and participate are in this Focus edition.

As for the latter, your Focus Editor is heavily enmeshed in politics and has strong opinions about which parties measure up on disability and genuinely care about people. But all I'll say here is that this election is on a knife edge between two very different-looking government make-ups so your vote really is consequential. If you go to [policy.nz](http://policy.nz) and do a word search for "community and inclusion", you'll find summaries of the Parties' disability policies under that category. And don't miss the article in this edition from Blind Citizens NZ's Chief Executive about the organisation's ongoing work for us to have an independent vote, and how to register for Telephone Dictation Voting.

This edition also delves into representations of blind people in service provider communications, attitudes to accessibility and more. Enjoy!

Email me at [focus.abcnz@gmail.com](mailto: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](mailto:focus@blindcitizensnz.org.nz)

## **Let's not settle for subpar representation**

### **Editorial - Áine Kelly-Costello, Focus Editor**

Blindness service providers talk about blindness in public a lot. Whether it's to market their services to those who may benefit from them, or to fundraise given that they're habitually forced to operate under a charity model, every public message they send by definition frames blindness or blind people in one way or another. These messages can reach a broad audience, from people who may not know a single blind person, to people currently losing their vision. This makes it particularly important that they portray us, as blind community, in accurate, empowering and dignified ways.

I don't think an inventory of Blind Low Vision NZ's public-facing communications exists anywhere--and I certainly don't have access to one so can't accurately comment on a trend. But I have noticed a number of communications over the past couple years which concern me about a lack of guidance or oversight from blind people ourselves. Here are a few examples.

Last year, a fundraising email seeking \$1,000-dollar donations shared a story about a member who felt much safer and more independent with a guide dog. At the same time, the email managed to portray cane travel as inherently riskier, by providing no context around her story. It described her using her cane and falling down stairs "alarmingly often", losing her independence and it being "too dangerous" to continue her regular volunteer activities and travelling to see family. It's likely that a guide dog is indeed the better mobility aid for this member, but canes are an equally valid and - when used correctly - safe, option. That's a message our blindness service provider shouldn't be undermining.

Here are a couple of BLVNZ Facebook ads that left me uncomfortable.

"Imagine if you lost your sight," one offers. "For a child, their sight is how they learn about so much of the world around them. Without specialist support, they may never learn essential skills like dressing themselves or brushing their teeth. Some children with vision loss may even be too afraid to go outside. Give help to children with vision loss."

And another one:

"Little five-year-old Saoirse has an incurable eye condition. Without specialist support, children like her won't just lose their sight – they'll lose their confidence and independence, too. Will you help?"

It's accurate, I think, to recognise that societal expectations of blind kids are low enough that some parents may genuinely land up depriving blind kids of basic skills and autonomy. But these ads are playing into pity. They suggest that you imagine yourself or perhaps your child being deprived with BLVNZ the only option to save them. They could instead have sent a positive message about the full and happy lives blind kids can lead with the right support. Also, "children with vision loss" isn't a widely used term among our community; we tend to use blind, low vision or vision impaired. Many (not all) kids have not lost vision but never had any more of it than they currently do to begin with.

Speaking of pity, two (sighted, but disabled) friends in different cities independently shared, unprompted, that they'd in recent months had BLVNZ fundraising volunteers door-knock them and portray blind folks with pity and in need of the benevolent support of kind donors and BLVNZ. It's on the fundraising teams to ensure volunteers are able to tell a different story, about how funding guide dog training, Braille transcription, tech support and the rest, gives blind people the tools, access and skills we need to thrive.

In another example, BLVNZ recently ran an ad campaign designed to attract the attention of older people starting to lose their sight.

Its main video ad shows some blurry text, presumably trying to mimic the difficulty of seeing text clearly as one's vision starts to go, and the voiceover is done with a synthesised voice. It starts off promisingly. "We're Blind Low Vision NZ. It's our mission to provide tools for people to live a full and happy life." Then, it has a go at humour: "even if that life means seeing unsubtle ads like this one. We need to be as clear as possible, because, well, it's fairly obvious. We're even using an automated voice that blind and low vision people can use to really ram home the point."

Even if whatever it is that's meant to be 'obvious' and whatever the point to be rammed home is visually apparent, the framing strikes me as an awkward beating around the bush, rather than a friendly call-out to people who might be reluctant to admit to themselves that a bit of assistance adapting to their vision loss would come in useful. The ad finishes by directing people to BLVNZ's website, not without a final stab at humour. "It's very, very easy to read," the automated voice proclaims. "Ha ha ha."

What is so funny about a blindness service provider doing the minimum of providing a legible website is a mystery, from which I can only interpret discomfort or unease about being reliant on accessibility measures on the part of the ad writers. Finally, this campaign's slogan is "See a way". One of the associated Facebook ads entreats the benevolent reader to "Help those people with difficulties to see a way." I commented on that patronising reference to people with low vision, but got no reply, and continued to see the ad pop up in the following days.

Blind Citizens NZ's National President Jonathan Godfrey says that the "damage done by such crass language in these examples undermines so much of the good work done in providing services. We keep being told that one of the greatest barriers we face is the attitude towards blind people." To that end, Blind Citizens NZ's strategic plan states that "We will always portray blind people in a positive light."

## **RNZFB Board response**

I sought comment from Chair of the RNZFB Board Clive Lansink who states: "BLVNZ is always conscious of the need to portray blindness and blind, deafblind and low vision people positively in the media[...] this extends to our everyday communications with the public, social media communications and job vacancy advertisements.

"From time to time, directors may become aware that a given advertisement or activity has caused some upset, and we always take such instances seriously. It is important that we all learn from such instances.

"There are no Board level policies that directly focus on how BLVNZ should communicate about blind people. However, having delegated to the Chief Executive full responsibility for running BLVNZ in a way that meets international best practice, one of the Board's most important functions is to monitor the organisation's activities on behalf of clients and other stakeholders and draw the Chief Executive's attention to any concerns. We fully appreciate that not only do our staff have to raise a lot of funds from the public to pay for services the government won't pay for, but they also have to raise awareness and understanding of blindness issues and attract the attention of people in the community who might not be aware that they could benefit from our services. Furthermore, they must do this in a way that does not undermine the organisation's mission. From time to time there may be publicity events that miss the mark and don't meet the expectations of directors, and in such cases we would certainly discuss our concerns with the Chief Executive."

On Blind Citizens NZ's BlindDiscuss email list, Mr Lansink provided an example of the Board doing so at the start of the year when a vacancy advertisement referred to blind people as "vulnerable". Mr Lansink would "encourage clients and other stakeholders to make their feelings known if they are concerned or upset by something in our publicity."

## **We can do better**

For all the diversity we have in the blind community, I think that if we were in charge of setting guidance and direction over BLVNZ's public communications, the tone would not veer off course in these ways. The Board's current approach of only raising issues if they happen to have their attention drawn to them leaves a lot to chance.

Designing communications that speak to the tools and skills service providers can offer without wandering into saviour, pity or belittling territory does require nuance and effort. But given that many in the wider public may set some store by how the country's largest blindness service provider portrays the lives of those it serves, I'd argue this is effort well spent.

## **Accessibility and taking chances**

### **Jonathan Godfrey - Blind Citizens NZ**

### **National President**

Kenilworth Castle is a ruin, and even for the sighted, it is hard to see what it was like when it was in use from the 13th to the 17th centuries. Obviously, the Castle is not in New Zealand, and neither was I when the deadline for this column was approaching. I'm based at the University of Warwick for a couple of weeks, and my hosts took me and another visitor to Kenilworth and then to Stratford-upon-Avon (the supposed birthplace of Shakespeare) on Saturday. I then sat around drinking coffee all day on Sunday with my statistically and community-minded host, her husband, and a retired mathematician who I've only met online until now

The day out was pleasant in so many ways, and was a break from sitting around with a group of nerds doing programming. It's been a while since I cracked 20,000 steps in a day. The ruined castle had an audio guide with descriptions of what the various areas are thought to have been used for.

Unlike my hosts, I had my own earpiece to plug into the audio guide so walking and listening was much easier for me than for them. My hosts made sure I had every sign read to me, commented on what they could see off in the distance, and answered piles of questions. We had to park plenty of questions for our return to a place where we could search the internet. They made sure I touched everything within reach and finally that the gift shop maximised its opportunity to empty my wallet. I didn't, but the replica broadsword was really tempting; such a pity I had doubts about the size of my suitcase. The kitset trebuchet would have to do.

This attraction was extremely accessible to me. I definitely soaked up about as much information as I could manage, but it relied on the company I was keeping. Not everyone wants to read every last word on display so I was listening for any signs that my host was running out of enthusiasm. A ruin is not going to be physically accessible to all comers though. The ground is rough, the steps are worn and seriously uneven, the doorways in places were a bit shorter than me, and some of the handrails were out of reach for a shorter person. It is what it is though, and you can't make a ruin accessible without ruining it as a ruin, and therefore as an attraction for the masses. This idea that you can't and shouldn't always make everything totally accessible featured a lot in discussions I was having during my UK sojourn.

So why am I here in the UK? I'm not here to be a tourist I assure you. Many of you will know that I was the first totally blind person to gain employment as a lecturer in statistics. There are plenty of other blind people using the same software as me, and some that have as much technical skill as a statistician. I was described as a "scarce resource" by the aforementioned retired mathematician during one of our conversations recently. While I might find that terminology a bit strange, the fact that I was fully funded to be here says to me that someone thinks I was the blind person they wanted. I joined a group of people who all have a common interest in improving the software we use to do our jobs.



Some attendees were self-funded, some attendees had to take time off work, and some people were pressured to participate due to the roles they have in maintaining software systems. Fortunately, I haven't needed to take time off work to be here because these activities fit within my job description. I've been able to work with gurus to address the few irritations novice blind users of this software experience when they are compelled to take a course in statistics at university. It seems to me though that if I'd sat down with the same people ten years ago, we'd have found the same solutions. The understanding of accessibility and the needs of disabled people didn't exist then, or at least not to the same extent; if this event had been held ten years ago, I wouldn't have been invited.

Ten years ago, I was unable to meet these people though and so my ability to raise accessibility and the specific needs of blind users was limited to writing articles and email messages. I've attended conferences over the last ten years and spoken about the needs of blind users over and over, and it seems the message has gotten through. I even heard two people sitting at a nearby table discussing the issues with continuing to provide documents in pdf rather than using HTML, with specific reference to screen readers.

I managed to get myself over to that conversation and wondered if they wanted to know anything; the response was a firm "no" because "you've been telling us this stuff for over ten years Jonathan". I took myself back to my work station, thus separating the choir from the preacher.

I came to this event with an idea that I would be needing to push for the needs of blind users of the software and the needs of all disabled people who wish to participate in this community. My greatest "wow" moment of the event was when one of the gurus told me that he wanted my help before he took his pet project much further.

"Jonathan, I want this to be accessible from the start, and I need your advice please."

This is possibly the most awesome thing a disability advocate can ever hear. Disability issues at the front of an initiative, not some after-thought.

A common problem raised itself during discussions with support staff at the University of Warwick and then with someone from a Scottish university; they know accessibility is important, but they don't know how to deliver accessible scientific and mathematical content, and they don't have any blind students to test solutions on (yet). Perhaps the greatest irritation for me is that the solutions have been available for such a long time yet seldom used due to a complete lack of awareness of the right tools. This is an international problem that we face in NZ too. Intriguingly though, blind students in some European countries do not suffer anywhere nearly as much as those of us in English-speaking countries because the Braille system they use is more closely integrated with the systems used to create printed science and mathematical documents. Furthermore, the eight dot Braille system used in some countries is advantageous because they do not need a distinct Braille code for displaying mathematics, and another system for making nice equations for their sighted audiences.

Whether it is a visit to a ruined castle or a meeting of programmers, you have to be there to get full benefit, and to have full impact. The same is true for much of the work done by Blind Citizens NZ at national and local levels. Sometimes we take a punt on whether the meeting will lead to successful outcomes. If you want to roll a six, you must pick up the dice. You must be prepared to roll a few ones along the way.

Sometimes though, you must look at the situation and ask if the dice are loaded against you. You won't get a six if you only get to nudge it around a bit instead of picking it up and giving it a good shake. So, do you fight for the dice to be changed, or do you decide to walk away until someone else changes them for you?

We are fortunate that in today's climate, as individuals and as an organisation, there are plenty of opportunities out there to choose among. We must still hold on to the principles, but we can decide where to air them. We must also discover if we are exploring a ruin or creating something new and exciting.

## **How secret is your vote in this year's General Election**

**Rose Wilkinson, Chief Executive**

Political parties are well underway with their respective 2023 General Election campaigns, informing voters about their policies, stances and aspirations if they become Government. This is a great opportunity to provide some history about Telephone Dictation Voting and how this came about. Perhaps most important is what this actually means for the population of voters who are blind, deafblind, vision impaired, or have low vision (blind people).

Guided by the voice of our members and others in the blind community, Blind Citizens NZ advocated long and hard for an 'accessible' voting option that ensured the independence, confidence and dignity of blind people voting in elections. Telephone Dictation Voting in general elections is the result of Blind Citizens NZ's advocacy. We recognise there were many others who supported our efforts. This ensured the success benefitted blind people, as well as individuals unable to independently complete a voting paper without assistance in general elections. The success of the pilot in the 2014 General Election is why Telephone Dictation Voting remains an option for voters today – an option for blind people to cast an independent secret vote with confidence and dignity.

At the same time as Telephone Dictation Voting was piloted, Blind Citizens NZ's advocacy contributed to the Electoral Commission recognising the need for information about enrolling and voting in general elections to be accessible to disabled people.

The Electoral Commission continues to uphold its commitment, and provides information about enrolling and voting for blind people in large print, Braille, audio and electronically.

Blind Citizens NZ urges you to give Telephone Dictation Voting a try in this year's General Election. While blind voters can go to a polling booth and have someone of your choice to assist cast your vote, using Telephone Dictation to cast your vote offers a great experience. Early voting is open now and the next article has the information you need to register for and vote using Telephone Dictation.

## **Vote by Telephone Dictation at the 2023 General Election**

**Note to readers:** information in this article is from the Electoral Commission. The term 'partially blind' is used. This includes and | or refers to people who identify as low vision, deafblind or vision-impaired. The Electoral Commission must use the term 'partially blind' because that is how the criteria is referred to in legislation.

Telephone Dictation Voting in the 2023 General Election started on Wednesday 27 September. It ends at 7pm (NZ time) on election day, Saturday 14 October.

If you're unable to mark your voting paper without assistance you may be able to cast a secret vote by telephone dictation.

### **Who is eligible for telephone dictation voting?**

Anyone who is enrolled to vote and is blind, partially blind or has a physical disability that prevents them from marking their voting paper without assistance is eligible to vote by Telephone Dictation at the 2023 General Election.

If you live overseas or are overseas temporarily, you will also need to be one of the following:

- NZ Citizen who has visited NZ within the last 6 years;

- Permanent Resident of NZ who has visited within the last 4 years
- A Public Servant, Member of the NZ Defence Force or a family member who is travelling with them.

For more information on eligibility to vote from overseas visit [Enrol from overseas | Vote NZ](#) (or <https://tinyurl.com/367rsfup>)

## **Register to vote by telephone dictation**

If you're eligible and would like to vote by Telephone Dictation, then you need to register before you vote.

You can call to register from Monday to Saturday from 9am (NZ time) until 7pm (NZ time). Registration opened on Monday, 11 September and closes at noon (NZ time) Saturday 14 October.

To register you call:

- 0800 028 028 from within NZ or
- +64 4 471 2000 from overseas. Please note international calling rates may apply.

When you call to register you need to select option 1.

If you haven't registered by noon (NZ time) Saturday 14 October, you won't be able to vote using Telephone Dictation this time, However, you can still vote:

- In New Zealand at any voting place from Monday 2 October until 7pm on election day, Saturday 14 October.
- From overseas, by downloading and uploading your voting papers from [vote.nz/overseas](http://vote.nz/overseas) by 7pm (NZ time) Saturday 14 October.

When you register for Telephone Dictation Voting you will be asked to choose a secret question and answer which only you know. You can choose from one of three secret questions:

- The name of your first primary school.
- The name of your first pet.
- The name of the street where you grew up.

You will be given a personal registration number once you have registered. Your registration number can be sent to you by email, text message, given to you over the phone, or someone can call you back. Make sure you're ready to record your personal registration number if you want to receive it over the phone.

Your registration number and secret question are used to confirm that you're already registered when you call back to vote without giving your name to the electoral official. Please don't tell anyone your secret question or the answer to it until you call back to vote.

You'll need to know your registration number and the answer to your secret question when you call back to vote.

## **How to vote by telephone dictation**

If you're registered to vote by Telephone Dictation, you can vote from Wednesday 27 September by calling:

- 0800 028 028 from within New Zealand; or
- +64 4 471 2000 from overseas. Please note international call rates may apply.

When you call to cast your vote, you will need to select option 2.

Once you're connected to an electoral official you will be asked to provide your registration number. Do not give your name to the electoral official – they won't know your identity and your vote is secret. The electoral official will then ask you to answer the secret question you selected when registering.

The electoral official will read out a list of the political parties and the names of each candidate standing in your electorate. They will mark your voting paper according to your instructions.

A second electoral official will confirm that the voting papers have been marked according to your instructions.

You can phone to cast your vote from Wednesday 27 September, Monday to Saturday from 9am to 7pm (NZ time) until Saturday 14 October. Your last chance to vote is on election day, Saturday 14 October from 9am to 7pm (NZ time).

## **Enrol to vote**

You must be enrolled to make your vote count.

Information about enrolling to vote for disabled people is available at [vote.nz](http://vote.nz) or Freephone 0800 36 76 56.

When you register to vote for the Telephone Dictation service, the electoral official can help with questions about enrolling or enrol you to vote.

## **Challenging Others, Challenging Ourselves Blind Citizens NZ's 2023 AGM and Conference**

As this Focus edition reaches you, our 2023 AGM and Conference will be days away... While the closing date has passed, it is possible to receive late registrations for daily in-person attendance and for those preferring Zoom. If you wish to stay where the event is being held at the Naumi Auckland Airport Hotel, registering through our National Office needs to happen urgently. You should email [admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz](mailto:admin@blindcitizensnz.org.nz) or phone us on 0800 222 694.

The official programme for our 2023 AGM and Conference starts at 9am Friday 13 October, and finishes following the dinner on Saturday evening, 14 October. If you are registering to stay at the hotel, this includes accommodation and dinner for Thursday night, and breakfast Friday morning. On Thursday afternoon 12 October, for in-person attendees there are opportunities for interested members to come together in an informal setting, to hear about, discuss and | or contribute to the following topics.

Anyone interested in the following informal activities on Thursday afternoon should contact our National Office and let us know please:

- Blind Citizens NZ's Te Tiriti o Waitangi mahi (2:30pm-4pm);
- the importance of Braille and Blind Citizens NZ establishing a Braille Special Interest Network (4:05pm-5:05pm); and
- Guide Dog Handlers and Blind Citizens NZ's Special Interest Network (5:10pm-6:10pm).

During the opening we welcome the Mangere Bridge School Kapa Haka group. Then we have an array of guest presenters each speaking to our theme 'Challenging Others, Challenging Ourselves'... In no particular order and excluding their respective topics, presenters include:

- Paula Tesoriero – Chief Executive Whaikaha (official opening);
- Paul Hutcheson - Paul operates his own mediation business;
- Prudence Walker - Kaihautū Tika Hauātanga Disability Rights Commissioner;
- Joy Lanini - National Manager Connections and Funding, Your Way | Kia Roha;
- Ben O'Meara – one of six Deputy Chief Executives to the Chief Executive Whaikaha | responsible of Policy, Strategy and Partnerships;
- Robbie Francis-Watene – Co-founder of the Lucy Foundation.
- Clive Lansink - Chair RNZFB Board of Directors.

If you are unable to join us in person, we encourage you to think about the Zoom option where you can join using technology or phone in. If you would like to know more, call our National Office on 0800 222 694.





**Announcing the outcome of Blind Citizens NZ 2023  
Scheduled Election  
Rose Wilkinson, Returning Officer**

Nominations for the two Member-at-Large positions closed at 4pm Thursday 24 August. Two nominations for the two Member-at-Large positions were received, these being from Andrea Courtney and Paula Waby. They are each declared duly elected uncontested and fill the two Member-at-Large positions.

The term of office for both candidates is three years. Their respective term commences immediately following the close of this year's AGM and Conference and will come to an end at the conclusion of Blind Citizens NZ's AGM (and Conference if held), in October 2026.

Congratulations go to Andrea and Paula on being re-elected to the Board of Blind Citizens NZ.

## Blind Citizens NZ – Board and National Office

### Board

- **National President:** Jonathan Godfrey: [a.j.godfrey@massey.ac.nz](mailto:a.j.godfrey@massey.ac.nz)
- **Members-at-Large:**
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  - ✓ Paula Waby: [paula.waby4@gmail.com](mailto:paula.waby4@gmail.com)

### Blind Citizens NZ Delegates to World Blind Union

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