**September 2016**

# Vision Australia Submission to the Standing Senate Committee on Economics Inquiry into the 2016 Census

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# Introduction

Vision Australia would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the 2016 Census. The views in this submission have been formed through our work supporting members of the community who are blind or have low vision as they sought to access information, and complete the Census. It includes their direct experiences.

Our experience of the 2016 Census was a mixed one. Overall, the ABS made clear efforts to consider how people who are blind or have low vision could complete the Census. However, their positive initiatives were not supported by clear and comprehensive information, a rigorous public communicatios campaign addressing people who required additional assistance, or effective internal processes. There were long delays in the provision of information, and of alternate format Census forms. This caused avoidable confusion and distress.

The shift to a primarily online Census form was only a contributing factor to this confusion. We do not address the issues of data collection, security, and retention that arose during the Census as these were not the primary concern in the contacts we received. Rather, Vision Australia requests that the Committee consider the positive steps taken by the ABS to ensure the 2016 Census was accessible, while acknowledging the failures in provision of information and alternate materials for members of the blindness and low vision community.

Vision Australia provided assistance to the ABS in the lead up to the 2016 Census. This took two forms: support to ensure the digital assets were accessible; and support to ensure the print materials were available in alternate formats. Additional information on this is provided below.

Additionally, Vision Australia makes the observation that shifts towards online methods of service delivery, including the potential of a secure system of electronic voting for national elections that has the public’s confidence, may have been unduly negatively impacted by the issues related to Census 2016. Vision Australia supports the development of accessible online systems that facilitate civic participation and social inclusion.

We call on the Committee to ensure that any recommendations emerging from this Inquiry take into account the outstanding need for the Australian Government to develop and implement a secure, integrated, accessible, and user friendly method for all online interactions, for future censuses, and other systems such as online voting – and to ensure that recommendations on solutions include consultation, trial and input by relevant disability groups such as Vision Australia.

We hope this submission is of use to the Committee as you consider the 2016 Census. Vision Australia would be pleased to provide additional information or support to the Committee should it be required.

# Terms of Reference

The preparation, administration and management on the part of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Government in the lead up to the 2016 Census

### Provision of Information

The ability to access and clarify information in the lead up to, during, and immediately following the Census was manifestly inadequate to meet the needs of the blindness and low vision community. While basic information was provided around accessibility and the change to an online Census form, the ability to seek clarification or obtain Census forms in alternate formats was highly constricted.

A key feature of the 2016 Census was the move to an online system. Older Australians are far less likely to use the internet; equally, vision loss is increasingly prevalent among older people. The majority of Australians who experience blindness and low vision do so after they turn 65 years old.

A recent survey conducted by Vision Australia found that only 19% of our clients over the age of 65 used the internet. Given this, it is particularly concerning that information was so difficult to obtain for people who are blind or have low vision.

### Telephone information service – 1300 214 531

As had been widely reported, the telephone information service was overwhelmed with contacts. This was of particular concern for the blindness and low vision community, who were required to contact the telephone system in order to access the 12-digit code for the Census, clarify information about the accessibility of the online forms, or request the Census form in an alternate format.

This affected a wide range of people who are blind or have low vision, many of whom were distressed by the lack of information immediately available to them. A sighted member of the community could access the website to find information; many in the blindness and low vision community relied on the telephone information service. People contacting Vision Australia reported they were unable to access the information service despite multiple attempts over a range of time periods.

Vision Australia spoke to people who were deeply distressed by the lack of information available; their anxiety was exacerbated by the threat of fines for not completing the Census on time. The abrupt message left on the service that people should call back later only added to this confusion. We had contacts from a range of other community organisations and local Councils who were seeking clarity on the arrangements for people who are blind or have low vision and were unable to obtain this from the ABS.

Vision Australia contacted the ABS to seek clarity on these and other matters. We were informed there were no plans to bring additional staff onto the telephone information service, that we should encourage people to try calling again in a few days, and not to worry about handing in the Census late. At the time, this contrasted with the public message implying that the Census must be completed on Census night and added to the confusion.

For future censuses there should be a dedicated telephone information service for people who require alternate formats or assistance to complete the Census. This should be separate from the general information service, and provide information about accessibility and advice on completing the Census if you are blind or have low vision or have other needs that require support for accessibility of information.

### 12-digit access code

It was unclear how people who are blind or have low vision could obtain their 12-digit access code. It was also unclear whether this number was necessary if using the braille form, or if each braille form came with its own pre-assigned 12-digit code. Even if a person who is blind or has low vision wanted to complete the Census online, there was no information provided about how to obtain the 12-digit code in an accessible, non-print format.

This is such an obvious omission that it is not easy to see how was overlooked. This frustration was increased as it was reasonably straightforward to have the login code sent by SMS or email – yet the ability to request it was not publicised, nor was it detailed on the FAQ for people who are blind or have low vision; another failing of the public information campaign. This problem was compounded by the difficulty accessing information on the telephone information service.

### Delays in distribution of materials

There were long delays in the distribution of alternate format Census forms. Despite registering and requesting the Census in a braille format, there were instances of people not receiving the braille Census package until three weeks after Census night. Others reported similar delays with large print versions of the Census. One person’s experience is outlined below:

"On Wednesday in the week before Census Night I phoned the Census Enquiry line to request a braille Census form and to find out how I could obtain my 12-digit login credential. The person who answered my call said that the 12-digit number could be sent to me by SMS and she referred that request to another section. She was unsure about the braille form and said that she would need to "escalate" the request and that someone would call me back. However, by Friday I had not received my 12-digit number nor had anyone called me back about the braille form. So I called the Census Enquiry line again. I was again advised that the 12-digit number could be sent to me by SMS but that someone would have to call me back about the braille form. I received an SMS with the 12-digit number soon after my call, but no-one has ever called me back about the braille form. Soon after Census Night I received a print paper form under my door, which I had not requested. Three weeks later I received the braille form - this was after I had completed the Census form online so the braille form was of no use at all by the time I received it.”

There was a lack of clarity on the process to be followed with alternate formats. The provision of standard paper Census forms was arranged through an automated telephone number; for alternate formats people were required to call the general enquiry line which experienced unreasonably long delays.

Following Census night, when it was clear there was an extension to the deadline, there was confusion over the manner in which the Census could be completed. People who had requested a braille Census form were still waiting for it to be delivered, and completed their Census online. There was confusion about the protocol – having ordered a braille form, people were unsure if they could still complete the online form. The ABS was unable to answer questions along this line of enquiry. It was also unclear if the braille forms could be completed in braille, or if they required a handwritten response.

### Advertising

Some public advertising material was inaccessible to the blind and low vision community, despite opportunities to provide it in an accessible format. For instance, video advertising in the Melbourne City Loop was conveyed using just the text on screen with the rotating ‘pause’ symbol associated with the Census. Adding audio to describe the text was available in these locations and would be a simple way to ensure people who are blind or have low vision were informed about the Census in this setting.

### Support offered

The ABS information on the support that could be provided to the blindness and low vision community was at times unclear and inaccurate. The information Vision Australia were asked to share stated that ‘Support is available for anyone who needs help completing the Census’, although it was not clear what form this support would take. These are important examples of the lack of critical detail available during the public information campaign that must be included in all future Census operations.

Callers to Vision Australia’s contact centre reported that the ABS advised them to contact Vision Australia for assistance in completing the Census form, which was not a service we were able to provide. It is unclear why the ABS directed callers to Vision Australia, yet it led to confusion for people seeking to resolve their concerns.

## The scope, collection, retention, security and use of data obtained in the 2016 Census

The experience of the 2016 Census highlights the need for a system that ensures and maintains the reputation and integrity of the system and process for online interaction with Government. This has flow on effects to other systems that enable the full participation of people who are blind or have low vision, such as electronic voting. Vision Australia contends that familiarity, trust, and public perceptions of system integrity are crucial to public engagement and uptake of online systems.

We do not have any comment to make on the technical aspects of this point, as it is not directly related to our expertise.

## Arrangements, including contractual arrangements, in respect of the information technology aspects of the Census

Vision Australia provided two services to the ABS in the lead up to the Census. The first centred on the accessibility of the online form. Vision Australia worked hard with the ABS, for a number of years, to address technical and end user accessibility of the digital, online census. The ABS certainly did not undertake this task lightly and displayed a commitment to digital accessibility from the outset. They achieved a very high level of accessibility against international standards and in accordance with the Digital Transformation Office’s Digital Service Standard.

Vision Australia conducted extensive technical and user based testing to ensure the online Census form met Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.0 (WCAG 2.0) to Level AA standards. The feedback we have received from the community indicated minor technical glitches dependent on the user’s operating system, but for the most part it was considered to be highly accessible with only minor concerns.

The second service involved support for the creation of Census forms in braille, large print, and audio versions on CD.

Prior to 9 August, we promoted the Census on Vision Australia Radio, our website, social media feeds, and community email lists. We relied on information provided by the ABS to do so. As noted above, there were some gaps in this information – particularly around obtaining the 12 digit pin in an accessible format.

Neither of these services was connected to data collection systems, security, or retention. They were conducted on a fee-for-service basis.

## The shutting down of the Census website on the evening of 9 August 2016, the factors leading to that shutdown and the reasons given, and the support provided by government agencies, including the Australian Signals Directorate

The closure of the Census website on the evening of August 9 caused additional inconvenience and disruption to our community, although the nature and extent of this impact is difficult to measure. As a result of the shutting down of the website, we had numerous contacts from community members who were concerned about completing the Census late, or the potential of a fine.

The message that was displayed on the Census website for several days after its functionality had been shut down referred to the system being "busy" and advised users to try again later. This was clearly an inaccurate message and it meant that many people kept trying to access the site when there was no possibility that they would be able to do so given that it had been shut down. A more helpful message would have lessened the degree of confusion and anxiety that our community experienced.

## The response rate to the Census and factors that may have affected the response rate

Vision Australia cannot speak to the response rate among the blind and low vision community. However, as noted above, the difficulty in accessing information and support for alternate formats made it difficult for them to complete the Census in a timely and appropriate manner. This may have affected the response rate among people who are blind or have low vision – anecdotally, some contacts suggested they found the process too difficult and confusing, and would not complete the Census as a result.

It is difficult to know the true impact the confusion around the Census may have had on response rates. Anything that discourages or increases the difficulty in providing a response to the Census among people with a disability is particularly concerning. We discuss the importance of accurately counting the number of people who are blind or have low vision below.

## Privacy concerns in respect of the 2016 Census, including the use of data linking, information security and statistical linkage keys

We do not have any comment to make on this point, as it is not directly relevant to our expertise.

## Australia’s Census of Population and Housing generally, including purpose, scope, regularity and cost and benefits

The need to accurately measure the range and number of people who are blind or have low vision means the Census is of enduring value. Accurately identifying data for each cohort of disability is crucial for determining Government and community programs and funding, and planning for services.

At present, the number of people experiencing vision loss is expected to rise substantially in coming years – the Census is a vital tool for identifying trends and changes in a population that requires specific supports and services. This highlights the need to provide suitable, timely, and easily accessible information in a range of formats to encourage completion of the Census.

## The adequacy of funding and resources to the ABS

As noted above, the telephone information line was under-resourced, and did not adequately fulfil its function. Vision Australia recommends that additional funding is provided to establish a dedicated line for people who require assistance, alternate formats and information about accessibility.

## Ministerial oversight and responsibility

We do not have any comment to make on this point, as it is not directly relevant to our experience during Census 2016.

## Any related matters

We have covered our contributions under the above Terms of Reference.

## About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. It was formed through the merger of several of Australia’s most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families. The service delivery areas include:

* early childhood
* orientation and mobility
* employment
* accessible information (including library services)
* recreation
* independent living
* Seeing Eye Dogs
* Registered service provider for the NDIS and the My Aged Care portal
* advocacy, and working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has gained unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with our over 26,000 clients and their families, and also through the involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the Organisation. Vision Australia is therefore well placed to provide advice to governments, business and the community on the challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant client consultative framework, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the Organisation to the Board and Management. Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 14.5% of total staff having vision impairment.

Vision Australia also has a formal liaison arrangement with Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) through a Memorandum of Understanding for a number of purposes, including collaboration, so that Vision Australia’s systemic advocacy and public policy positions are, wherever practicable, consistent with the programs and policies of Australia's peak body representing people who are blind or have low vision.