# Blind Citizens Australia logo

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# Response to the Department of Social Services (DSS) Discussion Paper on Evaluating the Use of Visual Descriptions at DSS Events

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 About Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the peak national representative organisation of and for the over 500,000 people in Australia who are blind or vision impaired. For nearly 50 years, BCA has built a strong reputation for empowering Australians who are blind or vision impaired to lead full and active lives and to make meaningful contributions to our communities.

BCA provides peer support and individual advocacy to people who are blind or vision impaired across Australia. Through our campaign work, we address systemic barriers by promoting the full and equal participation in society of people who are blind or vision impaired. Through our policy work, we provide advice to community and governments on issues of importance to people who are blind or vision impaired. As a disability-led organisation, our work is directly informed by lived experience. All directors are full members of BCA and the majority of our volunteers and staff are blind or vision impaired. They are of diverse backgrounds and identities.

### 1.2 About people who are blind or vision impaired

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), over 4.4 million Australians have some form of disability - roughly equating to 1 in every 5 Australians having a disability, and there are currently more than 500,000 people who are blind or vision impaired in Australia; with estimates that this will rise to 564,000 by 2030. According to Vision Initiative, around 80% of vision loss in Australia is caused by conditions that become more common as people age[[1]](#footnote-1).

Australians who are blind or vision impaired can live rich and active lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities: working, volunteering, raising families and engaging in sports and other recreational activities.

The extent to which people can actively and independently participate in community life does, however, rely on facilities, services and systems that are available to the public being designed in a way that makes them inclusive of the needs of all citizens – including those who are blind or vision impaired.

## 2. Blind Citizens Australia’s submission

### Q. 1 - Do visual descriptions meaningfully enhance a sense of inclusion why / why not?

Feedback BCA has received in consultations indicates that – while undoubtedly well intentioned – a description of someone’s physical appearance has little relevance to many people who are blind or vision impaired, and does not meaningfully enhance a sense of inclusion.

For individuals who have lost their sight, or have some functional vision, a visual description may provide some interesting detail about a person’s appearance that they otherwise might have missed; but is not considered a necessity. For those who have been blind from birth, visual descriptions can actually add to a feeling of ‘othering’ as these descriptions rely heavily on language shared by sighted people. For example, a presenter describing themselves as a “woman in her mid 40s, wearing a blue blouse underneath a black blazer jacket”, realistically conveys very little meaningful information to a person who has been blind from birth, as they have no reference point for what the colours blue or black actually mean, and may actually inadvertently reinforce the sense of exclusion felt by that individual.

An important caveat is around information on gender identity. A visual description of a person is not required, but for people who are blind or vision impaired, identification of gender-identity or pronouns can be helpful, particularly if a person has a historically gender neutral name or a vocal timbre that does not conform with historical assumptions about masculinity or femininity. However, this can be brief: e.g. “my name is Jill, and I use she/her pronouns”. Unlike visual descriptions, this also ensures that everyone in the room has the same information.

### Q. 2 - Are there specific contexts where the practice of providing a visual description is more or less appropriate, and why?

There may be some limited instances where a visual description may provide important context about a presenter’s knowledge or connection to a topic. For example, in a discussion about indigenous healthcare for someone to introduce themselves as “an aboriginal woman” immediately establishes their credibility based on lived experience - information that may have been missed without that description. Importantly though, this is again information that would benefit all those involved - not just those who are blind or vision impaired - as assumptions should never be made about a person’s cultural background based simply on their physical appearance.

### Q. 3 - If a person chose to provide a visual description, how can DSS ensure the description is delivered in a consistent and meaningful way?

As noted above, if a description is given, this should be kept to gender identity, and possibly age range. A very basic description of a person’s dress may be useful at an in-person event, if the presenter is encouraging people to talk to them further afterwards, as this may assist those who are vision impaired locate the speaker; but provides no benefit in an online setting.

It is important also to note that the longer the event, the more likely it is that descriptions will become less useful. At a (non-DSS) event attended by BCA staff, which ran over two days, visual descriptions started off with useful, meaningful information (e.g. “I am a male in my mid-thirties, with short curly hair and wearing a blue blazer and tan chinos”), but ended up evolving to being used as a form of icebreaker by way of jokes and sarcasm – for example a woman in her late middle age describing herself as “and people tell me I look like Taylor Swift”.

This form of self-deprecating humour may endear a presenter to their sighted audience, but for those who are blind or vision impaired this ‘in joke’ can acutely heighten their sense of exclusion. It is important also to note that the use of ‘jokes’ and ‘humour’ in the visual descriptions can dramatically increase this sense of exclusion for people who are blind or vision impaired who also experience neurodiversity.

### Q. 4 - Are there other preferred inclusive practices that could be considered to create more inclusive events and meetings?

As noted above, while visual descriptions are undoubtedly well intentioned, there are other practices that can be far more effective at creating more inclusive events and meetings. This includes establishing a common etiquette of providing visual descriptions of rooms for in person meetings (ie. the size of the room, where the speaker is located, where the screen is located, where to find the exits etc) and by providing a detailed description of PowerPoint slides, including reading out the key points on the screen and images being thoughtfully described.

For online meetings, ensuring all slide decks and presentations are provided ahead of time, so that attendees can follow along on a device of their choosing.

Finally, we encourage presenters at all events (whether online or in person) to establish the habit of announcing their name when speaking or asking a question, even if they have spoken earlier.

1. Vision2020. *Eye health in Australia*. <http://www.visioninitiative.org.au/common-eye-conditions/eye-health-in-australia> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)