

2019-20 Pre-Budget Submission

Vision 2020 Australia

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Contents

About Vision 2020 Australia	1
Executive Summary	2
Summary of recommendations	3
Why invest in eye health and vision care?	3
Budget priorities for 2019-20	4
Support implementation of <i>Strong Eyes, Strong Communities</i> - improving eye health and vision outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	4
Improve access to assistive technologies for people who are blind or vision impaired	5
Support a 2020 National Eye Health Survey	6
Increase support for international eye health programs	7
Extend support for KeepSight	8

About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector.

Its role is to ensure that eye health and vision care remains high on the health, ageing, disability and international development agendas of Australian governments.

Vision 2020 Australia was established in October 2000. It is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organization and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

The organisation represents almost 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye health and vision care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support.

A range of Vision 2020 Australia members are making submissions to the annual budget process. Vision 2020 Australia supports these and the efforts of all members to reduce preventable blindness and improve opportunities for participation of people who are blind or vision impaired. This includes support for major plans that have been under development such as the National Macular Disease Action Plan.

The proposals in this Vision 2020 Australia submission have been developed to complement those being proposed by individual members.

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Executive Summary

Vision 2020 Australia considers that by working in partnership across government, non-government, private and community sectors, avoidable blindness and vision loss in Australia and our region can be prevented and treated and ensure that people who are blind or vision impaired of all ages, have equal access to services to support their independence and community participation.

There have been significant gains made across a range of areas in eye health and vision, however some key challenges remain:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience vision loss at three times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians
- Rates of diabetes are rising along with the risk of diabetic eye disease, which can result in permanent vision loss, however this is almost entirely preventable or treatable if identified early
- People who are blind or vision impaired continue to experience barriers when accessing the services and supports they need, including timely access to appropriate assistive technology
- Rates of vision impairment and blindness in the Indo-Pacific are rising, with forecasts suggesting that by 2050 approximately 440 million people could have moderate to severe vision impairment¹.

The Vision 2020 Australia membership and their many partners bring together the right knowledge, the right expertise and the right models of collaboration to continue to leverage success. To maximise eye health and vision outcomes for Australians and citizens in our region, the Australian Government and the eye health and vision care sector need to invest in well founded, evidence-based prevention, early detection, early intervention and support measures that achieve great outcomes, keeping people engaged in the social and economic life of our communities.

This submission reflects the combined expertise of the eye health and vision care sector and outlines investments over the coming four years that will achieve tangible results in targeted high priority areas including:

- Funding initiatives that will close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health and vision care, building on existing work and other priorities identified in *Strong Eyes, Strong Communities*
- Establishing a program to improve access to assistive technologies for people who are blind or vision impaired
- Supporting a second National Eye Health Survey
- Expanding investment in eye health programs in the Indo-Pacific as part of a broader increase in Australian Government foreign aid
- Extending support for the KeepSight program for a further four years.

Eye health and vision care across Australia and the Indo-Pacific region is cost effective, reduces poverty and will drive sustainable economic growth as we head towards 2020. The total annual economic cost of vision loss in Australia is estimated to be \$16.6 billion or \$28,905 per person with vision loss aged over 40².

However, the majority of all vision loss is preventable or treatable and interventions to improve or restore sight are among the most cost-effective of all healthcare interventions returning \$4 for every \$1 invested.

¹ Bourne, R, Flaxman, S, Braithwaite, T et al. *Magnitude, Temporal Trends, and Projections of the Global Prevalence of Blindness and Distance and Near Vision Impairment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, [The Lancet Global Health](#) 2017, 5(9): 888-897.

² Access Economics, 2010, *Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009: A Report prepared for Vision 2020 Australia*, Melbourne

Summary of recommendations

Strong eyes, Strong Communities - improving eye health and vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	
The Australian Government fund priority initiatives to close the gap in vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 2020	\$63.55 million over 4 years
Improving access to assistive technologies for people who are blind or vision impaired	
The Australian Government commence a program funding assistive technology in 2019-20 for people who are blind or vision impaired but cannot access these supports through other programs	
National Eye Health Survey 2020	
The Australian Government fund a 2020 National Eye Health Survey	\$4.4 million over 2 years
Expanding eye health programs in the Indo-Pacific as part of expanding foreign aid	
The Australian Government boost foreign aid spending, including re-investing in eye health programs in the Indo-Pacific, to grow the aid budget by 10 per cent each year for the next six years	
Prevent diabetic eye disease	
The Australian Government extend its investment in the KeepSight Initiative for a further 4 years	\$1.5 million pa over 4 years

Why invest in eye health and vision care?

More than 453,000 people live with blindness or a vision impairment making vision loss one of the most prevalent chronic health conditions³. Additionally, with a rapidly ageing population it is estimated that by the year 2020, close to 1 million Australians will be vision impaired or blind if action is not taken⁴. However, we know that 90 per cent of blindness and vision loss is preventable or treatable if it is detected early enough.

Blindness and vision impairment also disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who experience three times the rate of blindness and three times the rate of vision loss compared to non-Indigenous Australians⁵.

In the Indo-Pacific, \$160 million people are blind or vision impaired. Globally, women and girls make up 55 per cent of all people who are blind or vision impaired and women remain less likely to access eye health and vision care services in many countries⁶. This perpetuates the cycle of disempowerment, ensuring that poverty and disability remain disproportionately gender biased.

Since 1990 prevalence rates of avoidable blindness have reduced by 40 per cent in our region in spite of an ageing and overall population increase of 23 per cent; demonstrating the direct impact of avoidable blindness programs⁷. We also know that with the right supports and services, people with unavoidable blindness and vision impairment can remain independent and engaged in the social and economic life of their communities.

³ National Eye Health Survey Summary Report 2016.

⁴ Access Economics, 2010, *Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009: A Report prepared for Vision 2020 Australia*, Melbourne

⁵ National Eye Health Survey Summary Report 2016.

⁶ Bourne, R, Flaxman, S, Braithwaite, T et al. *Magnitude, Temporal Trends, and Projections of the Global Prevalence of Blindness and Distance and Near Vision Impairment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, *The Lancet Global Health* 2017, 5(9): 888-897.

⁷ J.B. Jonas, R. George, R. Asokan, S. R Flaxman, J. Keeffe, J. Leasher, K. Naidoo, K. Pesudovs, H. Price, L. Vijaya, R.A White, T. Y Wong, S. Resnikoff, h.R Taylor, R.A Bourne, on behalf of the Vision Loss Expert Group of the Global Burden of Disease Study, Prevalence and causes of vision loss in Southeast Asia and Oceania:1990-2010, *Journal of Ophthalmology*, Vol 98(5), p.586-91,2014.

Budget priorities for 2019-20

Support implementation of *Strong Eyes, Strong Communities* - improving eye health and vision outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The Australian Government has maintained a strong commitment to closing the gap for vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. *Strong Eyes, Strong Communities - a five year plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision 2019-2024* (the Plan) has been developed by Vision 2020 Australia and its members, with input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and health leaders and Jurisdictional Fundholders, to guide priorities for action and investment over the coming five years.

The Plan recognises that there has been significant progress made, and with further targeted investment, the gap in vision can be closed by 2020 and previous gains can be sustained and embedded across the nation. Expanding outreach services, enhancing coordination of existing services, and expanding the role of community controlled organisations and other primary care services are all critical to achieving ongoing access to sustainable, effective and culturally safe eye health and vision care services for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Priorities for 2019/20 Budget investment

Vision 2020 Australia has developed a suite of recommendations to give effect to the priorities identified in the Plan. A number of these priorities can be implemented within existing resources and/or require further engagement with states and territories to progress.

Of those remaining, there are eight that require immediate investment between now and 2020 to close the gap for vision, and these form the basis of the Vision 2020 Australia 2019-20 Budget submission⁸. This combination of fixed term and ongoing investment includes:

1. Expand the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS) funding by \$1.06 million in 2019-20, increasing to an additional \$4.7 million annually by 2023-24 (\$12.88 million over 4 years)
2. Expand the Rural Health Outreach Fund (RHOF) by an additional \$1.04 million per annum from 2019-20 (\$4.33 million over 4 years)
3. Fund a project to co-design, implement and evaluate Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) led models of eye care (\$3.46 million over 4 years)
4. Address equipment needs identified through phase 1 of the National Eye Care Equipment Inventory Project then support roll out of priorities identified through phase 2 from 2020 onwards (\$4.21 million over 4 years)
5. Build on ongoing work with states and territories and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) to achieve nationally consistent arrangements for the provision of affordable glasses and other optical aids to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who need them (initial investment \$4.86 million over 4 years)
6. Improve local supports for people who need treatment (\$20.12 million over 4 years)
7. Fund part time regional implementation managers in 25 regions (\$5.06 million over 4 years)
8. Establish a funding pool to support eye health training for ACCHO staff and development of a national network of ACCHO eye health contacts (\$4.23 million over 4 years).

⁸ Funding for a National Eye Health Survey in 2020, which is also identified in *Strong Eyes, Strong Communities*, is addressed separately in this submission.

Improve access to assistive technologies for people who are blind or vision impaired

A range of Vision 2020 Australia members, particularly those work with people who are blind or vision impaired, have identified funding assistive technologies as a critical priority for increasing social and economic participation.

Increasing advancements in low vision aids and assistive technologies are generating new and exciting opportunities to provide timely and effective interventions for people with blindness and low vision. Although the effectiveness of assistive technologies continue to increase, barriers are preventing the vast majority of people with vision impairment from accessing these transformative innovations, with only an estimated 15% of people with low vision accessing low vision aids⁹.

Under current arrangements, eligible participants in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) can access fully funded aids and equipment if the aid is assessed as being “reasonable and necessary”. However, people who are over 65 when the NDIS rolls out in their region or acquire a disability over the age of 65 are not eligible for individually funded NDIS packages and would be expected to access these supports through the aged care system. Home Care Packages offer some assistive technology funding, but are limited and often not prioritised for people who are blind or vision impaired. Where government-funded support is not available, people with low vision or blindness must fund the cost of assistive technologies themselves, which can be a significant barrier for some people.

The timely access to appropriate aids and assistive technology can lead to considerable health and socio-economic benefits, especially through its capacity to keep elderly Australians within their own homes. Low vision aids have the potential to enable people to remain independent and self-manage activities of daily living and/or facilitate the reablement of older Australians. This would assist older Australians to participate more in their community, help them maintain their independence by providing the opportunity to complete household activities, and enable older Australians with vision impairment the opportunity to age actively in their own homes¹⁰.

Priority for 2019/20 Budget investment

Fund a national program to improve access to assistive technology for people who are blind or vision impaired and cannot access these supports through other programs.

⁹ The George Institute (2017), “Low Vision, Quality of Life and Independence: A Review of the Evidence on Aids and Technologies”, *Macular Disease Foundation Australia*, Australia.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Support a 2020 National Eye Health Survey

The initial National Eye Health Survey (NEHS) in 2015 was the first comprehensive national survey of the prevalence and causes of vision impairment and blindness for Australians and provided a benchmark against which to measure national progress in eye health and vision care.

A number of well documented public health and environmental factors, with associated economic implications, underline the need for a future NEHS, including:

- The disparity in major eye disease rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, such as diabetic retinopathy and cataract.
- The differences in the prevalence of vision loss between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.
- The marked increase in our ageing population, where it is estimated that almost 85% of all vision impairment will be among those aged 50 years or more.
- The rapid rise in the prevalence of diabetes, and consequently diabetic eye disease.

It is recommended that the Australian Government fund a second NEHS to accurately track its progress in reducing the burden of blindness and vision impairment. A second NEHS 2020 will provide comparable data to what was collected in 2015, enabling accurate mapping of progress in reducing the burden of vision loss and an effective mechanism to target health care resources effectively. It will strengthen Australia's eye health and vision care evidence base, enabling the Australian Government to outline its contribution to achieving the aims set out in the Global Action Plan, and further quantify progress in closing the gap for vision between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non Indigenous Australians¹¹.

In addition to supporting the evaluation of the impact of existing eye healthcare services, the NEHS 2020 will also guide future resource allocation, policy development and economic analysis for effective service delivery in Australia. The completion of this work will enable the collation of high quality national data at two time points which will, for the first time, permit sophisticated projection analysis of the trends in vision impairment and major eye disease in Australia.

By endorsing and providing funding for a future NEHS, the Australian eye health and vision care sector will demonstrate a truly collaborative partnership of government, non-government and the private sector working together to deliver mutually beneficial research essential to achieving evidence-based eye health outcomes for all Australians.

Priority for 2019/20 Budget investment

Funding of \$4.4 million over two years is required to support the design, delivery and analysis of results of NEHS 2020: this is based on the 2016 NEHS and the financial and in-kind contributions. A funding commitment is required by mid-2019 to allow data collection and analysis to occur within strategically critical timeframes.

¹¹ <https://www.who.int/blindness/actionplan/en/index1.html>

Increase support for international eye health programs

Australia's foreign aid investment in eye health and vision care is vital to lifting our region's most vulnerable people out of poverty.

Globally, of the 253 million people that live with vision impairment, 36 million are blind and 217 million have moderate to severe vision impairment. In the Indo-Pacific region, there are more than 15 million people who are blind and another 82 million people that have a moderate to severe visual impairment. Over the next 20 years, that number is set to rise considerably.

Where the Australian Government has supported eye health and vision care, significant gains have been made towards eliminating avoidable vision loss and blindness. Funding eye health and vision care programs has immediate, tangible results. Globally, there is a return of \$4 for every \$1 invested in eye health and vision care¹². For this potential to make a positive difference in our region, with flow-on benefits to Australia, foreign aid funding cannot remain stagnant or face further cuts.

Eye health and vision care are an integral part of foreign aid, which is now at a historic low of 0.23 per cent of gross national income. Vision 2020 Australia is calling for the government to rebuild foreign aid spending to ensure our country's contribution reaches the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income by 2030.

Along with the humanitarian imperative, lifting people out of poverty fosters peace and sustainable local economies, protects Australia from regional conflicts and lowers the threat of other regional issues such as health pandemics.

Foreign aid is a crucial part of foreign policy, worthy of the legitimacy and budgetary provisions given to diplomacy, trade and security. The delivery of inclusive eye health programming is a significant soft power asset that provides regional leadership and extends Australia's influence.

Priority for 2019-20 Budget investment

It is recommended that the Australian Government expand investment in eye health programs in the Indo Pacific as part of a broader boost to foreign aid spending to ensure our country's contribution reaches the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income by 2030. This can be achieved if the Australian Government commits to growing the aid budget by 10 per cent each year for the next six years, to the 2024-25 financial year. On current assumptions, that trajectory will restore Australia's aid budget to 0.33 per cent of GNI, as a minimum first step towards reaching 0.7 per cent of GNI by 2030.

¹² Access Economics, *Investing in Sight: Strategic Interventions to Prevent Vision Loss in Australia*, 2005.

Extend support for KeepSight

Diabetes is the leading cause of vision loss in working age Australians, with diabetes causing diabetic retinopathy (DR) as well as the increased risk of developing cataracts and glaucoma. Almost all vision loss from diabetes is preventable and last year the Australian Government allocated an initial grant of \$1 million to Diabetes Australia to work with its founding partners to better coordinate early detection and timely treatment.

Currently around 50% of people with diabetes - 630,000 people - are not accessing an eye health check. The KeepSight initiative brings together eye care and diabetes health professionals to encourage people to be part of the program, and help thousands of people with diabetes access an eye health check and prevent avoidable vision loss¹³. The total indirect annual cost of vision loss associated with diabetic macular oedema (DME), one of the most common manifestations of DR, is estimated to be \$2.07 billion. This is more than \$28,000 per person with DME¹⁴.

Priority for 2019/20 Budget investment

To sustain the impact made with the \$1 million starting grant, further Australian Government funding of \$1.5 million per year over four years is needed to match the private sector investment and ensure the initiative is successfully implemented.

¹³ www.keepsight.org.au/health_professional

¹⁴ Deloitte Access Economics, *The economic impact of diabetic macular oedema in Australia*, 2015