



Inner South Canberra Community Council

## Election Disability Public Forum

### Summary of Discussion

Thursday, 2 May 2024

6.30-8.30pm: online

***ISCCC and AFI public forum: What issues do people with disability and their carers want to put to candidates in the upcoming ACT election?***

*See attachment for participants.*

### **1. Welcome: Colin Walters, ISCCC Chair and Nicolas Lawler, Chief Executive Officer, AFI**

Mr Walters welcomed attendees including his co-host, Nicolas Lawler, Chief Executive Officer, Advocacy for Inclusion, and the 'Master of Ceremonies' for the forum, Ms Bo Jeong, from WIN News.

Mr Walters acknowledged the traditional custodians of the land on which the forum was being streamed and their elders past, present and emerging, paying respect particularly to Indigenous people with disability. He noted that the forum was being recorded.

Turning to the agenda, Mr Walters said it was centred on what people with disability wanted the candidates in the forthcoming ACT government election to focus on in providing more accessible services and creating a more inclusive Canberra. The forum was an opportunity for election candidates to hear the views of people with disability directly. In this regard the Inner South Canberra Community Council (ISCCC) was proud to endorse the election platform being released by Advocacy for Inclusion at the meeting.

Mr Nicolas Lawler also welcomed attendees and paid his respects to the traditional owners of the land in which the forum was taking place, acknowledging their elders, past present and emerging. He said he was pleased to join the ISCCC in co-hosting the forum. AFI's non-partisan first election platform focused on access, transport, climate and urban issues. It was encouraging that a number of prospective election candidates were attending the forum.

Ms Joeng introduced the guest speakers:

- Craig Wallace, Head of Policy, Advocacy for Inclusion, disability activist and commentator.
- Barbara Bennett PSM, a former Commissioner, Disability Royal Commission and Deputy Secretary in the Australian Public Service.
- David Goodbody, expert in programs for people with disability in the areas of employment and education.

- Graham Downie AM, former Canberra Times journalist and public transport advocate.

## **2. Creating accessible and inclusive neighbour hoods and communities (Craig Wallace, Barbara Bennett and David Goodbody)**

Drawing on his experience as a person with disability and a disability advocate, Craig Wallace said he observed that the lives of people with disability were largely defined by what happened in their homes and in their neighbourhoods. In a changing environment (e.g. climate change; rising energy costs), people with disability were disproportionately and negatively impacted. They felt alone and lonely. As well, Canberra streets were poorly maintained and lit, people with disability were faced with numerous hazards on paths and in shared zones such as fast-moving e-scooters and silent electric cars; accessible taxis were hard to find and uncomfortable, and older inaccessible buses were still in use. Moving around Canberra was increasingly precarious. Better engagement with people with disability was needed, including through community councils such as the ISCCC, to achieve municipal improvements. While shocking, Governments needed to recognize that many people with disability were living in poverty.

Barbara Bennett explained that she had been a Canberra resident for over 40 years and a public servant for much of her adult life. Her experience as a Commissioner with the Disability Royal Commission for over five years taught her that there were fears and barriers to people with disability participating in society. Many people told the Commission that they did not feel safe in the community. They felt harassed and excluded. Being accepted into society was critical. There were mixed views from those sharing their experience with the Commission about the ACT Government, with calls for regular auditing of services in a changing environment. Ms Bennett said that changing accessibility affected everyone, not just people with disability, and brought improvements to many—the elderly, people with babies and young children etc. Finally, genuine consultation was very important, so that those designing programs and services understood what it was like for a person with disability using a service from beginning to end of the experience.

David Goodbody echoed many of the comments put forward by Mr Wallace and Ms Bennett, noting that transport in Canberra and new technologies such as electric scooters and cars in particular, presented challenges for people with disability. In this regard, he said that the relationship between the ACT Government and Commonwealth Government was important for the development of solutions and the delivery of joined up services.

Bo Jeong invited questions and comments from participants. Points made in discussion included the following:

- Transport for people with a disability was a huge issue. The Government's focus on encouraging electric vehicles (EVs) created problems for them. People with disability were not often well off and could not afford expensive EVs. A leasing scheme might be a solution.
- The bus infrastructure was poorly connected and accessible taxis difficult to find. Bus routes did not connect well in Canberra and community buses were often not a solution.
- NDIS workers were covered by adequate insurance but not NDIS service providers.
- Training sessions for hire car companies on how to assist an/or provide services for people with disability (such as available in Queensland) were desirable.
- Disability specialist service providers were often not ACT-based and travelling to NSW created challenges for people with disability based in the ACT.
- People with 'flare up' disability faced particular challenges. They were often ineligible for support services and sometimes harassed by the public e.g. when using a disability parking sticker if they did not have a visible disability.

In further discussion panelists and participants, including on chat lines, made the following points:

- New technology such as EVs should not push people into isolation.
- EV charging stations should also be accessible.
- Point to point transport was essential. The need to change buses caused people with disability to miss appointments or led to long journey times.
- Better infrastructure and program and service design was necessary, including for those people whose disability increased over time, even though the disability may have started as relatively mild.
- How best could people with episodic disability be financially supported to work and participate in society?
- Regulation for ride shares was needed, including for people with guide dogs.
- Excluding people with disability from social and cultural events (usually held on nights and weekends) owing to transport problems had an enormous impact on social isolation and exclusion.
- There were no traffic lights or pedestrian crossing between Fyshwick and Manuka.
- Public transport has been designed around working hours and neglected people trying to move around Canberra at other times.
- There were buttons at Canberra pedestrian crossings that are inaccessible to wheelchair users.

### **3. 'Getting around' (interview with Graham Downie)**

Bo Jeong introduced Graham Downie, a former Canberra Times journalist and commentator on public transport in Canberra.

Mr Downie said a key issue for people with disability moving around Canberra was the lack of connectivity on Canberra buses and a poor Sunday service. It was a lottery whether a person waited 5 minutes or 25 minutes for a bus on a week day. The introduction of the light rail system had made Canberra's bus system worse. He had been advised that it was difficult to get the staff to drive the buses, which was surprising as Canberra bus drivers were well paid when compared with the States.

In response to a question from Ms Jeong, Mr Downie said that e-scooters were largely for people without a disability. But for people with disability, they cluttered the pathways and were a hazard. A solution may be for the companies which hire scooters out, not the users, to be fined when they block walkways. The companies could pursue the users or even ban them. E-scooters also make crossing the road difficult, particularly as the scooters travel at high speed and are silent.

In discussion about the ease of using taxis for wheelchair users, Mr Downie said that the problem was largely that the service was provided commercially. While there were taxi providers who were trying to do their best for wheelchair users it was still a commercial enterprise. It had been reported to Mr Downie that since the Covid pandemic, many taxi drivers who had stopped working had not returned, so there was a staff shortage. If a person with disability could not book a taxi in advance, it was not possible to guarantee a driver. And sometimes even when it was booked in advance, drivers were unavailable. In Mr Downie's view it should be the responsibility of Government to provide a taxi service for people with disability.

In discussion participants, including on chat lines, made the following main points:

- There should be a minimum distance between stop points for buses e.g. every 500 metres in high density areas.
- A far more reactive, on demand, public transport system was needed.

- On demand bus services have worked well overseas.
- Getting to a bus stop after dark was difficult owing to poor lighting.
- Ubers have been very useful for people with disability—others commented that some people do not feel safe in them.

#### **4. Open Forum**

Ms Jeong invited questions on any topic. The following main points were made in discussion:

- Safety was important on public transport and people with disability often did not feel safe. Safety was also an issue for the elderly.
- Possible solutions included better lighting; better access to transport (ramps and better kerbs, better signage).
- Better town planning was needed with the community at the centre, not developers.
- There was no one in charge of social planning in the ACT Government. The AFI had called for a social planning unit. The Government did not understand social planning.
- Engagement with service users when planning new suburbs was vital. How could the problems identified be avoided in new developments?
- How could more public housing be included in the Inner South?
- People with disability were not at the front of the Government's mind when planning.
- The Oaks Estate has particularly poor public transport.
- The Government had put a good deal of emphasis on active transport, such as E-scooters, but not everyone can be active.
- Genuine consultation with the community was a key issue.
- Street lighting that had been converted to LED lighting was an issue. It created a pool of light with dark patches in between.
- Even if people (with disability) have the money to buy housing there is little accessible housing available. Accessible housing needs to be universally accessible e.g. including for the elderly.
- There should be incentives to attract investors to build accessible housing e.g. along the lines of the Defence Housing scheme.
- There was insufficient attention paid to the quality of life in new developments—need local commerce, shops, greenspace, community centres etc.

#### **5. Concluding remarks**

Mr Walters thanked Ms Jeong for facilitating the session so carefully and so well. He said he had heard two common themes running through the discussion:

- First, it was clear that ACT residents were living at a time of significant environmental and technological change. City planners and the designers of programs and services needed to consider how people with disability might be affected right at the start of designing new infrastructure and services. The needs of people with disability should be central, and these would change with new technologies, climate change and the growth of the city.
- Secondly, consultation was vital. The reason governments so often got things wrong was down to a lack of effective consultation. Consultation needed to be genuine and should consider user needs from the beginning to the end.

Mr Walters thanked participants and panelists for their contributions and Nicolas Lawler and Craig Wallace and the AFI and ISCCC teams for organizing the forum. He particularly thanked Kathie Potts, ISCCC Secretary, for pulling together the arrangements for the joint forum.

Mr Lawler echoed Mr Walters' words. The points made in discussion were incredibly valuable and would be important in the forthcoming election. The forum had highlighted the benefit of such meetings and should be repeated. Finally, Mr Lawler encouraged participants to join the AFI and be part of its advocacy for the rights of people with disability.

## List of Participants

- 1 Nicolas Lawler
- 2 Colin Walters
- 3 Bo Jeong
- 4 Craig Wallace
- 5 Barbara Bennett PSM
- 6 David Goodbody
- 7 Graham Downie AM
- 8 Kathie Potts
- 9 Karin Fisher
- 10 Carla Millner
- 11 Jo Luetjens
- 12 Roslyn Emmerick
- 13 Robert Altamore
- 14 Louise Bannister
- 15 Beatrice Bodart-Bailey
- 16 Jo Clay MLA
- 17 Anne-Louise Dawes
- 18 Robin Edmonds
- 19 Marea Fatseas
- 20 Cordelia Gee
- 21 Tania Giorgio
- 22 Gill King
- 23 Su Mon Kyaw-Myint
- 24 Jennifer Manson
- 25 Lady Nora Preston
- 26 Shane Rattenbury MLA
- 27 Kat Reed
- 28 Victoria Roberts
- 29 Robert Woolston
- 30 Elizabeth Goodbody
- 31 Kirsty Magarey
- 32 Katrina Muir
- 33 Laura Barwick
- 34 Anne Forrest
- 35 Not identified