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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) initiated a review to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the Print Disability Services Program and the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program. The review raised a range of matters that can be encapsulated into five key issues, namely the need for FaCS to:

- encourage producers of alternative format material to adapt digital technology and multimedia approaches to the development and production of their products;
- review the funding arrangements for the production of alternative format material;
- work with Australia Post to review the arrangements for administering the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program;
- work with Australia Post to ensure Australia Post staff are aware of the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program; and
- review items considered eligible for postage under the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program.

Participants of the review recognised that opportunities existed to improve the independence and self-reliance of blind and vision impaired people by employing advanced technology and applying international standards in the production and distribution of alternative format material. Other benefits can also be realised, such as the global sharing and exchange of standardised material and achieving efficiencies in production.

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Introduction

FaCS funds a range of programs for people with a disability under the provisions of the *Disability Services Act, 1986*. The Print Disability Services and the Postal Concessions for the Blind Programs are aimed at enabling blind and vision impaired people to access print material produced in an alternative format. The department funds the production of this material and its movements through the postal system.

The Print Disability Services Program provides funding to 13 print disability service providers. The Program assists print disability service providers to produce printed material in alternative formats such as audiotape and braille and to provide this material to people who are unable to read, hold or manipulate printed material in standard form because of their disabilities. Material is delivered mainly through the 'free of charge' postal service under the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program.

The review of the Print Disability Services and the Postal Concessions for the Blind Programs involved extensive consultation through forums, interviews and surveys with stakeholders representing all sectors of the blind and vision impaired community. Those consulted included participants from the funded print

disability service providers, Australia Post and people who were blind and vision impaired.

A Review Reference Group was formed to provide input to the review. Members represented ACROD (National Industry Association for Disability Services), Blind Citizens Australia, the Australian Blindness Forum and the Roundtable on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities.

This report is based on the contributions of people consulted in the review and the Review Reference Group.

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Print Disability Services Program

Parties to the Program

The system for servicing the access needs of people with a print disability involves producers, intermediaries and users.

Producers

There are 13 producers of alternative format material across Australia that receive funding under the Print Disability Services Program. These producers comprise:

- The Queensland Narrating Service, Queensland;
- The Australian Listening Library, New South Wales;
- Royal Blind Society of New South Wales, New South Wales;
- Royal Institute for the Deaf and Blind Children: Vision Ed, New South Wales;
- St Edmunds School for the Blind and Vision Impaired, New South Wales;
- Canberra Blind Society, Australian Capital Territory;
- Christian Blind Mission International, Victoria;
- Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Victoria;
- Vision Australia Foundation, Victoria;
- "Hear a Book" Service (Tasmania) Inc, Tasmania;
- Royal Society for the Blind of South Australia Inc, South Australia;
- Association of the Blind of Western Australia Inc, Western Australia; and
- Narkaling Inc, Western Australia.

The producers listed above are 'not-for-profit' incorporated organisations and produce a range of alternative format material and services for people with a print disability. Twelve of the 13 organisations produce material and services for blind and vision impaired people and one organisation produces alternative format material for people with an intellectual disability.

A range of alternative format material for State, Territory and Catholic Departments of Education are produced by some of the Print Disability funded services. These services also receive funding from State and Territory disability service programs.

Private enterprises are also commercially producing braille, audio and large print materials for people who require material in alternative formats.

Intermediaries

The primary intermediaries are public libraries and education institutions as well as public, private and community sector organisations that need to disseminate information to blind and vision impaired people and people with an intellectual disability.

Users

The majority of users are blind and vision impaired people who access material at intermediary facilities for the purposes of education, leisure and obtaining information. Another group of users are people with an intellectual disability. Users also access intermediaries to request production of alternative format material for a specific need.

Funding arrangements

FaCS currently apportions approximately \$1.3 million to the 13 producers recognised under the Program and each year enters into funding agreements with them for the provision of alternative format material.

The department calculates apportionment within a budget allocation on the estimated annual production of braille and audio masters and copies and the previous year's production levels. The production of alternative format materials such as large print and computer disks are also taken into account so as not to disadvantage producers.

Funding the 13 recognised organisations under the Print Disability Services Program reportedly represents an estimated 25 per cent of their production costs of alternative format material. Most of these organisations however also receive funding from other government grants, donations and sales of products. They also place heavy reliance on volunteers for production.

Likely impacts on current funding arrangements

Five factors impact on the current funding arrangement for the Print Disability Services Program, namely:

- access to more contemporary sources of information;
- producer proposals to fund other forms of alternative format materials;
- increased costs of production;
- the increasing aged population; and
- technological advances.

Access to contemporary sources of information

Blind and vision impaired people are increasingly resorting to more contemporary sources of information such as radio broadcasts, large print material, compact disks, use of the internet and voice access to newspapers from e-text files. These products are now considered part of the broad alternative format materials environment because of their growth in usage.

Funding other forms of alternative format materials

Funded producers are proposing changes to the current funding model so that the full range of alternative format material can be included in the funding arrangements, such as large print and etext material.

Increased cost of production

Funded producers are proposing changes to production targets based on a funding model that reflects actual production costs and cost drivers. The proposal is based on a concern that despite efficiencies and a high usage of volunteers, production costs continually increase because there is no logical connection between production targets and the cost of production.

Increasing aged population

It is proffered that over the next decade, Australia will experience an increasing demand for the broad range of alternative format material commensurate with the demographic increase in the aged population with vision impairment. Producers of alternative format material will experience funding and production pressures in trying to meet the increasing needs of this ageing population.

Technological advances

Technological advances generally and international technological developments in the alternative format material environment will inevitably drive more efficient and effective means of production in Australia and open up opportunities for global sharing or exchange of standardised material.

Realising these advantages however will require producers to move to digital platforms for production and to adhere to international standards in the application of digital technology and multimedia systems.

The shift by funded producers to the use of digital and convergence technology has yet to be fully realised. The current methods of production of alternative format material vary considerably between producers. The method ranges from the use of home based volunteers with rudimentary facilities to employed skilled operatives with reasonably sophisticated facilities and equipment.

The implications for a producer, particularly a small producer, in employing digital technology are therefore considerable in terms of cost and skilling. Yet the shift to this technology and international standards will increasingly become necessary, particularly in braille, large print and e-text if improved availability of alternative format material on a national and international scale is to be realised, quality is to be improved and efficiencies in production are to be achieved.

Assessment of technological developments and standards

The scale and pace of technological developments internationally in the production of alternative format material are considerable and likely to be daunting for some and challenging to many Australian producers.

A need exists therefore, to minimise risk and provide confidence in employing the latest technological developments and international standards in production. This need is best addressed through a comprehensive assessment of technological developments and standards as they relate to funded alternative format materials for blind and vision impaired people.

Future funding action

A review of the FaCS funding arrangements for the Print Disability Services Program is needed to take account of the current and projected user environment, producers' concerns, as outlined above, and the opportunities for achieving production efficiencies through the application of the latest technological developments.

Recommendations for the Print Disability Services Program

The implications for producers to adapt the latest technological advances to design and production are considerable and require a level of confidence that any transition producers undertake will be successful and beneficial. Confidence can be achieved through a comprehensive analysis of 'best technological production and practice' in the national and international print disability environment. It is therefore recommended that:

Recommendation 1

FaCS commission research into the application of contemporary technology to the production of alternative format material.

Further, demographic and technological changes are evolving in society and in the international and national print disability environment. These changes are impacting on user expectations, alternative format materials and production costs and skilling.

A need exists to take advantage of the changes for the benefit of people with a print disability. Accepting this challenge will, amongst other things, require a reconsideration of the department's funding arrangements. It is therefore recommended that:

Recommendation 2

FaCS further review the funding model for services funded under the Print Disability Services Program.

It is recognised that the outcome of Recommendation 1 will impact on Recommendation 2 and Recommendation 5. Depending on the outcome of these two recommendations, a broader review of the two programs may be required.

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Postal Concessions for the Blind Program

Funding arrangements

The department reimburses Australia Post for costs incurred in posting articles under the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program. The reimbursement is approximately \$6 million a year.

The Program enables blind and vision impaired people to access braille, audio recordings and other defined 'eligible' material¹ through the postal system between 'eligible' persons² at a concessional rate without incurring what would otherwise be prohibitive postal charges because of the bulk and weight of this material.

The concessional rate is a 'free of charge' rate for domestic mail and international surface mailing of braille and audio material. A heavily discounted rate is applied to international air mailings.

Australia Post invoices FaCS each month for reimbursement of Postal Concession for the Blind Program postage. The invoice is based on postal docketts from 'eligible' organisations and an estimate of mailing volume generated by smaller 'eligible' organisations, 'eligible' intermediaries and blind and vision impaired users.

Issues arising

There are three issues arising from the Program that may be considered, namely:

- the administration of the Program;
- clarification of what comprises 'eligible' material; and
- raising staff awareness of the requirement of the Program.

Administration of the program

It was evident from the review that Australia Post and FaCS share the view that a joint approach is required to streamline the administration of the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program.

A number of producers and intermediaries have 'large account' agreements with Australia Post that facilitate accurate re-imburement calculations. A significant number however have no such agreements. In such cases, and also in the case of all users, Australia Post's re-imburement calculations are based on estimates of the level of usage as a percentage of overall traffic.

Awareness program for Australia Post staff

It is considered that changes within Australia's postal system over the last fifteen years, and more recently within Australia Post, has resulted in uncertainty among staff about the nature and objective of the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program and the policy and procedures to be applied in processing 'eligible' material. There is some inconsistency in dealing with customers who seek to make use of the program as a consequence. Besides possibly adversely affecting customer relations, this level of staff uncertainty results in confusion over charging or not charging postage on items. This uncertainty and confusion no doubt impacts on Australia Post's re-imburement calculations one way or the other.

Action is required to provide Australia Post staff with certainty on the requirements of the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program by raising their level of awareness of the program. Australia Post and FaCS can best achieve this through a joint approach.

Clarification of 'eligible' material

The uncertainty of Australia Post staff on the requirement of the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program is attributable to large quantities of 'non eligible' material, including large print books being accepted at concessional postage rates contrary to the terms of the program. The department is aware that a proportion of material posted free of charge is not technically considered 'eligible' but meets the intent of the program. Some formality and clarification of eligible material is therefore required and disseminated to Australia Post staff and end users.

Recommendations on the Postal Concession for the Blind Program

FaCS and Australia Post share a degree of dissatisfaction with the arrangements for administering the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program. A central issue concerns the efficacy of the system. It is therefore recommended that:

Recommendation 3

FaCS and Australia Post jointly review the arrangements for administering the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program.

Further, FaCS and Australian Post also share a concern that staff employed by Australia Post and its agencies are uncertain about the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program to the probable detriment of the program's administration, customer relationships and objective on facilitation of access.

The department and Australia Post also share a concern that uncertainty exists on the requirements of the Program for confining postage to eligible material.

It is therefore recommended that:

Recommendation 4

FaCS works with Australia Post to ensure Australia Post staff are aware of the Postal Concessions for the

Blind Program.

Recommendation 5

FaCS reviews items considered eligible for postage under the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program.

- 1 'Eligible material' refers to
 - Braille material and sound recordings
 - Materials for writing Braille and making sound recordings; and
 - Some other communication items.
- 2 'Eligible persons' refers to
 - Blind and vision impaired people; and
 - Approved organisations providing services to blind and vision impaired people.

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Conclusion

The review of the Print Disability Services Program and the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program will become a milestone in the improvement of services to people with a print disability.

Participants in the review raised a wide range of issues, the more significant of which have been addressed in this report.

A need to keep pace with the social changes and technological advances in the design and production of alternative format material for people with a print disability has significant implications for producers and significant benefits for users.

Two key issues will need to be addressed if print disability stakeholders are to take advantage of these societal and technological changes. The first concerns the preparedness of producers to adapt the latest technological advances and international standards to their production. The second issue concerns the funding arrangements of FaCS to assist in facilitating this adaptation.

As a consequence, two recommendations are proposed, namely conduct a review of funding arrangements and research the application of advanced technology to the design and production of alternative format material for blind and vision impaired people.

The review also highlighted the need to improve administrative arrangements of the Postal Concessions for the Blind Program and the consistent delivery of services for the postage of eligible material for people with a print disability.

It is anticipated that the outcome of the recommended reviews, research and awareness program will be a noticeable improvement in the independence and self-reliance of people with a print disability, particularly for blind and vision impaired people.

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