Chair's Newsletter

July 2025

Clive Lansink

Hi everyone. I hope you're all able to keep yourselves warm as we push through the coldest time of the year. It's just another reminder of how time keeps moving on, and it is now time for me as the Chair of the Board to tell you about the activities of the RNZFB Board of Directors. This newsletter covers highlights of our meeting held in Dunedin on Saturday 5 July.

The Board approved the operations plan and budget for 2026. Whilst there is always concern about our reliance on fundraising and investments, we were aware of the great financial results achieved in the year just ended, primarily due to legacies and good management of expenses. We have also been advised that dividends from Foundation Properties Limited are expected to substantially increase in the next few years as the retirement village is fully completed on the Parnell property. With these factors in mind, we approved a budget that anticipates a deficit, but allows for significant new expenditure to allow the organisation to expand some services and develop new ideas. So we look forward to what that will mean for services in the near future.

The Board is formally responsible for the organisation's strategic plan, although it really is the result of a lot of thought from staff, clients and many other stakeholders. We adopted the current strategic plan at our meeting in May 2024 and it sets the organisation's strategic priorities until 2028. At our most recent meeting, we discussed a report from the Chief Executive showing positive results. We are very pleased to see the organisation making good progress and being clearly focused on the agreed priorities of empowering our clients to live full, independent lives in the community, teaching our clients the essential skills they need to live independently, working to encourage New Zealand to be more inclusive, and ensuring the organisation has the right people including specialist expertise. I urge you to read it for yourself if you want to know more about these priorities. You can find it at <https://blindlowvision.org.nz/about-us/strategic-plan-2024-2028/>, or phone the Contact Centre or contact the Board Secretary for a copy in your preferred format.

The Board approved a proposal allowing BLVNZ to invite clients to make donations to BLVNZ. We realise this may not sit well with everyone, but we have been assured that clients will not be pressured in any way to donate, and won't be made to feel guilty for not donating. Also we are assured that any donations they do make will be kept strictly confidential and not known to staff delivering services. But we also know that a lot of clients do want to support the organisation. The Board has said that all communications on this must set the right tone, and we are confident that what we have approved will strike the right balance.

The Board was advised of problems that BLVNZ is currently working through with the relatively new Chris Orr Recreation Centre in South Auckland, since it was opened on 21 March 2023. The building was originally the swimming pool complex for the old Homai College, but was taken over and completely fitted out to serve as BLVNZ's South Auckland centre. It was intended that the recreation space would be suitable for blind sports. However people have found that the bright sun striking through the windows on those hot sunny days Auckland is famous for (yeh right), causes considerable glare. The Board was advised that work is now under way to fix that problem. But Auckland is also well known for rain, and unfortunately people have found that the noise made by even moderate rain on the tin roof makes it difficult or even impossible for people to hear what is going on. This can be particularly disorienting for blind people who rely on hearing for navigation, and it is even worse for people who are deafblind or who just have a hearing impairment in addition to blindness. The Board has been advised that a solution that was being considered to solve this problem is not suitable because of other impacts it would have on the whole space. Regrettably that means right now that problem has not been solved, and we realise in the meantime blind sporting and social activities in that centre may be compromised in Auckland's rather unpredictable rainy weather. But we have been assured staff will continue to look for a solution.

The Board received a paper highlighting low voter participation in Board elections, and the ever-increasing cost of postal voting. We understand that sending items by post may ceased altogether by 2027, and courier will then be the only way to send print voting papers. Currently some 1500 people elect to vote by post, and the organisation is working to ask people to vote in a different way if at all possible.

The question of reducing voter turnout and whether democratic Board elections are sustainable in the long term will be examined as part of the review of the Constitution that is now getting under way. We have been planning this review for some time, and I have talked about it in previous newsletters so I won't repeat that here. I am pleased to announce that a small team from the law firm Simpson Grierson has been engaged to independently carry out this review and report back to the Board later this year.

People may recall the recent decision to apply a 25% subsidy from the Pearson Fund to all equipment bought through the BLVNZ equipment store which is now managed for us by Vision Australia. Although we continue to get very good feedback from people who have used the new webstore, we received a paper highlighting that some lower priced items are still proving to be rather expensive. The Board has now approved a proposal that a subsidy of 50% from the Pearson Fund will now be applied to items totalling less than $500.00. We were advised that this is affordable and we hope this will help make those smaller items that can be really helpful more affordable and easier to buy. Please be aware that system changes are required so this change will not be in place until late August. Communications will be sent to advise you when the change has been implemented.

The Board was advised that the Chief Executive is establishing a safe Working Policy for staff. Staff have been reporting an increasing number of incidents involving clients behaving aggressively. The policy now being introduced clearly empowers staff to withdraw in such situations. Service could be suspended for a client whose behaviour is particularly aggressive, although all care will be taken to ensure proper warnings are first given, and of course clients can lodge formal complaints if they feel a decision is unfair or unjustified. We all have to recognise I think that people in general may be under increasing stress, and other services such as retail stores are all reporting more aggressive behaviour from some customers. It is sad that the organisation has to take this step, but legally the Board is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of our staff. Therefore the Board fully supports this policy.

I reported last time that the Board approved a draft terms of reference for a proposed client reference group. We want this group of clients to be as diverse as possible and provide strategic advice to the Board on BLVNZ services from the client perspective. A survey has now been conducted inviting clients and stakeholders to provide feedback. The project’s steering group will meet shortly to review the feedback and decide on any necessary changes.

The Board noted that clients and members will soon be invited to participate in a survey on how BLVNZ communicates information to our community. This is part of an important project to improve how Blind Low Vision NZ shares information, whether through newsletters, our website, printed formats, or other channels. It will help us understand how and when clients want to receive information, what formats they prefer, and how easy it is for them to access what they need. I urge you to take part and have your say when this happens.

The Board's Client Services Committee received an update on the issue of stray and dangerous dogs in certain areas, mainly affecting Auckland. This problem is impacting Guide Dog Services, and the Committee continues to monitor the situation closely. Staff are actively working to raise awareness of the problem with Auckland Council, and there has been some media coverage to highlight the problem.

The Board thanks everyone who provided feedback on the policies we circulated late last year. We have carefully considered your comments and made a few amendments to the draft policies we circulated. We have now approved these policies and will soon report back to you on our final decisions.

The Board was advised that Natasha Mackie has been appointed to the role of General Manager Client Services. I have already met her as Chair and the Board will meet her at our September meeting. We welcome her to the organisation and I am confident she will quickly come up to speed in her new role.

The Board has been advised that the Contact Centre has been reconnecting with clients who have lost contact with the organisation, with a number of clients renewing their relationship with BLVNZ and exploring new services. The organisation is now committing to continue to proactively follow up with clients after a period of time, to ensure they don't feel lost and forgotten.

Ongoing discussions continue regarding the organisation’s eligibility criteria for service, usually linked to the measurement of a person’s visual acuity. There is a sense that a relatively large number of clients are receiving services despite falling outside the eligibility criteria. The Chief Executive is taking steps to reduce that number and to clarify how the eligibility criteria should be applied from now on.

The Board approved our meeting dates for next year. We will continue to meet in different locations and meet in person with people in the area so we can talk to you about our priorities and you can tell us and the Chief Executive what's on your mind. You can find our meeting timetable on the BLVNZ website but here it is:

• Saturday 7 March: Christchurch.

• Saturday 8 May: Whanganui.

• Saturday 4 July: Tauranga.

• Saturday 19 September: Auckland.

• Friday 20 November: Dunedin.

The AGM for 2026 will be held on Saturday 21 November in Dunedin.

Those are the highlights from our last meeting but there is always a lot more going on. More detail can be found in the minutes of our open meetings which are readily available. Remember also most of our meetings are open to observers and we do our best to provide all the agenda papers to observers. So please contact the Board Secretary if you would like more information or if you would like to observe any of our open meetings. Otherwise just keep your ears, eyes and fingers alert for our announcements so you can always be up to speed with what's going on.

Our next meeting is on 20 September in Auckland. I'll be back with another newsletter after that meeting.