



Submission to the Inquiry
into the
Delivery of Outcomes under the National
Disability Strategy 2010-2020
to Build Inclusive and Accessible
Communities

21st April 2017

SHHH Australia Inc.

SHHH Australia Inc (Self Help for Hard of Hearing People) is a voluntary, non-profit educational organisation dedicated to helping Australians with a hearing loss and whose primary method of communication is through speech. It was founded in 1983 in NSW by a hearing impaired person named Mary Sparke who felt strongly that hearing impaired people needed more than lip reading and hearing aids.

SHHH has since grown and expanded, and now provides information and advice to hearing impaired people and their families, while promoting community understanding about hearing loss. SHHH believes that knowledge is essential to managing hearing loss and as its name suggests, its aim is to assist each hearing impaired person to make informed decisions about the best options for their own hearing management.

Hearing impairment can lead to increasing isolation and difficulties in family, social and workplace situations. However, this is not inevitable. Hearing impaired people can help themselves and also work towards educating the community at large about hearing loss and how to manage it better.

SHHH Australia Inc, as a self-help organization for hard of hearing people, seeks to:

- educate hard of hearing people, their families and friends, and the community at large on the nature and complications of hearing loss and ways of coping with it.
- assist hard of hearing people to integrate into all aspects of society.
- provide referral services for the assistance of and guidance of hard of hearing people.
- publish and distribute a regular journal and other information materials to assist all those with an interest in hearing loss and to raise public awareness of hearing loss.
- encourage and support groups where hard of hearing people, their relatives and friends can come together in fellowship, empathy and concern based on common experience.
- represent and advocate for the interests of hard of hearing people on matters pertaining to hearing and hearing impairment.
- encourage scientific research into hearing loss and associated technology.
- promote the welfare of hard of hearing people and, where appropriate, co-operate with other related organisations.

SHHH Australia Inc would like to offer comments to this Committee into the Delivery of Outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 to Build Inclusive and Accessible Communities.

Introduction and Preamble

In order to build a more inclusive community for hearing impaired citizens, more public awareness and understanding is needed as to how to accommodate and assist those with hearing loss. SHHH considers that some aspects of provision for the hearing impaired are of sufficient importance to warrant being mandated by Government.

In general, most people with impaired hearing are otherwise able bodied, so do not generally have issues with physical access to buildings, workplaces, and transport or public facilities. Similarly, hearing impairment does not automatically mean intellectual impairment. The person living with impaired hearing is living day by day with the disability of restricted communication, and the impact that this has on their personal, working and social interactions.

Accessibility is not just about being able to physically access a building, workplace, entertainment venue or mode of transport. For a person with a hearing impairment or ear disorder, accessibility in the context of this Inquiry is about access to information/communication in their environment, so that he or she can live safely and participate in social, economic, sporting and cultural life within that space or system.

This ability to participate effectively can be difficult to achieve in many built environments, due to poor design and/or lack of communication facilities such as effective signage, hearing loops and other aids.

For many people with hearing loss and who do not use hearing devices, their world is full of silence, random or broken sounds and incomplete messages. They may know that they are being spoken to, and be able to hear some words, but struggle to understand or process the meaning. Even with hearing aids or cochlea implants they will often hear only parts of words or phrases, and have difficulty with amplified background noise. Their aids will usually constitute only part of the solution, and other communication techniques, plus assistive technology built into the environment, is often required and necessary to complement their devices.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

In this Submission SHHH Australia Inc addresses the following Terms of Reference:

- a) The planning, design, management, and regulation of:
 - (i) the built and natural environment, including commercial premises, housing, public spaces and amenities,
 - (ii) transport services and infrastructure

- b) potential barriers to progress or innovation and how these might be addressed:

- c) the impact of restricted access for people with disability on inclusion and participation in economic, cultural, civil and political life

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) The planning, design, management, and regulation of:**
- (i) the built and natural environment, including commercial premises, housing, public spaces and amenities.**

Recommendations:

- *That consideration be given to the introduction of mandatory requirements for the needs of hearing impaired people to be taken into account in the safety management of public and corporate buildings and facilities.*
- *That more consideration be given during the design phase of these spaces, to the beneficial effects of noise absorbing materials and surfaces and soft furnishings e.g. noise absorbing wall construction materials & coverings, carpet, drapes, upholstery which help absorb noise and minimise echo.*
- *That a campaign be implemented to raise awareness amongst employers and businesses of the contribution that hearing impaired people can make to their businesses if assisted with the right technology at the employer's end of the communication channel.*

(ii) transport services and infrastructure

Recommendations:

- *That, if the requirement for consultation with health and disability groups during the planning process of infrastructure and community facilities does not already exist in other government agencies and large commercial developments, such a requirement should be imposed.*
- *That transport help points which are currently audio only should include dynamic real time visual information, including captioning.*

b) potential barriers to progress or innovation and how these might be addressed:

Recommendation:

- *That recognition be given to the need for and value of rehabilitation for people who have been fitted with hearing aids or cochlea implants.*

c) the impact of restricted access for people with disability on inclusion and participation in economic, cultural, civil and political life.

Recommendations:

- *That personal hearing devices such as hearing aids and cochlear implants be considered to be essential tools of trade, to facilitate hearing impaired people entering and maintaining employment, and be an allowed income tax deduction.*
- *That the cost of hearing devices be investigated with a view to making them more affordable.*
- *That an investigation be conducted into policies and services that would contribute to improved educational outcomes for hearing impaired students.*
- *That an investigation be conducted into the provision of early intervention programs to minimise the impact of hearing loss on mental health.*
- *That a public awareness campaign by support groups for the hearing impaired be supported by Government to reduce the social impacts of hearing loss.*

a) The planning, design, management, and regulation of:

(i) The built and natural environment, including commercial premises, housing, public spaces and amenities,

Built environment

- **Signage**

Adequate & effective signage is essential in public places where there is usually a reliance on audible announcements or dialogue e.g. in places of worship, cinemas and entertainment areas. This includes the provision of appropriate and easily recognisable hearing symbols to indicate hearing help or other assistance. This signage is more critical in open spaces where specific services are not easily recognisable or located.

In many such venues hearing loops are available for use, however these systems are only as good as those who know how to use them. Hearing loop systems and areas need to also be easily recognisable and located. Where staff are available to assist, they need adequate training to help patrons access hearing loops, along with training in appropriate communication techniques to use with patrons who have hearing loss.

- **Safety in public places**

A particular issue exists with public transport and public venues when circumstances are not normal, such as during transport disruptions or emergency events. In such cases, the fixed signage is often not relevant, circumstances are fluid and changing quickly, and the agencies involved rely on spoken announcements made by the local staff. The effectiveness of these announcements can be affected by the availability and quality of audio systems, ambient noise, accented speech and confusion or panic. Hearing impaired people find these situations particularly difficult, and could have their safety compromised by their reduced ability to understand what they are being asked to do.

This can be considered as analogous to emergency evacuation procedures for buildings, whereby special arrangements must be made for non-ambulant people during fire evacuations etc.

Recommendation:

- ***That consideration be given to the introduction of mandatory requirements for the needs of hearing impaired people to be taken into account in the safety management of public and corporate buildings and facilities.***

- **Noisy environment design**

The design of many modern public and commercial spaces involves lots of hard surfaces which reflect and amplify unwanted noise, and limited use of soft furnishings, floor or wall coverings. Such spaces can be dominated by the clattering of chairs, banging of cutlery, kitchen noises etc, as well as people talking with each other. This environmental noise makes it more difficult for hearing impaired people to hear and decipher sounds. It is very difficult for hearing devices to effectively discriminate between background noise and the sounds that the listener wants or needs to hear and understand.

Recommendation:

- ***That more consideration be given during the design phase of these spaces, to the beneficial effects of noise absorbing materials and surfaces and soft furnishings e.g. noise absorbing wall construction materials & coverings, carpet, drapes, upholstery which help absorb noise and minimise echo.***

- **Commercial premises**

Offices and other workplaces can also inhibit effective access to employment, in terms of accommodating the needs of hearing impaired workers. Many hearing impaired workers require assistive technology in their workplace, to augment any personal hearing devices they use, in order to perform effectively in the workplace. Such assistance can range from wearing noise cancelling headphones to other communication aids such as volume control and Captel telephones and Bluetooth connectivity.

Recommendation:

- ***That a campaign be implemented to raise awareness amongst employers and businesses of the contribution that hearing impaired people can make to their businesses if assisted with the right technology at the employer's end of the communication channel.***

Natural Environment

The Natural environment is less likely to represent a greater challenge for hearing impaired people than for non-impaired people, because most outdoor locations and activities do not rely on audio communication. In outdoor locations, good clear and appropriate signage is important for both hearing impaired and non-impaired people.

(i) Transport services and infrastructure

Public transport networks can be a particularly difficult environment for the hearing impaired, especially when operations are “out of course” or disrupted. Please see the section above dealing with safety in public places.

Transport for NSW is implementing its Accessible Transport policy, through which it aims to create world class accessibility compliance for all Rail, Bus, Ferry and point to point (taxi) transport systems in NSW. SHHH represents Deafness Forum on the Accessible Transport Advisory Committee (ATAC) through which Transport for NSW is seeking advice from the disability sector.

Along with enhanced access for other disabilities, the following initiatives are being implemented to assist hearing impaired patrons

- Train carriages are being systematically fitted with hearing loop systems to improve the communication of train running information, including during “out of course” circumstances;
- Refurbished railway stations are being equipped with hearing loops in a designated area to assist with patrons hearing station announcements;
- Enhanced signage is being provided to indicate the location and operation of help points, and new stations have audio visual access to help.
- Visual information regarding approaching stops, operational changes etc is being improved in trains, light rail and buses;
- Enhanced education programs are being run for staff in dealing with disabled patrons. For example, all rail customer service staff have attended Radio School for speech and announcement training.

Recommendations

- ***That, if the requirement for consultation with health and disability groups during the planning process of infrastructure and community facilities does not already exist in other government agencies and large commercial developments, such a requirement should be imposed.***
- ***That transport help points which are currently audio only should include dynamic real time visual information, including captioning.***

(b) Potential barriers to progress or innovation and how these might be addressed.

Of particular interest to SHHH is the barrier to progress which is experienced by hearing impaired people who do not achieve the maximum possible benefit from prescribed hearing devices.

Being prescribed a hearing device is only part of the solution to the communication problem for a hearing impaired person. For most people, hearing devices do not completely rectify the hearing loss and some communication challenges remain. Most new hearing device users experience considerable challenges as they get accustomed to their device(s) because they are introduced to unfamiliar sounds and their brains need time to get used to those new sounds.

A process of rehabilitation is necessary for the new hearing device user to maximise the benefits achieved from the device(s). Rehabilitation includes learning communication strategies and techniques to make the most of the enhanced hearing capability as well as to minimise the impact of the remaining deficiencies. It takes time for this to happen and some people seek additional consumer support, encouragement and practical advice to assist in achieving a good outcome.

Without support, users of hearing devices frequently fail to achieve the full benefits of their device(s) or more often than not many simply give up and discontinue wearing them or wear them sporadically such as for “social occasions”. Reports suggest that one third of consumers use their prescribed hearing aids for less than one hour per week. For many of these people the cost of under-treated hearing loss becomes a lifestyle cost in terms of increased isolation and poorer health outcomes.

SHHH and other hearing consumer advocacy groups provide information, peer support, technical and lifestyle advice to people with hearing loss. SHHH, like many other advocacy groups, is an unfunded volunteer organisation and is limited in its ability to reach people in need of its help by limited resources. SHHH has already

forwarded a submission to the Senate Hearing Health and Wellbeing Inquiry recommending amongst other things that recognition be given to the need for and value of rehabilitation for people who have been fitted with hearing aids or cochlea implants. This is currently not promoted widely in the hearing industry and could be achieved through audiology clinics in collaboration with hearing consumer organisations such as SHHH. It should be treated in a similar way to rehabilitative therapy after major operations (e.g. Knee replacements) whereby rehabilitation program costs are covered by health funds.

Recommendation:

- ***That recognition be given to the need for and value of rehabilitation for people who have been fitted with hearing aids or cochlea implants.***

(c) The impact of restricted access for people with disability on inclusion and participation in economic, cultural, social, civil and political life:

Hearing loss is one of the most challenging health issues as it robs us of the ability to effectively communicate and therefore impacts on every facet of life. Because it is largely an invisible disability, its impact often goes unnoticed and unaddressed. Hearing loss has been shown to have a negative impact on overall health and wellbeing and is associated with an increased use of health care services. It is often more debilitating in older adults even when other more physical health conditions are controlled. Unaddressed hearing loss imposes an escalating cost on economic, public health and social systems which far outweigh the cost of addressing it.

Social isolation

With poorer communication and less interpersonal interaction, those with hearing loss often experience social isolation and the consequent challenges this brings. Interaction with carers and family members, work meetings, phone use and social gatherings, theatre entertainment, church gatherings, and eating out with friends all become more difficult and often lead to withdrawal from such activities. For many, even the enjoyment of understanding speech on television is impossible unless the volume is turned up so loud that it becomes an environmental problem for others. Continued denial of many of these activities in turn leads to reduced intellectual and cultural stimulation and an increasingly passive and isolated social citizen.

Even when people have hearing devices, their ability to communicate in social situations can be compromised by inadequate signage, unhelpful ambient noise

conditions, low lighting levels and the lack of built-in technology such as hearing loops.

Employment

Employment experiences for people with hearing loss include:

- a higher level of unemployment and under-employment
- being considered unable to carry out some roles
- being overlooked or considered less favourably for promotions
- a requirement for specialist equipment to facilitate their ability to work, such as captioned telephones, hearing loops, amplified telephones and interpreting services.

Currently, hearing aids and cochlear implants are not considered workplace aids. The financial costs of obtaining those aids are significant and although their use might be essential for a person with hearing loss to be able to work, they don't qualify as a deduction against income tax. Hearing aids are the first line of assistance provided to people with hearing impairment and without these devices many would not be able to participate successfully in the workforce.

Recommendations:

- ***That personal hearing devices such as hearing aids and cochlear implants be considered to be essential tools of trade, to facilitate hearing impaired people entering and maintaining employment, and be an allowed income tax deduction.***
- ***That the cost of hearing devices be investigated with a view to making them more affordable.***

Reduced education levels

It is well known that early diagnosis and intervention of children with hearing loss generally leads to better educational outcomes. There is a high level of educational assistance available both in and outside of school and these children have a better chance of reaching their full potential.

For those who may not receive early intervention or who experience hearing loss later, there are less positive education outcomes. Unassisted, many young people with hearing loss struggle through school and other more undesirable behaviours typically emerge to compensate for reduced self-esteem and lack of achievement.

Poor access to services that assist hearing impaired students to achieve their education goals leads to lower academic outcomes which can ultimately lead to reduced tertiary education and employment opportunities.

Recommendation:

- ***That an investigation be conducted into policies and services that would contribute to improved educational outcomes for hearing impaired students.***

Mental health

Whether it strikes suddenly or progresses stealthily and slowly, the emotional consequences of hearing loss can be overwhelming. Along with fading hearing and serious communication difficulties that can curtail normal interactions, it can lead to social isolation, frustration and ultimately depression.

Older people with hearing loss are much more likely to experience depression than those without hearing loss and there is a growing body of evidence that has identified a strong association between all levels of hearing loss and cognitive decline and dementia. The cognitive decline appears to be greater in people who have hearing loss but do not wear hearing aids. It is thought that earlier intervention and proper management of hearing loss in such people could delay the need for admission into costly residential care.

Further, any delay in access to proper diagnosis and treatment of hearing loss leads to poorer related health outcomes.

Recommendation:

- ***That an investigation be conducted into the provision of early intervention programs to minimise the impact of hearing loss on mental health.***

Stigma of hearing loss

There is also a stigma attached to hearing loss. There is a perception that those with hearing loss have a reduced mental capacity. Perhaps it is because hearing is no longer effortless for these people and requires considerable concentration and attention in order to listen, process and understand what is being said.

Low levels of public awareness of hearing loss contributes to a lack of understanding of hearing loss in the wider community and of its effects on at least one in six Australians.

Recommendation:

- ***That a public awareness campaign by support groups for the hearing impaired be supported by Government to reduce the social impacts of hearing loss.***