

Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

30 July 2008

Dear Sir/Madam,

INQUIRY INTO THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (National Broadband Network) BILL 2008

The Australian Federation of Deaf Societies (AFDS) is pleased to jointly submit to the inquiry in coalition with the Australian Communication Exchange (ACE), and provide the following attached comments for the consideration of the Inquiry into the Telecommunications Legislation Amendment Bill 2008, the National Broadband Network.

AFDS is the peak body representing the interests of organisations providing services to the Australian Deaf community. Consisting of the state Deaf Societies of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia, the Federation was formed in 1966 with the principle objective of improving Commonwealth and State government awareness of issues relating to the sector. As Deaf Societies provide a broad range of services to the Deaf community including employment, welfare and sign language interpreting, Deaf Societies are well placed to provide advice on issues relating to the delivery of services in the sector.

Deaf Societies also work closely with other service providers in the sector, including Deaf Australia (formerly the Australian Association of the Deaf) and the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association.

The Australian Communication Exchange (ACE) is a not-for-profit, Australian organisation dedicated to empowering those who are Deaf or have a hearing, speech or communication impairment, to obtain access to the telephone and other telecommunication networks.

AFDS and ACE believe that with currently expanding technological development for Deaf services, and the global trend to provide Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) as a standard subsidised service, the Federal Government must ensure that the framework and infrastructure of the proposed National Broadband Network will support the requirements of VRI.

Enabling a broadband network that supports VRI would significantly support the *Social Inclusion* policy of the current government. Previously, VRI has only been accessible by the highest-paying users of broadband internet, and therefore has left much of the Deaf community without needed services.

The key recommendations of AFDS and ACE are:

1. Ensuring the minimum uniform speed of broadband provided to the Australian population under the proposed network be above 384 kilobits per second, in order to support the minimum requirement speed for the provision of VRI,
2. Ensure that these minimum speeds reach at least 98% of the Australian population, and therefore cover a large proportion of the Deaf community in Australia,
3. Ensure that the costs of access to the high-speed broadband network are uniform throughout Australia, and that the cost does not disadvantage regional and rural areas.

Enclosed is a project overview undertaken by the Victorian Deaf Society (a member organisation of AFDS) into the provision of VRI in Victoria. This should be used as a guideline - however the report reflects many trends and effects throughout Australia. This report was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Human Services in 2007.

We would be pleased to provide the Inquiry with any further information or to expand on our submission in a hearing in due course.

Yours sincerely,



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Auslan VRI Project Project Overview

1.0 Purpose of this document

The purpose of this document is to provide background information to the Auslan VRI Steering Committee and Advisory Group on the potential benefits of an Auslan Video Relay Interpreting (VRI) Service in Victoria.

2.0 Background

Australian Sign Language (Auslan)

Australian Sign Language – Auslan – is the predominant language of the Australian Deaf community. Auslan uses hand shapes and movements, and facial expression and orientation, and has its own syntax, grammar and semantics. It is not based on English. Auslan has its own way of organising meaning, just as any other language has. It has grammatical rules, a semantic system and a phonological system like all other sign languages. Auslan is based on two-handed signs and incorporates a two-handed alphabet (finger spelling). Auslan users rely on the use of space, movement and facial expression to express all the nuances, force and subtleties of language.

Policies

Auslan is recognised in the Australian Government Language Services Policy and the DHS Language Services Policy as a community language. Around 10,000 deaf Australians currently use Auslan as their community language. Many Deaf Auslan users rely on interpreters in their day-to-day interactions with hearing people. Interpreters are required in many situations.

The Victorian Deaf community

The 2006 Census recorded 2,172 sign language users in Victoria and 7,150 for the whole of Australia. In Victoria, Auslan is the most widely used sign language with 1,907 users, followed by 206 people who reported simply 'sign language', 53 speakers of Makaton and 6 reported using a sign language such as British Sign Language (BSL) or Malaysian sign language, not elsewhere classified by the ABS.

Of the 2119 people who reported using sign language (excludes Makaton, BSL and other sign languages) at home in 2006, 1551 or 73.2% live in Metropolitan Melbourne. In regional Victoria the signing population is concentrated in a handful of municipalities. As might be expected, Victoria's two largest regional municipalities – Greater Geelong and Greater Bendigo – also lead regional areas in number of signers (95 and 69 respectively) followed by Shepparton (43 signers), Ballarat (40 signers).

While the signing population of country Victoria tends to cluster in major regional centres, Gippsland area proves an exception to this rule. Of the 104 signers living in Gippsland region, 34 live in East Gippsland, 25 live in Wellington and Latrobe and a further 10 live in South Gippsland. The establishment of the Gippsland Auslan Interpreting Service (GAIS) has gone some way to alleviating the issue of access to Auslan interpreters. (Source: Draft Report prepared for Vicdeaf by Dr Louisa Willoughby)

Issues

As a result of consultations, projects and ongoing forums held by the Department of Human Services with Deaf community organisations and services, and based on a report commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to determine the supply and demand for Auslan Interpreters (Jan 2004), the following issues and challenges have been articulated:

- ⇒ Shortage of qualified Auslan interpreters, particularly at short notice
- ⇒ Where funded language services are provided through the existing DHS Language Services Credit line system, there is insufficient funding to meet the demand
- ⇒ Lack of awareness and/or commitment by service providers to provide access to professional interpreters
- ⇒ Lack of awareness by Deaf community members about the need to use professional interpreters
- ⇒ Co-opting of family members or friends who can sign, as opposed to interpret, particularly in medical, legal and community settings where there is limited or no funding for Auslan interpreting.

Health care research findings have associated language barriers with:

- ⇒ Higher risk of mistaken diagnosis;
- ⇒ Problems with quality of care;
- ⇒ Discrepancies with regard to prescriptions;
- ⇒ An increase in invasive procedures; and,
- ⇒ Less effective symptom management in palliative care.

When Deaf Auslan users cannot get a professional interpreter, they use family members or friends; cancel or reschedule appointments; or proceed with the appointment and communicate through the use of notes and/or lip-reading.

3.0 A Video Relay Auslan Interpreting Service for Victoria

As part of the 2007-08 State Budget, the Government committed \$2 million over four years to improve access to Auslan interpreting services for Deaf and hard of hearing people through the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) such as high speed broadband and video communication.

In April 2006, the Community Development Unit of Multimedia Victoria (MMV) within the Department of Infrastructure funded Vicdeaf to develop a Business Plan for the establishment of a Videoconferencing IP (Internet Protocol) Platform for Deaf Services in Victoria over five regional sites. The Business Plan by Vicdeaf made a clear case for the need for a Video Relay Interpreting (VRI) service however further work is required to identify the most suitable and cost efficient method of service delivery. In early 2007, MMV's Community Development Unit was transferred to the former Department for Victorian Communities (now the Department for Planning and Community Development (DPCD) under the Citizen Access and Transformation division within the Citizen Engagement and Connecting Communities business unit.

Victorian data on the use of Auslan interpreters by DHS funded agencies indicates that current services are unable to meet the demand for Auslan interpreters. The potential of innovative technology such as video remote interpreting to assist in the provision of Auslan interpreting services has been documented in the UK, USA and Canada.

A VRI service would enable a deaf person and a hearing person to communicate with each other by connecting them to an Auslan interpreter located at a different (i.e. remote) location using ICT. Providing accessible Auslan interpreting services in this way has the potential to improve communication with deaf people in a range of settings such as health, education, finance and legal services.

The Commonwealth Report on Supply and Demand for Auslan Interpreters (Jan 2004) briefly investigated technologies which could improve the provision of Auslan interpreting services. Video Relay Interpreting was one such technology. Responses to the Deaf Auslan user survey showed that many Deaf people (around 40%) have limited experience of this technology and are unsure of its benefits. However, a further 40% of Deaf people indicated they would use video remote interpreting if it were more widely available.

While Deaf people would always prefer to have a face-to-face interpreter, this is not always possible, particularly in health-related and workplace situations. Access to the VRI would help significantly in addressing this gap. Potential benefits include:

- ⇒ Increased range of services people can access
- ⇒ Improved quality of services – less reliance on family or other back-up measures
- ⇒ Improved staff productivity – reduced travel time to regional/rural regions by Auslan interpreters
- ⇒ Faster access to interpreter services via VRI if face-to-face interpreters are not available
- ⇒ Improved access and exchange of information across services and the community
- ⇒ Improved connectivity with regional/rural offices
- ⇒ Improved relationships between service providers, the Department and the community
- ⇒ Increased in-service training options
- ⇒ Reduced waiting time for service delivery