



## **Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee**

**Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia –  
additional information regarding accessible  
buildings for people with hearing impairment**

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## **1. Executive Summary**

Deafness Forum of Australia has been delighted with the way that the Senators on the Committee undertaking the Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia have welcomed input from many organisations and individuals. We hope these submissions and appearances have highlighted the extent of the issues facing Australians who are Deaf, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear.

During our appearance in October 2009, the Committee asked about accessible venues, specifically finding venues with hearing loops.

We welcome the opportunity to provide this additional information.

We reiterate our comments in our original submission, as take the opportunity to provide further information herewith, that has been provided to us by our members all over Australia. From reading the Hansard reports, we are aware that the Senators have experienced difficulties in many locations, in finding accessible venues. Without wishing to be flippant, can I say; “welcome to our world”. This difficulty confronts us on a daily basis.

There is an essential inequity in Australia in the way hearing loss is regarded and funded compared with other health conditions e.g. vision impairment. Hearing health care is not considered by the government to be a primary health care area, and aids and equipment are not treated as essential equipment. Rather, Deaf and hearing impaired adults are expected to budget for and purchase aids and equipment as if they were discretionary consumer items.

Affordability and availability of services, and accessibility of goods, services and premises are of key concern to people who are Deaf, deafblind, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear, and with the ageing population this will become even more vital.

## 2. Our comments

Comments provided by our members all over Australia are reproduced verbatim here.

### 2.1. Victoria

In the Barwon South west region of seven council areas from Geelong to the SA border, only Geelong council have a loop in the meeting room and a counter loop.

In Warrnambool and Glenelg Shires it is on their disability action plan and I am working on getting them put in a counter loop.

Warrnambool, Surf coast, Southern Grampians, Glenelg Moyne shires have portable listeners from a single system up to enough for about 8 users They are not advertised, signed or freely made available so are not used

Council Public consultation is frequently done in unsuitable community halls, pubs or gaming venues. Most of the meeting rooms that councils have are not acoustically suitable.

Other agencies and community organizations vary in their suitability of meeting rooms none I know of have loops

No schools I have been to have loop systems but about 5 state and about 6 catholic schools do have soundfield systems in specific classrooms. Not in halls or assembly areas .There are about 200 + schools in the region.

TAFEs don't have loops systems but the major university

Deakin does have loops in main lecture theatres but not classrooms.

I have attended several council meetings for the City of Stonington in the Malvern Town Hall (Vic) council meeting room and there are no provision for hearing impaired persons if that helps. In fact I am also not aware of any room or offices at the City of Stonington or Port Melbourne in Victoria that have a hearing loop installed.

Performing arts centres in Geelong Warrnambool, Colac Hamilton and Portland have loops but not all work efficiently as no maintenance seems to be performed.

Other than the larger Catholic and C of E, churches in the area don't seem to have them.

Any rural church that has a itinerant minister doesn't have loops and do not have access to portable ones.

Hospitals in the region do not have counter loops, meeting rooms or assistive devices for hearing impaired .



Department of Human Services and Centrelink in the region meeting rooms do not have hearing loops so I assume they do not have counter loops as I have not seen sign.

Warrnambool cinema just burnt down so I have asked them to put in a loop as they have not had one.

Geelong railway station is looped but no other regional station.

Trains are not looped or have visual signage.

## **2.2. New South Wales**

The loop in the University Department of Rural Health located in the grounds of Tamworth Hospital has not been functioning for at least 18 months despite my multiple approaches to have it repaired correctly. They tell me they want to spend the money on other things rather than fixing a loop that “only a few people use anyway”.

The NSW State Parliament Theatre and then several meeting rooms at Canberra's Federal Parliament House had loop systems that were so badly tuned that they were useless. So I didn't use the loop systems even though they were offered because they were not set loudly enough.

RTAs do not have counter loops

Local councils – not all community centres have loops e.g Parramatta – Jubilee Hall

I use Medicare branches in North Sydney, Chatswood and the CBD of Sydney. In none of those have I ever noticed a sign for a loop system - it would be very helpful for me as a hearing impaired person with hearing aids, as quite often they want to ask me questions, and I have to say, 'write it down, or speak more clearly!'. The queue system is great, however, I can see very clearly which desk I need to go to, and when my number is called. What I don't know however, is if I can request some special help if I am deaf or hearing impaired.

Loops at all counters at all Medicare offices needed. Otherwise we can't get the counter we need. And by only placing them at some centres is also discriminatory. Will they pay for me to get a taxi to a Medicare office with a loop?

## **2.3. South Australia**

I sincerely hope the new super Schools being built in Adelaide will have superior acoustics. I have brought this issue to managers several times...not sure how much notice has been taken though.

The South Australian Parliament is NOT looped and despite efforts some years ago our request was dismissed. Since then no action has been taken to request consideration be given to install a loop, because of this outright rejection by the powers that be. Other prominent buildings in South Australia that do not have a loop

are the Festival Centre (that used to have one but destroyed it when the centre was refurbished with new flooring) and the Entertainment Centre that would not even consider it when the building was constructed. These two buildings are South Australia's main entertainment venues yet cannot performances cannot be accessed by the hearing impaired because no loop facilities are provided.

The District Council of Yorke (SA) Peninsula's Council Chambers are acoustically unfriendly. I do not attend council meetings but on occasions have attended meetings of other organisations in the Council chambers. It is a cavernous, echoing room with no PA and the seating is arranged in a large square so that attendees are spaced well apart from each other.

Our Local District Council Offices, in the Barossa Valley, have a phone for the hearing impaired, and I believe their meeting room is looped, however, when I first tried the phone out I could not use it with my cochlear implant, but I must perhaps try it with my Freedom implant – I had gone into the Offices particularly to trial it to see whether it would be suitable for our Health Service.

I do not think any of our halls, etc. in the district are looped – I know of one church only which is looped. Our Health Service are certainly not equipped to handle hearing impaired people, I did buy a special phone to help me in my work – a couple of years ago I was asked to investigate devices, however, nothing ever came from it – they are waiting for our new health service to be built in x years time (a long-standing political issue).

I do not think there are any establishments in the Barossa Valley which would assist the hearing impaired so most of us avoid them as much as possible.

I haven't experience any major problems at the Noarlunga Medicare Branch in South Australia of Medicare. The only thing I hate is that even though I am good with lip reading I cannot always hear what they are saying because if the door opens and closes the noise from the shopping centre comes in and in loud. I feel I need to lean into the counter to hear them but I am used to that.

## **2.4. Queensland**

Nambour hospital does not have a loop system in either their front ground level reception desk, nor at the Emergency Department front desk counter. And why is there not a loop counter at all the Reception counters in all the hospital Wards?

Mater public Hospital in Brisbane DOES NOT have teletext television sets yet, despite many requests for this over the years.

The Centrelink office in Maroochydore, Sunshine Coast does not have an audio loop counter at their front desk. (This is not helped with the fact that they have closed a number of their other front counters and have streamlined these departments over to one or two main reception desks where clients have to wait longer, sometimes for up to an hour to see Staff.)

As far as I know the Sunshine Coast Regional Council public offices (there are a few of them on the Sunshine Coast) do not have any audio loop counters.

The Sunshine Coast has very few (if any) Council meeting rooms for hire or use that include inbuilt audio loop systems, although in Caloundra the local Council is in the planning stage to incorporate an induction loop system at the Events Centre (which is good progress). If Councils have these facilities available, they should be listed and properly identified in their Halls for Hire Register. How else are people going to know if these systems are available?

Sunshine Coast Regional airport does not have any check-in counters with audio loop systems for passengers (it is currently being refurbished.....

Nambour Civic Centre does not have an inbuilt audio loop despite numerous requests for this over the years also.

On a good note, Lake Kawana Community Centre, DOES have an audio loop in one of its smaller rooms and I have used it during an event.

I recently used the refurbished Medicare facility at Capalaba Park, Redland City. It was disappointing that the refurbishment did not include visual indicators for the service positions as they become vacant. My husband and I both have a hearing impairment, and cannot hear the verbal 'next please'. It is particularly awkward if the position is at the end, out of line of sight, as occurred during my visit. I was made aware, by an impatient person in the queue who gave me a nudge and pointed to the appropriate position. As you may appreciate, this was embarrassing." I suggested visual indicator lights and audio loop. The letter I received indicated that a ticketing system and visual indicator would eventually be installed. On a recent visit, I found this had been done - though unfortunately the indicator lights were not functioning on that day. Staff said it had been reported and they were waiting for a technician. Unfortunately there was no response re the audio loop. One of the biggest problems we have found when loops are provided - there are no notices to say they are there!! If there is a notice, there is no indication as to how they are used! We discovered that our local Council has a loop in one of its committee rooms, but they didn't tell anybody, or put up any notices!!!

## **2.5. Northern Territory**

Many schools in the Northern Territory are build with hard surface and don't have carpet or curtain, which make it acoustically difficult for a hearing impaired person (this from a school teacher who is himself hearing impaired).

## **2.6. ACT**

The only hotel I know with loop installed is Rydges Lakeside.

Ainslie Football Club say they have a loop for function rooms but when I booked it for an event it did not work.

The Convention Centre failed to install a loop when they refurbished (out of sync with Building Code, surely?) even though I wrote to them before they started renovations asking them to install a loop.

## **2.7. Tasmania**

The Hobart airport has incorrect signage, relating to a loop system that doesn't work, and staff at the airport don't know what it does anyway!

## **2.8. Australia-wide**

It's mostly schools! I notice many classrooms have very poor acoustics.

As far as acoustic-friendly buildings, far too many public halls have wooden floors and these are NOT acoustic friendly for people with a hearing loss due to reverberation & noise, this is why audio loops work better etc.

Virtually every building in Australia is not hearing friendly, because the emergency egress procedures are based on an assumption that everyone in the building can hear. There need to be visual as well as audible evacuation warnings, and flashing signs at the entries during an emergency.

## **3. Issues**

- Low number of loops installed in public venues including hotels/motels, community centres etc
- Lack of loops in business premises eg shops, which could use counter loops
- Lack of loops in government premises including Medicare offices
- Installation to Australian Standard
- Maintenance of loops
- Correct signage (International Symbol for Deafness)
- Other hearing communication needs including emergency egress, announcements made simultaneous visual and audio format (to meet the needs of those with deafness and those with blindness)
- The need for acoustically-friendly environments, etc.
- Additional costs to hire loops in venues that don't provide them – I don't see anyone charging extra for wheelchair access, how can they get away with it for loops?



### **3.1. Positive stories**

The news is not all bad.

Australian National University - Many lecture theatres with seating capacities up to 160. All are well signposted and have coverage greater than 90%.

University of Canberra - Approx 9 lecture theatres with seating capacities up to 300. All are well signposted and have coverage greater than 90%.

33-35 Brindabella Business Park - Canberra Airport (managed by Canberra Airport Group and available for hire) - 125 seat theatre that is well signposted with 100% coverage.

11 Lancaster Dr. Majura Park (Brand Depot) (managed by Canberra Airport Group and available for hire) - 140 seat theatre that is well signposted with 100% coverage.

Eastlake Football Club - 3 Oxlet St Griffith - Recently upgraded function rooms have loops that cover 2 of the 3 rooms. These rooms are available for hire.

A small portable loop system is available with room hire from the local Council offices in Caloundra.

The Realm Hotel. National Cct Barton - In house system has induction loops but I have heard mixed reports about them. The in house AV staging company (Elite Sound and Lighting) put temp. loops in for small groups and single people as required.

Old Parliament House - Managed by Ginger Catering - Loops in the dining/function rooms are installed on a hire basis by the in house AV staging company (Elite again) Coverage can be for a single person or large group.

Southern Cross Club – Woden - function rooms have recently had loops installed.

Adelaide airport – good loop coverage and signage.

The Village theatre in Geelong does have a loop that works.

Hamilton new theatre run by the Southern Grampians shire will have a full loop.

I would like to congratulate and commend the Belconnen Westfield Branch of Medicare for their attention to access for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired. The blue ear logo is on the front window and also clearly displayed at the back counter which is looped for use with a T - switch.. You can clearly see the counter logo right from the front entrance. This counter with the loop is nearly always has a staff member in attendance and you can take a ticket and go straight to that counter. The service is courteous and thoughtful. I hope all Medicare Branches have the same standard of access for us. (note: only about 6 Medicare offices have loops)

Queanbeyan Cultural Centre - Large performance venue with approx 70% coverage.

Most large catholic churches in the major regional centres, Geelong Warrnambool, Colac, Hamilton and Portland have loops .Some Geelong other large churches Uniting, Cof E, have loop signs.

## **4. Recommendations**

In our original submission we made a number of recommendation relating to this issue, as follows:

*Recommendation 3: improving educational outcomes for children who are Deaf or hearing impaired through better access to interpreters, soundfield systems, captioning and more teachers of the deaf.*

*Recommendation 8: legislation to ensure communication access in the built environment.*

*Recommendation 11: Implement communication accessible transport standards.*

*Recommendation 12: accessible tourism including financial assistance to purchase equipment.*

*Recommendation 13: As per Access to Premises, all government and business premises should have best practice communication access in place including the display of the International Deafness Symbol to indicate access availability of this access.*

*Recommendation 18: better aged care standards to ensure that hearing loss, which affects around 90 per cent of residents, is adequately catered for, through visual smoke alarms, captioned televisions, appropriate volume control phones, and other relevant mechanisms in accommodation.*

*Recommendation 21: Hearing loop maintenance schedules be legislatively linked to fire alarm testing regimes.*



## **5. Conclusion**

In the UK there is a subsidy program for businesses to install loops which could be a good model for Australia.

Given the social exclusion for people with hearing impairment, there is an urgent need for reform for and better provision of communication access in the built environment.

## **6. Contact**

If you have any questions about the information contained in this submission, please contact

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