



Hearing Services Program Review – Terms of Reference

Background

The Australian Government's Hearing Services Program (the program) was established in 1997. The program works towards reducing the incidence and consequences of avoidable hearing loss in the Australian community by providing access to high quality hearing services and devices. It also funds research on strategies to prevent hearing loss or lessen its impact.

Hearing services are delivered through the Voucher and the Community Services Obligation (CSO) streams. The Voucher stream is delivered through a network of private providers as well as Hearing Australia which is a statutory authority established by the *Australian Hearing Services Act 1991*. Through the Voucher stream, eligible Australians can access hearing tests, annual reviews, and fitting of subsidised devices. Eligibility to receive services under the program includes:

- Pensioner Concession Card holders,
- DVA Gold Card holders or White Card holders where the card is issued for hearing loss, or
- People referred by the Disability Employment Services Program.

The CSO stream is a targeted program delivered by Hearing Australia which provides hearing services to:

- Children and young adults up to the age of 26 years
- Adults with complex hearing needs
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Over the past two decades, the hearing health sector has grown. Developments in hearing technology and changes to retail service delivery mean that today's consumer has more choice than ever in both hearing devices and service delivery options.

With a greater focus on early detection and intervention, particularly amongst vulnerable groups, as well as Australia's ageing population, demand for hearing services is expected to increase.

Despite these developments, the current arrangements for delivery of hearing services through the Hearing Services Program have remained largely unchanged since its establishment.

The Australian Government remains committed to improving and refining the support it offers Australians who are hard of hearing to enable them to reach their potential.



Purpose of the Review

An Expert Panel will undertake a program evaluation, investigate and identify reforms, and report on recommended improvements to program design that ensure the program remains client-focused, fit-for-purpose and sustainable.

The Panel will focus on optimising program outcomes for clients, improving the efficiency of the program's delivery, ensuring value for money and good governance, and modernising key components of the program in the context of policy, markets and technological developments.

Scope

The Review will examine:

- whether the program delivers services aligned with clinical need and contemporary service delivery
- how the Voucher and device maintenance payment system compares with advances in the manufacturing sector and product offering
- how technology is changing the provision of services through the program
- how program services are currently delivered and whether access can be enhanced for vulnerable Australians and in thin markets, such as regional, rural and remote areas.

The Review will identify opportunities to:

- improve access to hearing services for low-income earners, vulnerable Australians, those over 65, and those living in regional, rural and remote areas
- refine the current Voucher and maintenance payment system
- improve program design, including compliance and oversight
- implement new targeted initiatives that encourage the provision of services in thin markets and the development of alternative service delivery channels.

The Review should have regard to:

- the needs and experiences of clients
- professional standards developed by the hearing sector
- interactions between the Hearing Services Program and other government programs
- the sensitivity of changes to the program to established business models in the sector
- experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic on service provision
- outcomes from any previous inquiries and consultation.



Function of the Expert Panel

The Panel is to advise the Government on future program settings to support hearing-impaired Australians and maintain appropriate access to program services.

The Panel will consider a series of policy papers, commissioned research, and will consult with industry and the community.

The Department of Health will provide secretariat services, support consultations and assist with the commissioning of independent research and analysis.

Deliverables

The Panel will report to Government through the Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications, and Local Government.

It is expected that the panel will produce a series of issues papers during the course of the Review, and provide a final report in July 2021.

