JANE LEE: Thank you, everyone, for attending our webinar today launching our new discussion paper on the Hearing Services Program.

A brief intro of me. My name is Jane Lee. I am the National Manager of Health Programs of Deafness Forum Australia. Also with us is Hayley Stone. She is our Director, Advocacy and Policy. I'll be presenting, Hayley will be sort of moderating the chat.

If you would like to introduce yourself, please feel free to do so in the chat. There are live captions. You may need to turn them on. If you need help, please shout out in the chat and Hayley will help you. We also have a couple of Auslan interpreters, and again, if you need any support with the interpreters, shout out in the chat and Hayley will help you with that. If there's any other tech issues, please just put them in the chat.

Firstly, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land. I'm joining this meeting from Canberra, the land of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. I pay my respect to their Elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which you are joining us from and extend that respect to any First Nations people joining us today.

Just quickly, who is Deafness Forum Australia? We are the national independent citizen representative peak body for all Australians with hearing challenges, ear or balance disorders, and their families and supporters. Our purpose is to support Australians to live well in the community by making hearing health and wellbeing a national priority.

So for today, our webinar goals. Firstly, our main focus is we want to share gaps and opportunities within the Hearing Services Program and we want to encourage discussion for further improvement. We hope that today you as an attendee will take away - just start thinking about what would make an ideal program and what changes do we need to get there. Just imagine

your ideal hearing service, what does that look like. So we hope that's what you will take away today.

Quickly about the structure of today's webinar - we will start with a brief overview of what is the program. We at Deafness Forum do not administer the program, so it's not our intent to dive deeply into the specifics of the program. Some context of the program is needed. You may or may not be a user of the program services, so we understand that we have to share some context of it. If you need further details about the specifics of the program, we encourage you to go look at the program's website.

We'll talk a little bit about why we did this, why did we put together this discussion paper, what was our objective, what were we trying to achieve? We'll also go a little bit about the what, like what actually did we do to create our discussion paper; the how, what was our analysis process. We will talk a little bit about the current state of the program as we can determine it, and then we'll share some potential issues, opportunities that we think may exist, and then we'll talk a little bit about an ideal state that we think the program should strive for.

We are encouraging discussion. We want to know if we are identifying the right things. We want to make sure that we are striving to improve correctly for those who need it. If you have any questions at all, we ask you to put them into the Q&A option and then we will try to address them at the end. If you have any other comments at all, please put those into the chat. Thank you.

So a quick overview about the Hearing Services Program. The Hearing Services Program - and throughout this presentation I'll probably refer to it as "the program" - it's a Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care program. It provides subsidised hearing services and devices to eligible Australians with hearing loss.

The Hearing Services Program consists of two main components. There is the voucher scheme. The voucher scheme provides a voucher to eligible Australians that can be used at a network of more than 300 providers over 3,000 locations nationwide. Eligible persons are generally 21 years and older and have some other criteria, such as maybe a pension card or member of the Defence Force.

The second component is called the community services obligation, or the CSO component. This is delivered by Hearing Australia. This provides services for eligible persons who are aged under 26, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people who need specialist support or those who live in remote areas, and just a quick reminder that our intent today is not to

present on the specifics of the program. Some of the services that may be available under the program include hearing assessments, device fittings, appointment, maintenance, specialist services.

So, again, this is a discussion paper. We want to encourage discussion. Discussion often comes from reflection. Today, as we present on our paper during this webinar, we ask that you please reflect on these questions: what do you think are guiding concepts for improvement; what can be done better? If you are able to, please jot down your thoughts. If you feel comfortable, feel free to share them in the chat.

So why? Why did we at Deafness Forum decide to do this discussion paper? So we've called our discussion paper "Past Reviews, Future Vision". So the Hearing Services Program has been around for about three decades, approximately. During that time, there's been lots of different reviews. A lot of these reviews seem to have had more of an administrative-type focus to them and potentially may have overlooked participants.

We have heard some anecdotes that there's some uncertainty about the current state of the program. With all of these reviews that have happened over 30 years, what has been done? So we're hoping that perhaps we can gain some clarity by looking at the evolution of the program and we hope that we can gain clarity together with you. So by looking at the gaps that have been made between the recommendations and what has been accomplished so far, we're hoping to identify potential areas for improvement. But most importantly, our goal today is about sharing information with you, sparking discussion, having a conversation. We really want to hear from you about what, where and how can the program be improved because your insights are invaluable. They are what guides us.

So what is our objective? Understand actions taken and identify existing gaps, how can we improve it for all who needs it.

Just a quick note, the program is currently undergoing another review. Our goal is not to replicate or replace that process. We're hoping that having discussion, perhaps we can equip you with some knowledge that can help you to contribute to this review or to future ones. And potentially you may have noticed some gaps as well, so, you know, what are these? If you have noticed some gaps and you want to share them, please feel free to share them in the chat.

So what - what did we do in putting together our discussion paper? We looked at three reviews. Over the last 12 years, we've dived into like three reviews. We looked at a review in 2012, which was mostly about the legislative framework. It focused only on the voucher scheme because

there's two components to the program. The second one we looked at was a review in 2017. It looked at mostly service technology. Again, it was very voucher scheme focused. And then the most recent review was in 2020/2021. That was quite comprehensive and looked at the whole program holistically.

These were semi randomly chosen reviews. They're really meant to be snapshots that paint a big picture. They're not meant to be a comprehensive analysis and, again, we're not trying to replace reviews. For us, it was a unique way to look at the evolution of the program and see what does it look like, what did it look like before, what does it look like now today, what could the future look like?

From looking at the reviews, we did a little bit of analysis and we identified five different categories and then from those five different categories we put away 10 key takeaways, and then from those 10 key takeaways we put away 10 issues and opportunities for improvement. So I won't go through all this here because during this webinar presentation we'll touch on all of these components as we're going through it.

So the how, how did we put together our discussion paper? So we did a bit of thematic analysis. So pretty much a thematic analysis, some of you may be very familiar with it. You can think of it as looking at a puzzle where each piece is a theme. So reviewing the three reviews, we drew out different pieces of the puzzle and we identified some high-level themes.

Now, this is not supposed to be an exact rocket science. There is some subjectivity to it. We looked at best fit, and again, mostly it was about starting a framework to draw out trends, identify patterns, identify takeaways.

So the very first theme that kind of emerged by looking at the different history of reviews was around eligibility and for us that really means it's about recommendations that were aimed about improving access for hearing services to all Australians, including those who are most vulnerable, such as in rural communities, Indigenous communities, who are socially and economically disadvantaged in some way or culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

The second theme that emerged was around equity. So eligibility is about having access, but having access doesn't necessarily mean that you are partaking in the services. Equity is about reducing those barriers to access. So recommendations that were looking at things like bridging the language barriers and things like that, that's the sort of thing that came out in this theme.

The third theme that came out was around service delivery. So these are recommendations that are related to enhancing the delivery of the hearing services, these sorts of things like a better service model, better standards of care, service provider qualifications, more scope of services offered.

The fourth theme is around quality. So this is about improving quality, safety and effectiveness of the different hearing services. This could be, you know, evidence-based practices, clinical guidelines, accreditation standards, quality assurance mechanisms.

The last theme is policy and governance. This theme actually came up a lot because it is a Government-run program and these are recommendations around, you know, improving policy, governance structures, funding mechanisms, basically governing the delivery of hearing services.

So these are the five themes that we broadly saw across the history of the different recommendations that have been going through the program, and again, these recommendations could span multiple - recommendations could span multiple categories, but we tried to classify them according to best fit. Next we'll go over a little bit about the high-level trends that we saw within each theme.

So within the eligibility theme - and again, this one is about improving access for hearing services for all Australians, which is including those who are often vulnerable or marginalised in some ways. So some of the high levels for the trends that came across here was, I mean, understandably, let's improve access for underrepresented communities. Recommendations around creating tailored service pathways, so this could be just simply making things a lot more accessible for participants of all backgrounds to make informed choices for the website, it could be as simple as that; prioritising accessibility in aged care, so improving accessibility and services for those in aged care residence.

The theme around equity - and again, this one is about reducing barriers to access. So some of the broad trends that came across recommendations here was about being more inclusive through additional services, such as, you know, interpretation for non-English speaking speakers, teleaudiology, enhancing those services, so making sure the additional services exist, but not just they have them but they've been enhanced and they're actually good services, they actually are working, they're actually reducing barriers, they're actually fostering equity.

And then some of the themes came across about simplifying services to

break down barriers and this one is a little bit trickier to explain. It was about making the services easier for those who may struggle to understand complex structures. So it could be about prioritising services for those with greater needs, it could be ensuring that service supports actually include additional supports such as psychosocial and rehabilitation supports.

Our third thing was service delivery. Again, this one was about enhancing delivery of hearing services - yes, making better service delivery.

Some of the broad sort of trends that came out, the first one was around having clear information. To be able to access good services, you need to be able to understand information, so some of the recommendations were saying that there was a response to recognise the information around hearing services and available technology is inadequate. This is also including things like having simple decision-making support tools to understand what services you need. Good service delivery, clear information.

Aligning with other funded services - we acknowledge that the Hearing Services Program exists amongst an ecosystem of other services that are funded support hearing services, but how do they align, how do they work together? There's a little bit of confusion there. So that was one of the recommendations and the trends that came across.

There was sort of a trend that came across about optimising the delivery through market dynamics. This was basically about having greater price transparency, better technology innovation, encouraging healthy provider competition so that participants could be empowered to have more choice in quality accessible services.

Our fourth theme was around quality. So quality again - quality is about improving quality safety effectiveness around the services. One of the trends that came across is increasing provider disclosure. Participants should be able to better clearly understand price, technology. Providers should disclose more how this happens.

Having some sort of standardised measurement approach to ensure that services are delivered in a way that aligns with some recognised agreed professional standards. Having some sort of a monitoring and evaluation framework to make sure that the program's performance is working and is continuously improving.

The last theme, and this is sort of - this is a theme that comes across as not surprising with a government program - is around policy and governance, having some clarity in objectives. The program goals,

governance structures - this one came across a lot that objectives should be clearer. Making sure the program does modernise and adapt as needs evolve, so as the needs of persons evolve, industry evolves, the program should modernise and adapt with those changing needs. And the program should prioritise an outcomes focus approach, and this outcomes should be underpinned by robust and consistent policy and legislating governance structures.

So we just went through a little bit about the thematic analysis, the different themes that we were seeing by looking across a history and evolution of the program through recommendations. From those top trends and patterns in the thematic analysis, we then were able to draw away some key takeaways and these reviews were done in consultation with community and stakeholders, so a lot of these recommendations were coming from the community and from stakeholders.

So reflecting on what we did, there were some emerging patterns that came across that consistently different stakeholders were saying through all the different views that were going to government. So broadly, they're saying, you know, the program really has to prioritise the participant experience of outcomes; the program has to expand eligibility; it has to offer more flexible services; it has to provide clearer information to the people that it serves; its objectives should be clear; it should have efficient governance; it should measure its outcomes; it should have sustainable funding; for the program to do what it does, the funding needs to be sustainable; it should constantly innovate with technology; and it should have a smooth interaction with participants of other funded services - again, there's other services out there, but they should interact smoothly.

Next we took these takeaways and then we used these to try to understand what the current state of the program might be, our analysis, our takeaways, what is potentially the current state.

Okay, so we did apply some principles to try to understand this, what the current state might be. We basically avoided assumptions. So we tried to kind of not assume a government response or a lack thereof response. We didn't want to make unwarranted conclusions. We wanted to see what was there and not make assumptions. We wanted to focus on what was known status. So what we mean by this is what we can reasonably infer from publicly available information. There could be something going on with the program that we don't know about. But if the average consumer wanted to get an understanding of the program, what can reasonably be inferred from that?

We were very program centric. We concentrated on the program itself. We

are trying to avoid commentary about other funded services. Again, we acknowledge that the hearing services operates within a complex system. There's complementary - sometimes there's overlapping services. Sometimes some of the recommendations that have come through may have been delegated outside of the program itself to other parts of government. So there's a lot of complexities involved.

Our discussion paper is not perfect. We are operating on limited resources, we're small, we operate on limited time, so we applied some principles just to try to understand broadly what the current state might look like. And this basically just gave us an idea of some potential unresolved issues and trying to lay groundwork to drive positive change.

So current state summary - and again, we're comparing the current state to the 10 key takeaways. So one of the first key takeaways was about prioritising participant experiences. We felt that there wasn't a lot of easily accessible public information around the participant experience. So we're not sure how participants are experiencing the program, are they doing well? This we felt was lacking.

Expanding eligibility - there seems to be some efforts being made to try to have services more accessible and eligible for different groups. Like, for example, they put together a First Nations unit, they're doing some more research in CALD communities, but there's still a lot of opportunities for improvement.

More flexible services - the program has made some effort to try to simplify some processes to make it easier for people to access services. There still needs to be - which is a step forward, but there needs to be a lot more flexibly in the types of supports it actually provides. Providing clearer information.

The program's website does offer information, but it could be a bit more visible and a bit more accessible. We didn't find it to be the most easy to access information, so it could be better. Clearer objectives - the program does list within its website some general goals, but there could be some more explicit and measurable objectives and there is some argument that maybe these objectives should be actually embedded in legislation so that could improve accountability and continuous improvement, rather than sort of a general goal on the website.

They put together a monitoring and evaluation framework that was established in July 2023, so that's sort of positive steps, but it was very hard to kind of see what happened with that. We're not sure - has there been reports, has things been done, so it's there, but what's happened with

it? There's also been sort of some discussion about just improving things around the program, just simple things like changing terminology, like renaming the voucher scheme, measuring outcomes.

They do provide quarterly statistics, but they seem to be more very operational metrics rather than participant-based outcomes. So some standardised measurements that's aligned to professional bodies might provide more meaningful insights, sustainable fundings. This is a little bit outside of our scope, I think. We believe this needs probably a lot more economic analysis here.

Innovating with technology. They have introduced things like telehealth, but obviously, you know, more things are needed, more technological innovations, maybe advanced hearing aids, maybe assistive devices. Having smooth interaction with participants for other funded services. This is - again, it's quite complex (inaudible) provide a smooth experience, but it's a little bit difficult to ascertain what's happening (inaudible).

Alright, so this is the ocean. Just a moment to reflect and to pause. I find an ocean a very sort of calming sort of imagery. So we've just shared a lot of information. We've talked through our process, we've talked through our themes, we've talked through what we think is the current state, and before we dive into like our issues and opportunities, let's just take a quick moment just to reflect what's something that has stood out for you? Is there something that you've learned? Jot down the first thought, idea or feeling that comes to mind and if you feel comfortable, feel free to share it in the chat. If you want to as well, do a quick stretch, stretch your arms up, hold your breath, and just take a moment to reflect.

At the beginning of this webinar, we did ask you to consider some questions. Doing this, we said think about what do you think are guiding concepts for improvement and what can be done better. So just a quick moment to just reflect and pause and we'll now move into some of the issues and opportunities that we think exist. We may be wrong and again, we welcome discussion are we on the right track?

So we've gone through our analysis process, our takeaways, our current steps, issues and opportunities - potential issues and opportunities. We think a lot more can be done within the aged care settings to enhance services and improve communication and reduce risk of abuse. We think more can be done for culturally and linguistically diverse communities to improve services. We think more can be done in rural and remote communities, such as expanding tele audiology services. We think more can be done for low-income groups, such as making services more affordable. We think more can be done for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander, First Nations to just strengthen services and supports for them.

We think more can be done around psychosocial support. There's a lot of linkage about depression and anxiety and isolation and lower mental health related to hearing loss. We think a lot more could be done here. We think it could be better integrated into service offerings, so not just about providing hearing technology to those who have hearing loss, but also thinking about other ways to support them.

We think the program objectives could be clearer, perhaps they should be embedded in legislation to actually make them more accountable. We think there could be better provider training and education, maybe some standardised training, maybe some specialist courses, maybe some cultural competency courses so that the parties can work with different cultures well.

The monitoring and evaluation framework, it's there, but the process could be a bit more transparent so that - you know, it's one thing to have a framework, but is the framework actually working? And technology innovation, opportunities to improve continuous horizon scanning for opportunities to improve in technology.

We think the program should lead government efforts - it should be consistent, high-quality, it should be coordinated hearing healthcare. We think it leads. We think if it's not leading, then service delivery, quality participant experiences will stay inconsistent and we want people to have consistent hearing health experiences.

So analyse the takeaways, issues, opportunity. Now, what do we think is the ideal state? What is an ideal state? The program has gone through so many reviews. We don't really think the program needs to continuously go under reviews over and over again. We think the program needs to address some of the issues, opportunities that have been existent, have continued to emerge (inaudible) and potentially have not been fixed yet.

So an ideal state of the program, what is a good program? We would say here at Deafness Forum that it's about the person. The Hearing Services Program should prioritise the person. We know that 1 in 6 experience hearing loss and that this is predicted to grow to as big as 1 in 4 by 2050. We also know that not everybody is able to access the hearing support they need for a variety of reasons and we think the program can do better.

Like imagine the scenario where someone from an underrepresented group, say a rural community, they're struggling to access hearing services, they're feeling increasingly isolated from family and friends, but if we can

create tailored pathways with safe frameworks that can empower them to get their access to the hearing services they need, how transformative can that be and that's the power of prioritising the person. So let us ask you to think a little bit like how do you think person-centred care can transform services? Please share in the chat.

Okay. So again, we've gone through thematic analysis, our takeaways, what we think the current state is, what issues and opportunities might exist, what could be the ideal state, and we are saying the ideal state would be a program that prioritises the person, but what do we mean by that? So we'd like to think a little bit about - we'd like to propose a little bit about a program improvement framework, not just like constantly reviewing the program, but actually looking through it through a framework that improves the program.

So we think there's sort of five points to a good program improvement framework to reach the ideal stage. It's about prioritising the participant-centred outcomes; it's about emphasising person-centred supports; it's about recognising whole person health; it's about making sure education and information is accessible; it's about applying an equity lens - and we note that we are using the terminology "person-centred", but we recognise that hearing loss exists on a spectrum and can impact all ages and all stages, so in some instances person centred really means family centred.

So we want you to think - if we think about the program like a living organism, so like a living organism, it would rely on numerous different components to function, from small to large organs, but the key organ of an organism is the heart. So if the heart was to stop, the whole organism would just collapse, it would no longer exist. So we think that the participant is basically the heart of the program and the program should also centre around the heart, which is the participants.

So as we near our end, we're just going to recap a little bit what we did - three reviews, five themes, ten key takeaways, ten potential issues and opportunities, and a five-point program improvement framework.

We believe all Australians should have access to tailored hearing health support at every stage of their life. We think the program could lead the way. The program has already been critical in providing hearing support to Australians over many years, but more can be done and we can do more by working together.

We stated at the beginning and we said one of our aims is that we want you to take away - just to start thinking what would make an ideal program,

what changes we need to get there, what values should guide this. Please start thinking - you can use the chat if you want as well. We asked you to think about these questions throughout the presentation, what you think are guiding concepts for improvement, what can be done better. And in closing, we would like to ask you what would an ideal program look like?

So thank you. That's our presentation. The paper can be read and shared. It's on our website deafnessforum.org. It's under the issues tab. If you want to get in contact, my name is Jane Lee. I am the National Manager of Health Programs. You can reach me by email or you can connect and message me on LinkedIn.

We would like to - if you're able to, please provide us some feedback on our webinar. This will just take a quick moment to do. If you have any questions, please put them in the Q&A and we can sort of try and address them. Alright.

HAYLEY STONE: We just received a message, Jane, just to say that Anthea will drop you an email with some thoughts.

JANE LEE: Okay. Thank you, Anthea, look forward to it. I don't see any questions. But again, if you want to reach out to me, please send me an email. Please connect on LinkedIn. Please go and read our discussion paper and we encourage you to read through it and share it.

And if we don't have any questions, then we would like to give you all an early mark today, but we thank you for taking time out of your busy day to join us. Alright. Thank you, everyone. Have a good, pleasant day. Thank you. Alright. Bye.