

## **Submission to NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services**

### **Improving access to early childhood health and development checks (and response to supplementary question).**

**From: The Shepherd Centre for deaf children**

**Date: 20 December 2024**

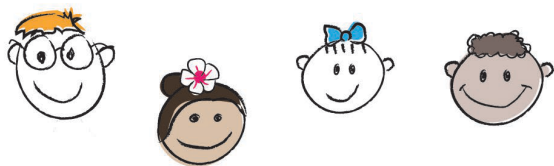
#### **About Us**

The Shepherd Centre is a world-leading organisation dedicated to supporting children with hearing loss from birth and through their school years, and beyond. For 50 years we have empowered thousands of children to develop crucial listening, spoken language, and social skills, enabling them to thrive in their communities in NSW and the ACT, and recently in Tasmania.

Our mission is to empower generations of children with hearing loss to listen, speak, and have a voice. To do this, The Shepherd Centre provides a comprehensive range of programs, including early intervention for babies and toddlers, school readiness support, teenager mentoring programs, implantable hearing solutions, and telehealth services for families in rural and regional areas.

Our innovative and family-centred early intervention approach ensures that children are able to transition to mainstream school with spoken language skills comparable to their hearing peers. This support continues through school for those with later diagnosed hearing loss, and the development of critical executive functioning and social skills, and wellbeing, mental health and self-identity with peer to peer mentoring.

The Shepherd Centre continues to expand its impact through new initiatives and facilities, including the recently opened purpose-built centre in Oran Park, South-Western Sydney, launching the first early intervention services in Japan for deaf children to develop spoken language, HearHub a digital platform for professionals, hearing health research, and two new centres in Tasmania. Serving close to 900 families annually, the Centre's holistic approach addresses not only the child's needs but also supports their families through tailored services and inclusive programs. By integrating cutting-edge technology, telehealth platforms, and community partnerships, The Shepherd Centre remains at the forefront of transforming the lives of children with hearing loss across Australia and enabling a world of choice.



## **Response to Supplementary Question by the Committee:**

*Your evidence suggests introducing a hearing screening program with Brighter Beginnings.1 To what extent do the Brighter Beginnings health and development checks screen for hearing loss and how can this screening be made more comprehensive?*

### The Shepherd Centre's Response

To our knowledge, Brighter Beginnings, does not include screening programs for hearing loss at this current time. We are actively reaching out to the Brighter Beginnings team to explore opportunities to incorporate hearing screening, and have started similar discussions with the Sydney Children's Hospital network to benefit from the learnings and application of the comprehensive early childhood vision screening systems in place.

## **The Need for Universal Preschool Hearing Screening in NSW**

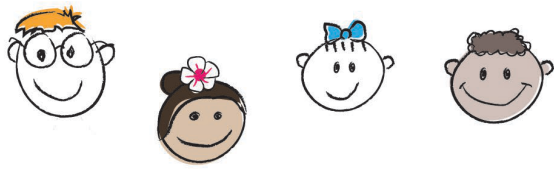
Hearing is fundamental to a child's language development, communication, and cognitive growth. While Universal Newborn Hearing Screening (UNHS) programs have been effective in detecting congenital hearing impairments, they fail to address late-onset or progressive hearing loss. This gap leaves many children undiagnosed until they face developmental and educational challenges.

In NSW, while newborn screening identifies hearing loss in approximately 1 in 1,000 children, an additional two children per 1,000 will have a hearing loss by school age. Despite this, no structured preschool hearing screening program exist in NSW, leaving families without timely support and intervention. Vulnerable populations, such as Aboriginal children (up to 40% of whom experience hearing impairments due to otitis media), children in rural and remote areas, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, are disproportionately affected by systemic barriers to care. A recent survey by The Shepherd Centre of over 1000 parents indicated 91% would like their child's hearing screened prior to starting school.

## **The Case for Universal Preschool Hearing Screening**

### **Developmental and Societal Impacts:**

Undiagnosed hearing loss significantly impacts a child's ability to acquire language, develop literacy skills, and integrate socially. These challenges often result in academic difficulties, misdiagnoses of learning disabilities, and increased reliance on special education services. Furthermore, hearing loss can lead to social isolation and emotional struggles. Early identification and intervention mitigate these risks, improving outcomes for children and reducing long-term costs to the education and health systems.



Children are **unable** to determine whether they have a hearing loss, unless their family, educator, or GP pick up on this issue. In the majority of cases, children's hearing can go undetected and impact their educational, developmental, and social skills, resulting in lifetime expenses to the child, their family, and the taxpayer.

### **Screening Methods and Feasibility:**

Proven screening methods, such as Otoacoustic Emissions (OAE), Pure Tone Audiometry, and Tympanometry, are efficient, reliable, and cost-effective. Research consistently demonstrates that early detection through systematic screening programs saves public resources by reducing the need for special education and therapy. It is until recently we have the technology to ensure accuracy and capacity to conduct hearing screening. The barrier left is funding to make this happen just like that for vision screening in NSW.

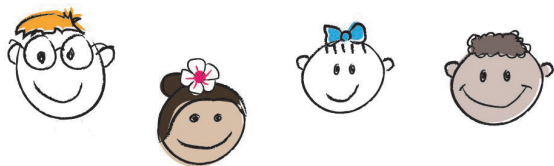
### **Addressing Barriers**

Currently, hearing checks are not a routine part of preschool health assessments in NSW. Parents are often unaware of the risks associated with undiagnosed mild-to-moderate hearing loss, and follow-up rates for identified cases remain low due to logistical challenges. These gaps disproportionately affect children in rural and remote areas, CALD families, and Aboriginal communities.

To overcome these barriers, we recommend:

1. Integrating hearing screens with existing preschool developmental health assessments and systems.
2. Conducting accessible screenings in preschools and childcare centres.
3. Utilising telehealth platforms to extend services to remote areas.
4. Targeting high-risk groups through culturally appropriate outreach programs.

We are committed to working with Brighter Beginnings, NSW Health, and other partners to implement these recommendations with support and funding from the NSW Government.



## Recommendation

We urge the NSW Government to **prioritise the implementation of universal preschool hearing screening**. Such a program would ensure:

- early identification of hearing loss,
- equitable access to intervention,
- optimised developmental outcomes for all children.

By addressing this critical gap, NSW has the opportunity to ensure through early childhood health checks that include hearing, there will be a generation of children who are prepared to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We thank the Committee for the opportunity for us to discuss this further at the Parliamentary hearing and look forward to collaborating on solutions to improve hearing health outcomes for children in NSW.

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