

**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: The Shepherd Centre

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The Secretariat
 Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports
 Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales
 Legislative Council
 NSW Parliament House
 6 Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

9 April 2025

SUBMISSION FROM THE SHEPHERD CENTRE - FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORTS NSW

Thank you for the opportunity for us to provide a submission with regards to foundational and disability supports available for children and young people in NSW. Like that for many providers, alongside many deaf children of all ages and their families, we are in limbo in relation to what will foundational supports look like, how will it be funded, and who will be eligible.

However, regardless of the uncertainty, we will provide evidence of what supports are required for children with hearing loss as a disability, to provide an insight into what foundational supports may be required to support.

Background

The Shepherd Centre is a world-leading, child-safe NDIS service provider and specialist in helping children with hearing loss learn to listen and speak. For over 50 years, we have helped thousands of children reach their full potential and realise their world of choice in life. Our programs meet the needs of children at all ages and stages; from our world-leading early intervention system for babies and toddlers to our mentoring program, "Hear for You", which supports school-aged children and teenagers with hearing loss.

The Shepherd Centre is a part of the First Voice Alliance, an international member-based organisation providing evidence-based early intervention services to empower children who are deaf or have hearing loss. First Voice members in Australia provide listening and spoken language services to over 1,000 children across the country. The services provided enable the development of communication, integration into mainstream education, chosen employment, and social inclusion within the hearing world.

Over 70% of children achieve speech and language skills on par with peers with normal hearing by age 5. Outcomes for early intervention graduates demonstrate:

- 95% attendance in mainstream high schools.
- 86% completion of Year 12.
- 82% acceptance into tertiary education or vocational training.
- 77% regular employment experience.
- 84% participation in community activities.



This experience provides First Voice member organisations deep knowledge and experience in the supports required for children with hearing loss and their families to learn to listen and speak.

Foundational Supports

The Shepherd Centre and First Voice are committed to ensuring a robust NSW Foundational Supports Strategy for children with hearing loss and their parents/guardians, supporting them from birth through school transitions, wherever they are in Australia.

Families of young children with hearing loss are facing increasing challenges due to the fragmented nature of the NDIS. This is impacting the scheme's ability to ensure deaf children, and their families can access early, appropriate, and evidence-based care and support. Timely and effective delivery of these services is essential for children to reach their full potential, transition smoothly to school, reduce reliance on NDIS support, and become active and independent members of society.

If the right mix of specialists supports are provided, in alignment with internationally accepted best practice guidelines, children with hearing loss can develop age-appropriate speech and language and transition successfully to mainstream school, reducing reliance on the scheme and other state government supports throughout their schooling years.

Five Key Issues

The Shepherd Centre and First Voice **raise 5 key** issues for consideration to support the development of children with hearing loss in the NSW Foundational Supports strategy.

1. Children with hearing loss of all levels require individualised therapeutic specialist early intervention services, regardless of functional severity

There is a strong and robust evidence base detailing the impact early educational intervention has for children with all levels of hearing loss and their families. This must remain a top priority. This may be a combination of specialised therapeutic supports and capability building skills for family members dependant on need. It must not be reliant on functional performance particularly in the early year, as the specialist supports are enabling speech and language development, without which their development can and will fall behind.

2. Specialists supports need to be in place within 2 months of diagnosis

To avoid delayed auditory and brain development, early intervention requires the rapid detection and diagnosis of deafness, timely provision of hearing devices to ensure early access to sound, and access to specialist early intervention therapy.

NSW has one of the leading State Wide Infant Screening Hearing (SWISH) programs in Australia, let alone the world, capturing over 95% of newborn across its hospitals. However, the pathway has a gap between confirmation of diagnosis, to an early intervention service. These delays cause confusion, fear, and uncertainty for families.

Specialist navigators with experience in and knowledge of hearing loss are required to guide families from diagnosis to specialist services. Building on the successful Queensland Hearing Loss Family Support Service, these navigators would provide immediate support post-diagnosis, assist families at key life transitions (e.g., school entry, high school, tertiary education), and improve engagement rates with services, minimising poor listening and language skills, negative impacts on education, social development, and employment outcomes through delays in access to appropriate intervention.

3. Funding levels are required that cover the specialised nature of supports required to ensure children with hearing loss can reach their potential

Without appropriate levels of funding for children with hearing loss, providers are unable to provide the necessary and recognised training, meet compliance standards, mitigate against business risks such as cyber protection and pay the corporate overheads required. There is a significant risk The Shepherd Centre and other specialist providers will go out of business during the transition, without incentives to continue to invest and innovate.

This will lead to delays in children's speech, language and literacy skills, further straining overloaded health and education systems.

4. Outcomes-based measures to ensure accountability, informed decision-making, service quality, policy development and the choice and control of participants.

Mechanisms must be in place for the quality of care to be measured in the new environment of Foundational Supports, including the ongoing need for practitioners to be part of a professional body to guarantee consistent and high standards. These measures should move beyond provision of service and focus on demonstrable outcomes

5. Group Programs to Develop Capacity, Networks, and Life Skills

The individualised NDIS funding model overlooks the value of group programs and skill building of parents and family members, which are essential for children with hearing loss and their families. Group sessions foster peer support, shared experiences, and capability building, but are often underfunded or inaccessible. The Foundational Supports Strategy can support the provision of funding to enable providers to host professional, supervised group programs, including parenting workshops, Supported Playgroups, Social Skills Workshops, Mentoring Programs.

These programs should involve individuals with lived experience of hearing loss, ensuring relevance and impact.

Why Group Programs are Important for deaf Children?

Furthermore, the “**why**” of group programs, is because for deaf children an impact of hearing loss of any degree is being able to interact with others within their community, school peer group, and throughout everyday life. Hearing devices (Cochlear Implants, Hearing Aids, and Bone Conduction Devices) do not operate as efficiently as normal hearing, and do not capture verbal social and sound depth clues as do hearing peers. Hence why group social skills, mentoring, and music/drama programs are crucial to providing the foundational confidence and support for deaf children from toddlers to high school age.

Recognising the importance of family support for deaf children, the provision of mentoring programs and facilitated group discussions cultivates a robust support network throughout children's developmental trajectory towards adulthood. Support for individuals with hearing loss often comes from family throughout their lives, evolving from parents/guardians in early years to siblings or cousins as they age. We believe Foundational Supports should be targeting this required need for all children of any level of hearing loss in NSW and beyond.

Our Questions and Concerns

To ensure the success of the National Foundational Supports Strategy, The Shepherd Centre raises the following concerns:

- a. **Assessments:** How will assessments be structured—based on current or future needs?
- b. **Financial Sustainability:** Providers face challenges without additional funding from philanthropy or grants. What measures will ensure their financial viability during the transition?
- c. **Roadmap Development:** How will a roadmap be developed for children transitioning from the NDIS to Foundational Supports, to ensure 'cliff edge' situations are avoided where vulnerable children and families fall out of the scheme and related supports and aren't picked up in the state-based Foundational Support system.
- d. **Innovation and Compliance:** How will the strategy incentivise providers to invest in innovation and sustain high standards amidst rising costs?
- e. **Quality Assurance:** What mechanisms will states implement to monitor and ensure care quality?
- f. **Professional Standards:** Will practitioners be required to adhere to professional body standards to maintain consistent care?

This submission underscores the critical role of foundational supports in transforming outcomes for children with hearing loss and their families. The Shepherd Centre is ready to collaborate and achieve a future where every child has the opportunity to listen, speak, and thrive.

We welcome the opportunity to share more information to the Legislative Council Select Committee on any aspect of the Terms of Reference. We are committed to ensuring the NSW Government today and tomorrow gets Foundational Supports right in design and



implementation, not just for the people of NSW, but for all children with disabilities and their families who need reassurance of their futures.

Please don't hesitate to contact me should more detail on any of the above points be helpful.

Kindest Regards,

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