

HEARING HEALTH FORUM EU

Active Ageing through Healthy Hearing: The Importance of Hearing Screening in the EU European Parliament event

Wednesday 29 November 2023, 14.30-16.30 CET

The Hearing Health Forum EU organized a policy roundtable discussion bringing together influential stakeholders and experts from across Europe to discuss active ageing and the importance of hearing screening in the EU. Co-hosted by MEP Alex Agius-Saliba, together with MEP Radka Maxova, the roundtable addressed vital issues surrounding adult hearing health such as hearing loss, associated comorbidities, screening, diagnosis, treatment, and the social and economic impacts of hearing health.

The core recommendations from the event include:

- Creating a European Hearing Health Strategy
- Establishing standardized adult hearing screening tests in all Member States
- Adopting a European Parliament Resolution to address the subject of hearing loss
- Integrating hearing loss into active ageing policies
- Raising the issue of hearing health through mental health initiatives
- Creating a comprehensive health policy and prevention-oriented approach to address the needs of an ageing population
- Creating a European Declaration on Older Persons
- Organizing a European Year of Older Persons

Speakers present:

- Moderator: Dr. Patrick D’Haese, Director of Public Affairs, MED-EL
- MEP Alex Agius-Saliba (S&D, MT), European Parliament
- MEP Radka Maxova (S&D, CZ), European Parliament
- Dr. Andrew Sciberras, President of Maltese Audiologists Association
- Gonçalo Lobo Xavier, Vice-President at European Economic and Social Committee
- Stefan Schreck, Advisor for stakeholder relations, DG SANTE, European Commission

1. Welcome and introduction by Dr. Patrick D’Haese, MED-EL

Dr. Patrick D’Haese gave a warm welcome to the attendees and outlined the programme of the event.

- **Dr. Patrick D’Haese introduced the policy roundtable co-hosted by MEP Alex-Agius Saliba and MEP Radka Maxova.** The speakers would address the EU’s ageing population, the need for EU adult hearing screening programs and put forward policy recommendations for a European Hearing Health Strategy.
- **Dr. Patrick D’Haese announced the 360° virtual reality experience,** where attendees would be able to experience differing levels of hearing loss in and around the European Parliament.

2. Presentation by Dr. Andrew Sciberras, Maltese Audiologists Association

Dr. Andrew Sciberras shared the key findings of the collaborative adult hearing screening pilot project in Malta and the burden of hearing loss in Europe.

- **Dr. Andrew Sciberras introduced his background.** He has been practicing audiology for 24 years, working for the government and the public health sector and since 2015 in the private sector. He mostly has experience in cochlear implant programs and screening programs for children. **Using Kochkin (2011) methodology, Dr. Andrew Sciberras estimated that in 2014, 1.4% of Maltese population had hearing loss.** He observed that over half of the population living with hearing loss were people over 60 years of age. He also observed a lower patient turnout to his medical office despite the prevalent hearing loss within the older community. Possible reasons are lack of education and awareness, no official screening programs, and complicated bureaucratic referral system.
- **Following these initial study results, Dr. Andrew Sciberras called for standardized adult hearing screening programs to improve the quality of life, cognitive function, social life and general and mental health.** Hearing loss has multiple comorbidities such as dementia, stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, diabetes, and heart problems. By addressing the hearing loss early on, there is a decrease in all comorbidities. In his opinion, the screening programs should start at the age of 40 years instead of 50, as suggested by the WHO's World Report on Hearing.¹ Most importantly, screenings should be free of charge and not a part of advertising, to increase the likelihood of people seeking medical attention and to increase the promotion of hearing health.
- **To support this cause, Dr. Andrew Sciberras together with MEP Alex Agius-Saliba, the Ministry of Inclusion and Quality of Life, and the Maltese Association of Audiologists, started the free adult hearing screening pilot project.** They tested 700 people, 597 of them had documented results due to issues in recording the data. From that number, 264 people (44%) had untreated disabling hearing loss. The highest number of participants were in the 60-70 age group.
- **To tackle untreated hearing loss, Dr. Andrew Sciberras put forward four recommendations:**
 1. Implement a basic and fast standardized screening test with good sensitivity, specificity, and guidelines, done by screeners, with distortion product otoacoustic emissions, automated audiometry, or full audiometry.
 2. Develop a European Hearing Health Strategy in collaboration with EU countries.
 3. Establish a good referral pathway to local public audiology centres that can fully test within a reasonable timeframe.
 4. For governments to create a reasonable timeframe for management of hearing loss as well as reaching out to people living with untreated hearing loss.
- Dr. Andrew Sciberras added that before introducing the screening, we need to address the stigma of using hearing aids, lack of information and accessibility to services, lack of professionals in the field of audiology and the fragmentation of financial aid across the EU.

¹ [WHO world hearing report](#) (2021)

3. Presentation by Gonçalo Lobo Xavier, European Economic and Social Committee

Gonçalo Lobo Xavier presented the impact of an ageing population on economy and society, demographic changes in the EU and the ways to further boost policies for the inclusion of elderly in society.

- **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier introduced his background.** He described his personal experience in hearing loss, sharing how difficult it is to establish communication with persons with hearing loss. He then introduced the work of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), emphasizing its representation in civil society, including employers, workers, and different NGOs. He wishes to conduct auditory research projects and to collaborate with partners in the auditory field with the aim of providing solutions to shared challenges.
- **The ageing society of Europe is not a problem but a challenge.** By 2050, there will be 1 in 6 people over 65 years of age in the EU, double the current figure. The cost of long-term care is set to increase by 2.1% of GDP. Therefore, a strategy is needed to combine quality of life with life expectancy, plan investments, and to lessen the negative trends in employment and productivity. He suggested creating different retirement options and helping older people stay socially included and employed.
- **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier called for Member States to draft and implement a European Declaration on Older People to reflect the commitment to developing a European Strategy on Older Persons as well as for the EU Commission to organize a European Year of Older Persons to ensure their full participation in society, employment, and the economy.** Older persons contribute to society with their knowledge, skills and talents which should not remain underutilized and overlooked. Only with a comprehensive strategy can there be real impact and change.

4. Presentation by MEP Alex Agius-Saliba (S&D, MT)

MEP Alex Agius-Saliba provided a presentation on hearing loss and health, and the role of the European Parliament.

- **Without an EU Strategy put in place and with many issues on the subject of hearing loss, MEP Alex Agius-Saliba stated one of his priorities is promoting hearing health.** The MEP called for raising awareness within and across Member States, reducing stigma in using hearing devices such as cochlear implants as a treatment option, and ensuring more visibility, coordination, funding, research, and knowledge.
- **In his continuous efforts, MEP Alex Agius-Saliba is pushing forward for a resolution in the European Parliament to address the subject of hearing loss.** Not treating hearing loss is costing the EU €185 billion yearly with additional pressure on the healthcare systems due to multiple linked comorbidities.
- **Since the Commission is currently starting the consultation on a mental health policy, MEP Alex Agius-Saliba stated this is a window of opportunity to raise the issue of hearing health.** In his opinion, stakeholders play a crucial role when it comes to establishing hearing health as an important pillar of the European mental health strategy.

5. Q&A session

Following the presentations, Dr. Patrick D'Haese moderated a short Q&A session.

- **Dr. Stefan Zimmer, representing the European Hearing Instrument Manufacturers Association, asked about the cost and financing of pilot adult hearing screening projects in Malta.**
 - **In response, Dr. Andrew Sciberras stated that the costs were covered by MEP Alex Agius-Saliba and the Ministry of Inclusion and Quality of Life, and he provided services and audiometers.** He emphasized that the project had minimal expenses, adding up to around €1,500, but with regular full-time scale, there needs to be more resources and finance. The World Report on Hearing states that for every dollar invested, there is a \$16 return.
 - **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier added that adult hearing screenings should not be perceived as a cost but as an investment.** The EU can create a policy on data systems with statistics on costs and savings in order save money in public services.
- **Professor Uwe Baumann, representing the German Society for Audiology (DGA HNO), asked about the presence of registry in the Maltase pilot hearing screening project that was accumulating findings.**
 - **In response, Dr. Andrew Sciberras stated there was such a registry.** During screening, every audiologist was registering data on a cloud. The data accumulated was age, noise working conditions, wax, and ear problems.
- **Ms. Latifa Aït-Baala, Deputy of the Brussels Parliament, asked if there is an EU country that can serve as a role model in the issue of hearing health.**
 - **In response, MEP Alex Agius-Saliba stated he does not believe there are Member States that are conducting general hearing screenings.** The hearing screening project in Malta was the first of its kind. This is why we need to advocate for good practices and examples.

6. Presentation by Stefan Schreck, Advisor for Stakeholder Relations, European Commission

Stefan Schreck provided an overview of the European Commission's actions and screening policies emphasizing previous and future efforts.

- **Stefan Schreck informed there is a system in place to identify and share best practices in the EU health area.** The European Commission has created a portal where anybody can submit good practices which can be awarded as a best practice and ultimately financed under EU4Health Program to help Member States with implementation. This can help in promoting hearing health practices.
- **Stefan Schreck advised joining the EU Commission's new stakeholder group concerning mental health on DG SANTE's Health Policy Platform.** Stakeholders can share opinions, collaborate, and produce position papers for the Commission, all of which are helpful to promote hearing health in the realm of mental health.
- **Stefan Schreck mentioned the Commission's joint research center launch of a pan-European data collection effort on loneliness to provide stronger knowledge of coping and prevention.** Hearing health is an important element in an EU ageing society; therefore, there must be a recognition of the needs of older persons and adapt to the challenges.

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- **Stefan Schreck mentioned the work of the Commission in supporting healthy and active ageing under the Healthier Together EU Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Initiative.**
 - Under the initiative, they are promoting collaborative action between EU countries in public health issues relevant for ageing population such as mental health and neurological disorders.
 - The guidance documents support public health interventions by addressing hearing impairment in preventative strategies for dementia and by implementing newborn hearing screening programs for the early detection of hearing loss.
- **Stefan Schreck mentioned the work of the Commission in supporting mental health with multiple initiatives and flagships, fundings and actions put in place.**
- **Stefan Schreck stated there are Research and Innovation projects on hearing being funded under Horizon Europe.** He revealed the Commission is working towards a ready hear project, which will support the development of a new generation of diagnostic and treatment devices for hearing loss.
- **In his opinion, to address the needs of an ageing population we must support and nurture the health and wellbeing of all generations equally and without discrimination.** To do so, a comprehensive health policy and prevention-oriented approach should be put in place. Such an approach should go beyond public health and include other key policy areas, like employment, education, digitalization, and many more.

7. Presentation by MEP Radka Maxova (S&D, CZ)

MEP Radka Maxova provided insights of challenges of EU's ageing population and the importance of active ageing as well as explained how hearing health makes a key component.

- **MEP Radka Maxova introduced her background.** Her work focuses on vulnerable groups, such as elderly, people with disabilities, minorities, women, and children. She advocates for the exchange of best practices for active ageing and lifelong learning. She emphasized the importance of modernizing learning tools for elderly, especially those with vision and hearing impairments.
- **MEP Radka Maxova emphasized the impact of ageing on hearing loss.** As people age, the likelihood of hearing loss increases. Hearing loss is a hidden barrier to leading a fulfilling life because it causes difficulty with communication, frustration, and low self-esteem. In 2021, the World Health Organization recommended systematic hearing screening, but only 10% of the 57 million Europeans with disabling hearing loss receive necessary treatment.
- **MEP Radka Maxova explained the link between hearing health and healthy ageing.** Active ageing extends healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people. People affected by hearing loss experience comorbidities and have a decreased quality of life, with social isolation, cognitive decline, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and many more. For example, untreated hearing loss accounts for 8% of dementia cases.
- **MEP Radka Maxova stated healthy active ageing is a priority.** The EU has contributed to this cause with past initiatives such as the European Innovation Partnership in active and healthy ageing, The European Pillar of Social Rights, and the EP Resolution on Ageing Policies 2020 that served as catalysts facilitating participation of all individuals in society. Even though some Member States are developing active ageing policies, it is crucial to integrate hearing loss directly

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into these policies. At the EU level, the European Hearing Health Strategy can ensure all individuals with hearing loss actively participate in society, enhancing their overall quality of life.

8. Summary and close

Dr. Patrick D’Haese closed the policy roundtable with conclusions and invites attendees to the reception and virtual reality experience.

- **Dr. Patrick D’Haese concluded there is a start of a different set of efforts within Europe and within national Member States, focusing on healthy ageing and hearing loss.** The pilot project in Malta can serve as an example of good practice. It would be best to have screening free of charge and embedded in the healthcare system through standardized tests, with a good referral pathway, so people receive hearing care and treatment in a timely manner.
- **Dr. Patrick D’Haese concluded with defining hearing loss as a societal problem and a key component in the ageing process.** He called for a resolution on hearing loss and further action from the European Commission. There is a clear window of opportunity to voice hearing loss as an important pillar in the mental health strategy through current mental health consultations. Hearing loss is invisible, but together we can make a difference and bring it higher on the political agenda with a clear aim of creating a strategic approach to hearing health.