



16 March 2018

Dr. Kirsty Noble and  
Ms. Rhiannon Cook  
ARACY Principals of  
Collaboration and Engagement

Dear Dr. Noble and Ms. Cook,

Royal Far West (RFW) welcomes the ARACY Report Card and the opportunity to participate in the process to refine the ARACY Priority Framework.

We particularly support the early intervention and prevention aspects of the ARACY Priority Framework, as these align closely with our own strategic objectives.

RFW focus is on developmental health and reducing childhood vulnerability and disadvantage. Our 2017 ["The Invisible Children" Report](#), combined with Australian Early Development Census ([AECD data](#)), confirms that children in rural and remote Australia are some of the most vulnerable in our community, in terms of poverty, social isolation, likelihood to engage in early childhood education and care services and poorer access to early intervention services, paediatric and allied health and mental health services<sup>1</sup>. Indigenous children are over represented in all these categories.

We have found that targeted screening programs and improved access to appropriate services (such as those provided by paediatric specialists) are critical factors in addressing developmental health and childhood vulnerability issues. At RFW, we advocate **national leadership and stewardship** via the creation of a national target to reduce developmental vulnerability from 22% to 10% by 2025 (as measured by the AECD) – establishing it as a regional development priority – and development of a whole of government plan to deliver on it, prioritising the first 2000 days of life.

**In terms of specific feedback on the ARACY Priority Framework:**

Theme 1) Promotion of universal early learning and pre-literacy skills - programs, interventions or strategies to address should include telecare, as this improves access to services for all Australians, especially in rural and remote areas. RFW recommends **early identification and intervention** via investment in consistent, comprehensive pre-school developmental screening and school-readiness programs for children aged 3-5 years in rural and remote communities that integrate health, education and disability. Education programs highlighting developmental milestones to parents and teachers would facilitate better identification and early intervention and would be most effective if it included a focus on supporting parents and early learning staff to understand developmental milestones and red flags.

Theme 2) Improvement of primary and secondary education - the draft ARACY Framework asks "How can we improve the educational performance of children...?" and "How can we better mitigate school stress?" One of RFW's Strategic Objectives is to Empower Communities – building capacity through outcome based collaboration, education and training. This includes working with schools, families and communities. We firmly believe that strengthening the capability of teachers to identify developmental delays and behavioural disorders early, and building their capability through provision of allied health services, such as speech therapy and OT both in parent/child sessions and with the teacher, are a strong platform for improved educational outcomes and reduced child, teacher and parental stress.

Evidence also tells us that educational outcomes can be improved through addressing developmental vulnerabilities related to speech, language, learning and mental health very early in childhood. We therefore strongly argue that funding for speech, learning, and mental health supports

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<sup>1</sup> RFW ["The Invisible Children" Report 2017](#) based on research prepared by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Centre for Community Child Health ([full CCCH paper here](#))

for pre-school aged children will significantly improve educational outcomes through Primary and Secondary school.

Theme 3) Understanding the root causes of mental illness and the promotion of resilience – ARACY’s 2018 Report Card focuses on the mental health of 18-24 year olds. There is an opportunity to look more closely at the early indicators of mental health issues (refer AECD data). RFW recommends the **adoption of a broader approach to children’s mental health** with the creation of a new paradigm that supports a broader, more multi-disciplinary, developmental perspective that looks at mental health in the context of the whole child and his/her needs. At a practical level, this requires a comprehensive screening and early intervention framework, which should focus on positive mental health and resilience as well as access to evidence-based services where required. Parents’ mental health is a social determinant of children’s health and wellbeing, so recommend programs which support parents with their own mental health needs and strengthen their capacity to parent effectively. We also recommend the **promotion of school-based models that support transitions**, making them mainstream, to identify and resolve developmental vulnerability, including mental health, and integrate this with health and disability approaches. RFW’s Access EI project showed that proper treatment of conduct disorders can prevent mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, later in life.

Theme 5) Addressing inequality – the draft ARACY Framework asks “How do we reduce inequity?” and “Who are the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups we need to be aware of and targeting?” The evidence points to rural and remote communities as being in great need. Disadvantage is linked to vulnerability and children living in very remote areas are up to five times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable as children from urban areas. With this in mind, we recommend **increased use of telehealth models** with provision of funding, improved infrastructure and connectivity, and collection and sharing of evidence to drive a step change nationally in the use of telehealth models to improve outcomes for children with developmental issues. To this end, in an effort to address both inequity of service access and high rates of disadvantage and vulnerability, we are expanding our telehealth program nationally, with our multi-disciplinary teams of allied health professionals delivering online services to screen, diagnose and address physical, mental and behavioural health issues. Telehealth model’s focus on strengthening capacity of teachers, parents and communities is central to addressing inequality.

Theme 8) Disability – RFW recommends **the integration of health and disability services for children**. From the national level down, integrate the planning and delivery of health and NDIS services for children with developmental issues, across sectors and across government agencies, developing an approach that will work for all country children who are developmentally vulnerable. This should include access to appropriate services for rural and remote communities.

[Our recent publications](#) and our [2018 Pre-Budget Submission](#) (which we shared with ARACY) closely align with the ARACY Priority Framework themes. We would welcome any joint opportunity to advocate on childhood mental health, addressing inequality or vulnerability.

Yours,



Lindsay Cane  
CEO Royal Far West