

Submission
No 267

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH OUTCOMES AND ACCESS TO
HEALTH AND HOSPITAL SERVICES IN RURAL,
REGIONAL AND REMOTE NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Project Sprouts
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Submission from Fiona Francis, Coordinator Project Sprouts to Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales

The seeds for Project Sprouts were planted in 2018, when Royal Far West held a community meeting in Parkes to discuss the confronting findings from its 'The Invisible Children' report about the state of children's developmental health in rural and remote Australia, through the lens of the Parkes Shire.

Childhood development lays a critical foundation for long-term outcomes, and serious concerns were raised by the community around the growing rates of mental health and developmental vulnerabilities in young children in the Parkes region, coupled by the lack of access to services, teacher training and support.

Determined that no child in Parkes would be an Invisible Child, Project Sprouts was formed following the meeting. With representatives from local schools, preschools, government, business, and community organisations, the community is keen to create a working model to screen children for developmental health before they start school, to support parents and upskill local people to better identify children needing early intervention support.

The problem:

- 22% (Australian Early Development Census 2018) of children in the Parkes Shire start school with one developmental challenge
- 11.4% (AEDC) start school with two developmental challenges (the national average is 9.6%)
- These children are far more likely to have lower educational attainment and develop chronic health, learning, behavioural and mental health problems than their peers.
- Parkes Shire has 1,000 children aged 0-4 years (2016 Census), where 22% of the children identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2018.
- 81% of Local Government Areas across Australia are more advantaged than the Parkes Shire (2016 SEIFA Index of Disadvantage)
- While there is a great need for assistance in Parkes Shire and regional Australia, these geographies have the least access to specialist developmental services. Distances, lack of information, cost and disruption of travel, and sheer difficulty of diagnosing complex developmental conditions are all contributing factors.

The primary focus for local Project Sprouts Coordinator, Fiona Francis is to facilitate communication and coordination between families, paediatric health providers and education in the screening and follow-up therapy of children aged 4 and 5 to ensure their best start to formal schooling, as well as encouraging increased community capacity to improve childhood developmental outcomes via parent communication activities.

Where no local services are available to screen children or upskill adults, Royal Far West is providing health and developmental screenings, as well as supplying training for teachers, parents and service providers to increase their understanding of child development.

In October 2020 as part of Project Sprouts, Royal Far West, supported by local health clinicians, provided free developmental screenings for 4-5 year old children in Parkes Shire. This included a dental check, hearing check, and speech and occupational therapy screening. These were conducted in Peak Hill, Parkes, Trundle and Tullamore. 105 children were screened, for a total of 290 health checks.

From this screening, 68 children met the criteria for referral for further assessment or services. This includes 43 referrals for Occupational Therapy and 34 referrals for Speech Pathology. Local Health District have advised that these services are available in Parkes Shire, and a number of children are now placed on waiting lists as a result of this screening. Project Sprouts will continue to monitor the waitlist and referral outcomes over the next 12 months.

From Royal Far West's The Invisible Children report "Developmental vulnerability comes at a high cost to individuals, families and to society as whole. Vulnerable children are at risk of growing up to be vulnerable adults, with poorer educational attainment, higher rates of chronic disease and mental health, and greater tendency towards unemployment, homelessness and crime. At scale, this translates to significant costs in

education, unemployment, health, social welfare and criminal justice. It has a significant impact on human capital and economic productivity and ultimately, Australia's growth and prosperity. In an analysis undertaken by RFW in 2015, the economic impact of not halving Australia's childhood vulnerability rate of 22% would be a curbing of Australia's GDP growth by up to 10%, which is both material and significant." The full 'Invisible Children' report is available at <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/the-invisible-children/>