

22nd May 2020

Kate Alderton  
Director  
Aboriginal Policy and Coordination Unit  
Department of the Premier and Cabinet

**RE: A Path Forward – Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy**

Dear Kate

Reconciliation Western Australia (RWA) is the peak body in Western Australia advancing the Reconciliation agenda. With 191 members spanning Corporate, SME, Community, NGO and individuals, RWA is a conduit for a diverse and important voice to Government.

The Board and Executive of RWA have read and considered the State Governments 'A Path Forward' paper ("the Paper").

At the outset we would like to acknowledge the importance of the empowerment of Aboriginal people in their dealings with Government and we welcome those parts of the draft that enable real Aboriginal participation in shared decision making.

As a general comment, like you we want to avoid the risk that the Paper will share the fate of the many other papers referenced on page 7 of the document, that despite the State's best intentions it will fail to initiate the systemic change so desperately required if Aboriginal people are to be empowered in fact as well as rhetoric. We were reassured in our meeting with you, Darren and Natalie on 28 February that the State is aware of this risk and is actively engaged in design of the State's administrative architecture to ensure that Aboriginal voices can actually be heard and responded to. That is what has been absent from the context of past reports that have aimed to work with Aboriginal people.

RWA offers the following observations and comments in relation to the Paper:

- (1) RWA welcomes the empowerment of Aboriginal People in their dealings with the Government and is in agreement with those parts of the paper that enable real Aboriginal participation in decision making and delivery based on shared decision making.
- (2) To ensure the empowerment of Aboriginal People, RWA believes that there is an equal need for Government to empower its bureaucracy to be responsive and to act on the requests from Aboriginal First Nations . This is what has been missed in the past, the need to remove the systemic barriers to governments and their agencies being able to flexibly respond to First Nations voices including failure to provide the resources needed to deliver on the collaboration..
- (3) RWA is of the opinion that Government needs to be much more than a passive participant when engaging with strongly empowered communities. It has the same obligation to its Aboriginal citizens as to other Western Australians in regard to service delivery and provision. In addition,



Aboriginal Western Australians have a unique status and associated rights as First Nations Peoples, as stated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The critical role of empowerment is to ensure Government effectively delivers on its obligations by accepting that Aboriginal People must be active participants in the policies that affect them. This collaboration is a means of ending ineffective top down solutions.

- (4) In the absence of clear Government policies, empowerment will not work. It is critical that a clear overall Aboriginal Affairs policy framework exists, on which Aboriginal People will be consulted. The lack of clear policies about the future and present of remote communities is a case in point.

RWA's response to this paper is deliberately brief in that we believe that RWA has a broader role to play as the voice of a diverse group of stakeholders. RWA can and should play an important and active role in the further development of A Path Forward to ensure its successful impact on, and acceptance by, all Western Australians, but with focussed engagement with Aboriginal People. In addition we welcome the offer of further advice from you about the Government's Aboriginal administrative architecture that we believe is fundamental to providing architecture for Aboriginal voices to be empowered.

We thank the Aboriginal Policy Unit in particular for the opportunity to engage in the workshopping that lead to the development of the paper itself, the subsequent opportunity for feedback and informal discussion, and the good spirit that exists to allow a continued dialogue over what we hope will be a critically-important plan for empowerment and collaboration across the State.

In the first instance, our CEO Andrew Vlahov stands ready to respond to further calls for discussion and has the mandate to mobilize the Board of RWA quickly to ensure we support the progress of the Paper.

Your sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Gary Smith in black ink.

Gary Smith  
Co-Chair  
Reconciliation WA

Handwritten signature of Carol Innes in black ink.

Carol Innes  
Co-Chair  
Reconciliation WA

Cc. RWA Board Members  
Andrew Vlahov – Chief Executive Officer, RWA