



***Submission on the Productivity Commission's draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
August 2020***

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: That any proposed evaluation strategy is re-aligned to better support the National Closing the Gap Agreement.

Recommendation 2: That the Productivity Commission partner with peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to design approaches to evaluation.

Recommendation 3: Given that Closing the Gap commits agencies to shared decision making as a core part of any evaluation, consistent with Priority Reform 1 under the National Agreement, the proposed establishment of the Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation should be reconsidered.

Recommendation 4: That the guiding principles identified in the Strategy be amended to strengthen government commitments to respond and appropriately use evaluations.

Recommendation 5: That the Productivity Commission undertakes further work with the national Coalition of Peaks to ensure key initiatives, such as the three-yearly review of the Closing the Gap and the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports, are appropriately aligned to Closing the Gap.

Recommendation 6: That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged upfront in the evaluation process including any proposed commissioning of evaluations by government agencies.

Recommendation 7: That KPIs for government funding agreements incorporate evaluation program logics and are aligned with Closing the Gap targets where appropriate.

INTRODUCTION

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Productivity Commission's draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

NSWALC provides these comments in our capacity as the peak body representing Aboriginal peoples in NSW and as the largest Aboriginal member based organisation in Australia, with a network of 120 autonomous Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) across the state and over 23,000 members. NSWALC is a self-funded statutory corporation under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW) (ALRA), with legislated objectives to improve, protect and foster the best interests of all Aboriginal peoples in NSW.

NSWALC is a member of the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (**CAPO**). CAPO is comprised of peak Aboriginal community controlled organisations, including the NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation, Link-Up NSW, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group NSW, Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT, Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council and the First Peoples Disability Network. CAPO is a member of the National Closing the Gap Coalition, working to design and deliver the new Closing the Gap Framework.

DRAFT INDIGENOUS EVALUATION STRATEGY

Evaluation can be a useful learning tool, or it can be used as a form of administrative control, subjecting people to scrutiny and surveillance for no benefit. For the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy to be applied as it was intended, to improve government accountability for funding and delivering programs and services that meet Aboriginal peoples' needs, it is essential that Aboriginal people and organisations are at the centre of the evaluation process. While the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges are at the centre (figure 2, page 9), the principles in this draft Strategy could be improved to better reflect this.

The draft Strategy states that a key principle is *"about recognising the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, knowledges and cultures"* (page 8). It further states, that the Strategy is about *"building genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to define policy and program outcomes, decide on evaluation questions, how evaluations will be conducted and how evaluation findings will be interpreted"* (page 8). We note the overarching principle, which places Aboriginal people at the centre of the process is intended to be the lens through which the Strategy's other principles — credible, useful, ethical and transparent — are interpreted. Yet, as the Strategy points out, the principles are based on common principles in evaluation frameworks used by Australian Government agencies, not principles that necessarily reflect Aboriginal values and priorities.

The background paper to the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy states that a number of submissions provided alternative principles, these included: recognition; self-determination; respectful, reciprocal, collaborative and strength-based approaches among others (page 343). We suggest that Productivity Commission revisit the principles in the draft Strategy and commit to genuine partnership in the drafting process. As it currently stands, although the draft Strategy states that it places Aboriginal people at the centre, the language emphasises mainstream evaluation principles.

Furthermore, there is limited reference to Indigenous approaches to evaluation in the supporting documents. The Strategy could be improved by better recognising the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge systems.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE CLOSING THE GAP

The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes four priority reforms which aim to fundamentally change the way in which governments work with Aboriginal people. The role of governments must shift from delivering systems predicated on disadvantage, to facilitating the aspirations, priorities and self-determination of Aboriginal peoples. Governments must be prepared to move into an enabling and innovative space to support Aboriginal self-determination, and long-term partnerships.

Under the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, all Australian Governments are now sharing decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represented by their community-controlled peak organisations on Closing the Gap, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks).

We note the draft Strategy proposes the establishment of a new Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation (OIPE) and an Indigenous Evaluation Council with a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. We are concerned the proposal may create additional bureaucracy, divert resources away from the community-controlled sector, and potentially duplicate other work. We suggest that consideration is given to effective mechanisms to ensure genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the design and implementation of any evaluation strategy.

To truly hold government to account the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy should be led by Aboriginal people. Many of the core problems in Indigenous policy and programs stem from the Australian government's failure to recognise Indigenous Australians' self-determination and sovereignty. We also note the racially based assumption of Indigenous deficit that has marginalised Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Aboriginal people. The Priority Reforms in the new National Agreement are seeking to address this imbalance and the partnerships arrangements of the National Agreement should be reflected in any governance arrangements related to evaluation.

NSWALC agrees with the Coalition of Peaks that without stronger commitments on how evaluations will be used by Governments, there is a risk the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy will add to the burden of reporting many Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations currently face, without delivering any benefits.¹ The background paper also notes that fewer than 10 per cent of Australian Government evaluation reports included information on how the Government or the commissioning agency had used the evaluation findings or recommendations (page 232). We suggest that the guiding principles identified in the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy be amended to strengthen government commitments to respond and use evaluations.

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE MUST BE INVOLVED IN ALL ASPECTS OF EVALUATION

Consideration should be given to the commissioning of evaluations, as this process sets the level of Aboriginal engagement in the evaluation process.

As Maggie Walter states:

“Evaluations only superficially reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s perspectives because input is only sought at the participant level. By that time, important decisions have already been made about the evaluation process — what to evaluate, how to evaluate, the evaluation logic, key outcomes and objectives. Indigenous voice is denied and the current policy mindset is perpetuated. We need Indigenous voice up-front and helping to

¹ Dwyer, J., O'Donnell, K., Lavoie, J., Marlina, U., & Sullivan, P. (2009). The overburden report: contracting for indigenous health services: summary report. *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 33(6), 24.

make decisions from the outset" (sub. 112, p. 2 cited on page 8 of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy draft background paper).

We suggest that the Productivity Commission works within the structure provided by the National Closing the Gap Agreement to identify the scope, priorities and plan for evaluating government policies and programs. This work should also be coordinated with the Productivity Commission's comprehensive review every three years of the Closing the Gap and the Productivity Commission's existing reporting, such as the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports.

In addition to engaging Aboriginal voices in the commissioning of evaluations, there is scope to change the way in which KPIs for government funding agreements are developed to ensure that the information organisations are asked to report on reflect meaningful outcomes. Further work is needed to ensure Government grant managers dispersing funding, such as Indigenous Advancement Strategy funding, ensure the development of suitable KPIs. The KPIs should be based on evaluation program logic and involve asking meaningful questions. Ensuring that organisations are reporting on relevant KPIs will help to incorporate evaluation methodologies into the funding of programs and services without overburdening organisations with unnecessary, additional reporting requirements.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. We would be happy to provide further contributions. Please contact NSWALC on 02 9689 4444 or policy@alc.org.au.