Shaping evaluation of policies and programs impacting First Nations people – Consultation listening series

First Nations Economic Wellbeing Branch   August 2022
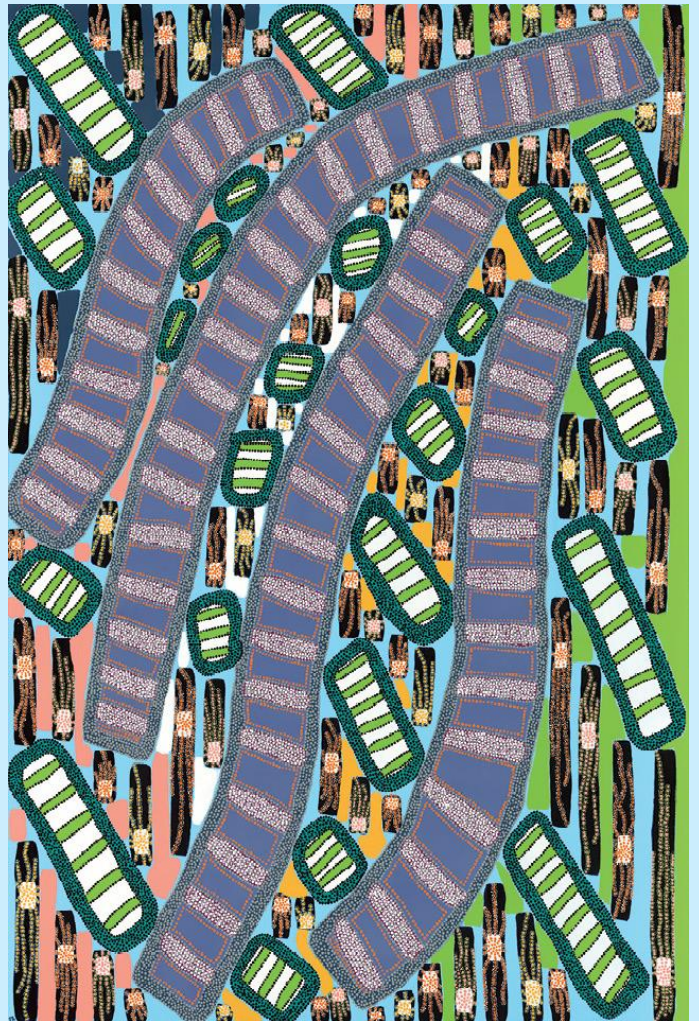
Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we live and work, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We pay respect to Elders past and present, and the emerging leaders of tomorrow.

We celebrate the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, language and culture and acknowledge the important contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to our communities and economies.

We reflect on the continuing impact of policies of the past and recognise our responsibility to work with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and communities, towards better economic, social and cultural outcomes.

Artwork: 'Regeneration' by Josie Rose

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Executive Summary

Limited progress in Closing the Gap over the past decade has led to increasing calls for government to partner with First Nations people and communities to build an evidence base around 'what works' in achieving outcomes. As a step towards building this evidence base, NSW Treasury has committed to develop a culturally responsive First Nations policy and investment framework by June 2024. Evaluation is one pillar of this framework[1] and forms part of the NSW Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap 2022-24.

To inform this work, NSW Treasury consulted with a broad range of stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of current evaluation practice relating to First Nations policies and programs across both government and non-government sectors. While the consultation series focused on evaluation of policies and programs impacting First Nations people and communities, much of the feedback was found to be applicable to evaluation practice generally. This paper reports back on what NSW Treasury heard through this process.

Overall, feedback from the consultations highlight that there are a number of capacity, capability and cultural factors currently limiting both the number of evaluations and the effectiveness of evaluation practice in New South Wales. This includes a number of unique factors which are impacting the effectiveness and appropriateness of evaluation for First Nations people and communities. At a high level, the consultation series found that:

- There is large variation in evaluation capacity and capability across the NSW Government sector.
- Very few agencies within the sector expressed high levels of confidence or expertise in evaluation of First Nations policies and programs.
- Only a limited number of agencies conduct evaluation in-house, with most outsourcing in whole or in part to third parties through the tendering process.
- There is a significant opportunity and growing demand for First Nations owned research and evaluation services.
- There is a lack of consistent evaluation culture across government and a need to improve systems for accountability and transparency.
- Creating avenues for embedding evaluation into program design from the beginning represents a significant opportunity to improving evaluation quality and creating a culture of evaluation.
- Current evaluation practice often does not effectively or meaningfully include First Nations people in its design or in the assessment of what success looks like.
- There is no consistent approach to how evaluations are funded across government, often leading to lack of resources to perform evaluation and to perform high quality evaluation.
- Evaluation across much of the sector continues to be focused on outputs rather than outcomes.
- A set of foundational principles to guide evaluation of programs that impact First Nations people and communities would help to centre evaluation through a First Nations lens.
- Cultural capability has been identified as an area for improvement across the public sector, including the recognition of the cultural and structural biases that are embedded into mainstream evaluation practice.

What we have heard will be used to inform the development of a First Nations policy and investment framework and will complement the existing suite of NSW Treasury investment frameworks and policy guidelines.

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[1] Other pillars of the framework will include guidance around First Nations policy design, business case development and Cost-benefit analysis.

1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings from a consultation series exploring evaluation practice in New South Wales, with a specific focus on evaluation of programs that impact First Nations people and communities. The voices and messages of those consulted will be used to inform the development of a NSW First Nations policy and investment framework. The background to the project is outlined below.

1.1. Background

NSW Treasury is working to lift the evidence base on 'what works' in achieving outcomes for First Nations people and communities. To support this, NSW Treasury has undertaken an initial consultation series for the scoping and development of a culturally responsive First Nations policy and investment framework, with a focus on evaluation. The evaluation component of this framework will provide advice and direction on how to approach the evaluation of policies and programs impacting First Nations people through a First Nations lens.

Evaluation is a valuable tool that helps to inform decision making so that public funding goes where it is most needed and most effective, and provides evidence about what is working, what is not, where and for who. In practice, however, government evaluation policy and practice has failed to accurately capture and incorporate First Nations perspectives and community priorities. This deficit in culturally responsive practice is also compounded by a low rate of evaluation of publicly funded programs. These factors have contributed towards a lack of progress in meeting Closing the Gap targets and other community aspirations, as well as an ongoing gap in understanding within government about what works.

NSW Treasury is committed to ensuring that we support and enable evaluation practice that puts First Nations people and perspectives at the heart.

The overall objectives of the project are to:

- contribute towards meaningful outcomes for First Nations people and communities
- guide government investment where it is most needed and most effective; and
- support self-determination, local solutions, and genuine partnership.

This commitment aligns with NSW Government's OCHRE Plan for Aboriginal Affairs and the recommendations of the Australian Government Productivity Commission's *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.*

This project is being led within NSW Treasury by the First Nations Economic Wellbeing (FNEW) Branch. The FNEW Branch work closely alongside the NSW Treasury Centre for Evidence and Evaluation (CEE), who have stewardship of NSW Government investment appraisal and evaluation policies. The CEE has been working in collaboration with NSW Government clusters to update and enhance the NSW Evaluation Policy and Guidelines. A NSW First Nations evaluation framework is expected to complement these guidelines with additional and specific guidance around evaluation of policies and programs impacting First Nations people and communities.

2. Approach

This section details the objectives of the consultation series, the participants involved, key questions and methods of engagement and the guiding principles for the consultation process.

This consultation series is the first step in developing a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities within New South Wales to improve evaluation practice for programs impacting First Nations people and communities. The key objectives of the consultation series include:

- Identifying existing capability and capacity within government and non-government organisations in New South Wales to conduct culturally responsive evaluations.

- Understanding any barriers and/or knowledge gaps which are inhibiting better practice, both in terms of guidance and information, and within broader evaluation culture and policy setting.

- Seeking ideas on how NSW Treasury can help to support better practice and address issues.

- Further understanding the needs and aspirations of First Nations people and organisations in research and evaluation.

- How to ensure that any future guidance is useful and practical.

This report summarises key themes and findings from the consultation series. The paper does not cover everything that was said across every interview, but rather captures key themes that were repeated across stakeholders. Acknowledging that there was large variability in the experience and perspectives of those involved, the report identifies commonly repeated messages, noting that not all messages will be reflective of feedback from every group.

To present a holistic view and a systems level representation of the issues, the consultation and the findings cover a wide range of feedback, including factors that would be considered as outside of the control of the NSW Government and our policies and guidance. The scoping exercise that will follow as part of the next steps for the project will seek to identify those areas where NSW Treasury can create the most effective and impactful change. It is acknowledged that NSW Treasury will not be able to address all of the feedback raised in this report, but seeks to recognise and understand all of the varied and unique factors which impact First Nations evaluation in New South Wales.

2.1. Participants

The interview series included 16 group interviews with a total of 86 participants from across a variety of sectors and locations across New South Wales, including representatives from regional and remote areas.

Stakeholders interviewed included representatives from across all NSW Government clusters, with a variety of representation from their evaluation, Aboriginal Outcomes Units and program management areas. Additionally, interviews were also conducted with NSW Aboriginal Regional Alliances, selected Aboriginal peak organisations and other Aboriginal organisations and research bodies. To protect the privacy of participants, the names of individuals and specific organisations have not been included in this report. Permission has been given from all stakeholders to include their feedback and quotations.

As the project progresses, the FNEW Branch plan to build on the consultations undertaken to date with additional consultations involving First Nations communities and organisations, NSW Government agencies and evaluation and research bodies.

2.2. Consultation method

To maximise participation in the consultations, interviews were conducted via videoconference. Online platforms were also used to bring together stakeholders from across New South Wales, including in regional and remote areas, to promote diverse and representative discussion within groups.

The consultations followed a semi-structured style, with a series of common questions asked across interviews. A sample list of the questions covered can be found at Appendix A. Questions centred around exploring what current evaluation practice looks like, identifying barriers and knowledge gaps, and feedback on opportunities for improvement. Specific questions varied across stakeholders, and were guided by the experience, location and unique perspective of the participants. Interviewees were also asked to share what they thought was important for NSW Treasury to know, providing an opportunity for open discussion on a range of issues.

Participants were encouraged to speak from their own experiences and observations, and do not necessarily represent the views of their whole organisation or community. Interviews varied in length depending on the size of the group, from between 1-1.5 hours.

2.3. Guiding Principles

The First Nations Economic Wellbeing Branch approach follows four core guiding principles in design and engagement, which are:

- **Partnership** - doing things *with* First Nations people and communities, rather than *to* First Nations people.
- **Listening** - taking a 'searchers' mentality and listening with an open mind, instead of a set agenda.
- **Reciprocity** – engaging in a two-way flow of information rather than 'extracting' information from First Nations people.
- **Strengths-based** - focusing on the capabilities, skills, knowledge and potential in individuals and communities.

3. What we heard

3.1 Capacity and capability

The level of internal evaluation capacity and capability varies substantially across NSW Government clusters and within clusters themselves. Some clusters reported very high levels of expertise within specialist evaluation teams, while for others evaluation is a skill and practice that is still developing.

- 'there is a mixed level of capability and capacity – some program areas have dedicated evaluation capacity and some program areas don't. For the later, they lean on the coordinating/central evaluation team'

- 'there are many capacity issues and there are varying levels of experience and understanding across the group especially with the nature of the cluster'

- 'there is a desire to dive into evaluation, but the knowledge base is what is lacking. Working in some teams to identify gaps and upskill. Looking at developing logic models in the hope of undertaking an evaluation on some of the initiatives – it is a way to upskill'

- 'there is a need to upskill people in the cluster and a need to provide the right advice and connect the right people to set up evaluation for success'

- 'capability and capacity are lacking in the cluster. Would need some specific training around this'

- 'level of expertise is good and high in pockets of the cluster, however some of the program areas need assistance as they are not experienced. Slowly building the capacity'

- 'experience is quite varied across departments; some areas are doing it well and thinking about it. There is a real desire for information and resources that would aid with understanding and knowing how to approach evaluation. People don't know where to start, even within the evaluation team'

- 'the maturity of evaluation knowledge varies across the department. Some are still grappling with outcome mapping, let alone outcome evaluation. Currently there are a lot of the programs where it is unclear what the impact is'

- 'most people would be limited in their knowledge of how to build evaluation into policy and how to conduct it. Capacity building and upskilling around when and why to use it is an area where there is a bit more work to be done'

- 'there are many programs that are funded but are not being routinely evaluated, and where they are being evaluated, it's not necessarily in a consistent manner'

- 'other clusters may be more advanced in their approach to evaluation in relation to social impacts generally and perhaps Aboriginal impacts'

Evaluation capacity and capability issues are compounded when it comes to conducting culturally informed and consultative evaluation, with very few NSW Government agencies reporting strong capability in this space.

- 'when it comes to evaluation of Aboriginal programs, it seems there is a lack of cultural sensitivity. The skill set is quite low'

- 'culturally informed evaluations are still something that is developing in our organisation'

- 'mainstream programs are well evaluated, but there are huge gaps when it comes to Aboriginal programs and work within the mainstream programs and evaluations tend to be retrospective or tacked on at the end'

- 'skill set for the culturally informed programs is lacking and there is a lot to learn'
- 'there is a weakness around Aboriginal program evaluation. Unaware of any First Nations initiatives that have been evaluated in the cluster'
- 'some initiatives have fantastic evaluation for Aboriginal outcomes, for others its very poor. There is an *ad-hoc* approach to evaluation. There is recognition that improvement is required'
- 'not a good understanding of what culturally appropriate evaluation is within government'
- 'we currently have a very small dedicated evaluation unit, but don't have a specific Aboriginal evaluation unit, or Aboriginal staff within our unit who can undertake or support Aboriginal evaluation'
- 'working at building competence in the workforce and also getting Aboriginal staff in the agencies to be involved in building in-house capacity. Have not yet nailed how to do Aboriginal evaluation, still a level of maturity that needs to occur'
- 'there is not much of a broad understanding across the organisation about the differences in evaluating a mainstream initiative versus Aboriginal initiatives, and ensuring there is the cultural sensitivity and understanding of the nuances and differences. For example, the time needed, difference in the methodologies, the need to build capacity for the services you engage with and issues of data sovereignty'
- 'haven't had much of an Aboriginal focus in any of our programs. No experience in designing culturally appropriate evaluations'

Differences in capacity and capability are also linked to differences in internal evaluation structures within NSW Government agencies. Some have specialised units conducting evaluations, while others use a 'hub-and-spoke model' where central evaluation teams support and oversee evaluations in program areas. In other cases, there is no evaluation team or specific evaluation capability.

- 'only doing evaluation if it is a large project with large funding, but the business-as-usual work does not have the funds and there is the limitation for community to meet with the agency. There is no sharing of resources or a centre for excellence to turn to that could assist within the cluster. There have been different iterations of a central function, but it has been a challenge'
- 'variable level of expertise across the cluster. Don't have central evaluation expertise model and rely heavily on the community of practice'
- 'there is a central unit that oversees things and then works with the teams in charge of the evaluation, but expertise is varied. There is separation in roles and responsibilities between the program teams and the evaluation teams'
- 'there is a hub model where program teams engage with the central team to help with evaluation. Teams would be responsible for implementation and evaluation is done by the central team. There are a couple of agencies with their own evaluation capacity, there are some parts with good evaluation capacity'
- 'operating model was established to respond to the 2016 Auditor General report about having centres of evaluation in clusters. Recent focus has been on program design and ensuring that evaluation is thought of upfront and data monitoring as well as program logics'

3.2 Outsourcing and procurement

The approach to outsourcing or commissioning of evaluations varies across NSW Government clusters and within clusters. Some areas outsource all evaluation work, while others undertake evaluations in-house. Most use a mixed approach.

- 'when it comes to outsourcing it is a mix. A lot of the process evaluation thinking is done in-house and consultants do the on-the-ground work'

- 'evaluations are mostly done in-house and then depending on how projects are funded we will outsource some'

- 'mixed approach to this, likely 50:50, we have managed some evaluations internally but have also engaged Indigenous organisations for some evaluations'

- 'far less providers in this space. We sometimes use university based Indigenous evaluation units. When not using this, evaluation would be in-house or through a commercial evaluation agency'

- 'mindful that in outsourcing we need to do the governance properly and have to go through the AH&MRC[2]. We have involved agencies who have significant experience or have an Aboriginal evaluation unit, but moving towards engaging Aboriginal owned agencies to ensure that the methodologies and co-design are done well'

- 'a lot is done in-house, especially where there is complex data or economic appraisal. We will often outsource for qualitative work, where we need more independence, in particular for vulnerable populations'

- 'evaluations are normally contracted out and we try to get someone that is an expert in the field and has connection with community or some understanding of how to work with Aboriginal people'

- 'the agency is under resourced and understaffed and can't be experts in all areas, so we often contract out research and evaluation to specialists in the field'

The request for quote (RFQ) process is complex and time consuming and leads to unclear project scoping and ineffective commissioning for evaluations.

- 'the process around the RFQ and what needs to go in there is unclear. There are gaps around what's needed. For example, the deliverables. Need help with RFQ process'

- 'usually individuals that are commissioning are not sure of the appropriate approach to commissioning and need more clarity around scoping of the work to be commissioned'

- 'hard to find the time to make evaluation a priority – procurement processes are a big workload'

- 'interpreting the RFQ is quite difficult. We don't even know what questions to ask'

- 'there is no understanding about the purpose of the evaluation, and in scoping out the tender for an evaluation, often people do not have the expertise. Need to ask the right questions and unsure that there is enough guidance around this'

- 'lack of knowledge and understanding around procuring an evaluation – started one evaluation project and had to pull back as we realised that the RFQ process required a lot more. The procurement process is frustrating and difficult to navigate'

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[2] Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AH&MRC)

The benefits of commissioning an external evaluation includes sourcing evaluation expertise that does not exist in-house and conducting evaluations that are independent and impartial.

- 'preference would be for evaluation to be done outside of government – gives us "more meat on the bone" when done externally'
- 'it is important to have quality people that can be approached for evaluation for the agencies as there is no in-house skill currently'
- 'important thing is that there is independence, hence preference for outsourcing'
- 'experience has been that it is almost always outsourced because there is varied level capacity and capability in evaluation across teams. Outsourcing also allows for independence and arm's length approach to the evaluation'
- 'benefit of an external agency means that there is better scoping of the work and specification of what is required'
- 'outsourcing helps to reduce bias and yield independent evaluations'
- 'tend to outsource when the independence is needed, and people need to be speaking to the people that are detached from the program'
- 'outsourcing to experts is good for ensuring that the methodology is appropriate'
- 'independent evaluation is important'

3.3 First Nations business and skills

Shortfalls in evaluation sector capability forces agencies to obtain the skill sets needed from multiple sources. In these cases, larger non-Indigenous consultants are often partnered with smaller First Nations businesses to collaborate on First Nations-specific program evaluations that require strong cultural capability.

- 'where evaluation has focused on specific groups within community or participants in a program, the approach has been for contractors to subcontract to specialists who have links to the networks and expertise. The market responds by adding on the expertise required when it is needed'
- 'often have universities partner with Aboriginal organisations to deliver the evaluation'
- 'we are getting large evaluation experts to partner with smaller Aboriginal organisations to do the evaluation'
- 'often a balancing act to get a consultancy with the technical skills, research and experience. Usually procure Aboriginal supplier or someone that has an internal Aboriginal unit'
- 'often going to multiple sources to get the expertise we need'
- 'aboriginal businesses need more money to employ more highly skilled people, so they can compete with big not-for-profit organisations. For example, skilled submission/tender writers'
- 'currently we predominantly outsource our evaluations, and it can be difficult to identify suitable consultants with the necessary skills to cover both the broader evaluation and specific Aboriginal perspectives'
- 'there is a need for non-Indigenous businesses to also build capacity and capability in this space'

First Nations owned evaluation consultancies are in high demand and there are only a small number who work in this space. This makes it challenging, in some cases, for agencies to source from First Nations owned businesses for these services.

- 'would like to improve First Nations businesses and the ideal would be to work with Aboriginal businesses, but when looking for consultants there is a challenge. There are not a lot of Aboriginal business doing evaluation. I currently only know of two pre-qualified consultants, and they are oversubscribed'
- 'Aboriginal led consultancies are few and far between, but it's a growing sector'
- 'there are only a small handful of existing consultancies who have robust Aboriginal focused evaluation teams'
- 'there is a small pool of Indigenous evaluators, so it can be hard to hire'
- 'often have had difficulty finding the right evaluators. There is a high demand for skilled and experienced Aboriginal people who tend to be very busy'
- 'often there are no responses or one response to RFQs. Sometimes this is the case even with targeted RFQs'
- 'the research area is very specific and quite niche and limited, especially when you need people that have connection to community or that deep experience and knowledge of Aboriginal communities. That genuine understanding of Aboriginal issues is a key reason why someone would be considered in a tendering process'

The partnering of smaller First Nations evaluation providers with larger non-Indigenous providers has sometimes resulted in missed opportunities for First Nations providers to lead processes and develop technical skills and expertise.

- 'if we keep giving contracts to the big not-for-profit organisations, this makes it hard to develop the required skills in community. Concerns around how to train up Aboriginal people and businesses in this space if they are not getting the opportunities to conduct the work. This is an area that needs to be looked at'
- 'big organisations take over when in partnership with Aboriginal organisations. The 'white' model still takes over. Decision making is taken away from the Aboriginal organisation. Always have another organisation stilling on top of them'
- 'when the partnerships do occur for the big evaluations, the challenge is that the Aboriginal organisations do not have any say and their views are not taken on board. There is no decision making happening and they are not developing any skill sets to properly do evaluations and grow'
- 'not a lot of Aboriginal evaluators had the experience to be able to lead the evaluation themselves. That's why the big consulting firms get a lot of the evaluations'

Greater support is needed to help First Nations businesses meet government requirements for procurement pre-qualification and getting onto the government supplier list.

- 'getting on the supplier portal is not straightforward – can't leave it up to Supply Nation. There is a need for a market and sector strategy to build the capability of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector. This needs to occur in company with a plan to attract more Aboriginal people to the social sciences'
- 'there is a need to lift visibility of Aboriginal businesses in the market. Need to support their scale for fieldwork and support the methodologies that are proposed as they often don't match with governments view of evaluation against community identified outcomes'
- 'sector help and support to be able to get Aboriginal business really robust and to be able to keep delivering and maintain (procurement) compliance. Need support for the Aboriginal research sector and build capacity'

- 'of the pre-registered organisations – only half were Aboriginal owned. Some sector help and support to help Aboriginal organisations to keep working and delivering on what is required is needed as there are challenges in working with government and keeping up to date with the approvals required'

Black cladding[3] issues have been identified among some large consulting organisations tendering for First Nations evaluation work.

- 'black cladding is happening where consultant companies have no Aboriginal people working in their Aboriginal teams. In one example, we met one Aboriginal person at the first meeting, but the project manager was non-Indigenous'

- 'having been on some tender panels, I have realised that it is important to probe the capability of consultants. For example, the level of Aboriginal executive representation and proposals about consultation with community – it's important to evaluate the evaluators as there are often issues of black cladding'

- 'handful of consultancies with the expertise and there is the black cladding issue where there is a director or two who are Aboriginal. When you do identify organisations that have more Aboriginal staff we can continue to work with these organisations and the larger consultancies are starting to develop Aboriginal teams'

There is a lack of visibility for many NSW Government agencies on who to approach or where to look to source First Nations businesses for evaluation work.

- 'would not know who to recommend when it comes to Aboriginal evaluators. Not sure who to approach and where to begin looking when it comes to outsourcing for that'

- 'important to tell people about organisations that provide these services and how the Aboriginal Procurement Policy could be used'

- 'would be beneficial to have a list of recommended suppliers and what contracts can be leveraged off. Would like to know and understand if there is a difference between SME's[4] and larger organisations in this space as well as how to engage with the market'

- 'it would be useful to have a database of experienced evaluators in Aboriginal evaluation'

- 'don't even know who the providers are in the Aboriginal evaluation market. Need communities to run those connections for you'

- 'a list of good Aboriginal evaluators would be helpful and guidance around how to work collaboratively, particularly when partnering or subcontracted by the larger firms. It would be helpful if there is guidance on how the capacity building could occur'

- 'guidance on identifying suitable consultants is needed – perhaps a repository of Aboriginal services and organisations to make it easier to find and consult with relevant stakeholders'

Investment is needed to attract and upskill more First Nations people in research and evaluation to build capacity within the sector and support more First Nations led evaluations.

- 'have had some discussions around training some in community as evaluators – there was a project in the Northern Territory with evaluation training for Aboriginal women, using an Aboriginal lens. Need to be training Aboriginal community to be evaluators'

- 'need to train up our own (Aboriginal) kids and own people to perform evaluation'

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[3] Black Cladding refers to a business structure where Aboriginal ownership or leadership is advertised to qualify for government contracts – but there is little to no involvement from Aboriginal people, and where the business is usually run by a non-Aboriginal partner / shareholder.
[4] Small and Mid-size Enterprise

- 'need to empower people in the community to understand what evaluation is and there are not enough resources to help community understand a base level of knowledge'
- 'how do we get Aboriginal people into this kind of workforce to do this work in the future and empowering the young people'
- 'consider some incentives not just to employ Aboriginal people on evaluations but across the board. Getting Aboriginal evaluators on the procurement panels'
- 'looking at hiring Aboriginal staff into teams to have Aboriginal voices embedded in the process'
- 'there should be courses for Aboriginal people in public sector to build evaluation skills'
- 'need to start looking at strategies to get Aboriginal people into data and evaluation from high school'
- 'having more First Nations people in all areas of work would help address issues of better practice'
- 'when speaking to Aboriginal people in the various units it is evident that there is a wealth of knowledge that is not formalised – they have phenomenal experiences and insight, and it is about getting the knowledge on the pages and upskilling the rest of the team and department. There is clear cultural expertise in the team, but it is not formalised'
- 'there needs to be investment into attracting Aboriginal people into working in the social policy space. Over time the demand for evaluation has increased but capacity hasn't increased'
- 'it is difficult to recruit and retain Aboriginal staff in the workforce, in particular those with a research background'
- 'challenges with identifying, recruiting and training staff who have skills in research. Don't have the right partnerships with Aboriginal researchers and people who are Aboriginal. People are often attracted to targeted programs instead of the universal. Often difficult to engage on the mainstream evaluations'
- 'key thing for roles to be filled would be finding people with place-based experience'

3.4   Program design and planning

Evaluation is often not built into the planning and design of programs from their inception. This creates a multitude of issues when trying to retrospectively evaluate programs later down the line.

- 'when programs are being designed, evaluation is not front of mind'
- 'planning and ensuring that evaluators are working at the front of the program has been the Achilles heel'
- 'it is important to have the co-design and collaboration happening at the start of the program. The ideal would be to design and structure with community at the start, as it allows for leverage and engagement'
- 'there is a need to plan from the beginning robust partnership and consultation approaches'
- 'really important to bring it in at the program design stage. When you're defining what success looks like from the beginning. Propper genuine consultation in how to design the program'
- 'genuine and authentic evaluation should be built in at the start'
- 'evaluation has been an afterthought on policy development. The importance of embedding evaluation as part of policy development is something Treasury should be advocating for. This allows for effective and efficient evaluation practice'

- 'people don't articulate their variables of interest at the outset. This is often done at the end, which is a flawed methodology. Important that variables, scope and parameters are defined at the start'
- 'not enough done to set up an evaluation framework upfront and there are no clear linkages between what has been done and the original intent. Meaning no good reporting function and frantic rush at the end'
- 'the absence of early planning in evaluations which becomes quite challenging'
- 'more meaningful engagement in needed from the outset to determine what data and information should be collected in the first place'
- 'evaluation resources are often thought of at the end of the program and the program funding is now at the point of running out'
- 'evaluations are not designed appropriately at the start and no one is investing in the outcome evaluation component'
- 'when you are starting to evaluate something that was centrally designed, it is already starting from the wrong place because community has not been involved. Often the approach is policy driven and not designed with community in mind'
- 'usually the starting point is from the top down, and the change that community wants does not align with what has been designed. Programs are dropped into community and the initiatives are not tailored, usually drawn from an international setting and not specific to community. Challenge is you don't find out that a program is not working until right up at the end'
- 'we as evaluators are sometimes not brought in at the early stages of projects, which makes evaluation challenging in any case, but potentially more so where Aboriginal people are concerned as any specific Aboriginal or inclusive measures can't be considered or put in place early on to address key issues'
- 'should be thinking ahead instead of retrospectively. Need to work on the evidence base'
- 'not thinking about evaluation led by Aboriginal people at the beginning is the biggest issue. Need to bring it to the forefront of everything we do, rather than at the back end'
- 'consultation usually happens too late, it should happen during the design process. The engagement has to start when you're designing the outcomes'

3.5 Consultation and governance

Consultations with First Nations people and communities are often undertaken as a tick-a-box exercise where government comes to community with a pre-set agenda., rather than in genuine partnership.

- 'going to community with established research questions and not getting their genuine interests and priorities. Going with restricted tools and it is a barrier to getting something meaningful'
- 'evaluation is often a tack on, rather than meaningful co-design evaluation'
- 'can be perceived that we are coming with our own agenda in co-design. Using language that the community doesn't understand'
- 'the history of past engagement lives on and that is something that feeds into the pre-conceived ideas that community has about government'
- 'community have a long history of expectations that have not been delivered on'
- 'Aboriginal People are so tired of being talked about and talked at'

- 'when getting engagement early on, often the expectation of government is for the program to be rolled out and often the questions are biased and bureaucratic. Co-design is misused, should be co-creating'
- 'unable to interpret or incorporate the feedback from Aboriginal communities into existing government reporting structures'
- 'language is a big barrier, need to develop more simple language. No "program logic" no "co-design". Need to really think through language

Genuine consultation with First Nations people and communities requires appropriate time and resources and often needs to be undertaken on-the-ground.

- 'when working with community, the preference is for face-to-face consultation – to sit down and yarn with them, especially elders. The computer and phone would be frowned upon, preference is for a yarn. A lot of field work required'
- 'areas out west with low internet and phone coverage often get missed in so many ways, we need to have affirmative action to address this – we need to resource proper communication'
- 'face-to-face consultation is so expensive, but it is the best way to build relationships with communities'
- 'time is a challenge – time constraints often do not allow for proper co-design and planning and partnerships'
- 'need to provide more time – single biggest barrier that is faced and flexibility is another key issue. There is a vicious cycle around genuine engagement and there is not enough time. Doing things properly requires more start up time'
- 'a key challenge is that often evaluation is an afterthought for policy makers, and evaluators are engaged to appraise initiatives in very short timeframes. It is difficult to co-produce with Aboriginal organisations and communities in line with best practice when timeframes are tight. Need to continue to build a culture of evaluation within agencies'
- 'step back and invest in community expertise, the process takes time and there needs to be consideration of different practice that is time consuming and requires speaking to the people'
- 'investing in the time for the community consultation, specific time to spend in the community to understand and see what happening on the ground'
- 'community consultation is often very short and what needs to happen has not been feasible'
- 'it's not what you do but how you do it – it's about the process as well. What is critical is time on Country and time with community to hear the voices and having the right questions being asked. The consultant being the facilitator and the funding that is not all for the consultant but for the community. Need to know how to translate how First Nations see and view the world, the two-way learnings are very important to understand what is right and what is important'
- 'evaluators don't often talk to the people on the ground who they are evaluating, or who the project affects. Any evaluation should be looking at program receivers as a priority'

There is no such thing as 'best practice' or a one-size fits all approach to the development, design and evaluation of policies and programs impacting First Nations people. There is a need to move beyond co-design towards genuine partnership at the local level.

- 'no such thing as best practice – need to think about community and local needs'
- 'what works somewhere, won't work somewhere else. Co-design and the "how" of the process, the doing of it that is missing. How did you get there and what were the learnings? Opportunity to do more of this. What do we mean when we say co-design?'

- 'partnership is the gold standard over co-design. Partnership based governance model, where decision making is in partnership. Aboriginal peeks leading'
- 'steering away from the "co-design" term and more towards community leadership and letting community drive the projects'
- 'interpretation of co-design needs to be unpacked in organisations and there needs to be greater understanding, Important to emphasise the step before co-design which is around engagement with community'
- 'co-design needs to be unpacked – what does Aboriginal led look like? Data sovereignty – what is it? What does it look like? What is capacity building?'
- 'notions of "best practice" and "what works best" is looking out the rear-view mirror, often with a big lag. We should move to a capacity building approach where we develop and use a guiding frame with reflective and collaborative practice'
- 'you will never get best practice, but you can get better practice'
- 'understanding what good practice for Aboriginal evaluation is and getting this across the department which is where a First Nations evaluation framework would be helpful. Whilst we have started on that journey, we have a long way to go'

Local and community involvement in decision making is needed to ensure the programs and service providers who are funded are working effectively to achieve community outcomes.

- 'the idea of Local Decision Making is to allow Aboriginal communities to directly negotiate with key government decision-makers'
- 'best practice versus promising practice – thinking about the local needs and the community. Need to tailor the approaches and would need guidance around this'
- 'people in communities see value in local decision making, but all the decision makers don't acknowledge what community wants to do'
- 'local decision making should be included in commissioning of all grants and funding as this helps keep service providers accountable for money they receive for Aboriginal people and communities. Local decision making should also be included in evaluations of these programs'
- 'on a recent tender, three local Aboriginal organisations who work closely within the community came together to get a tender together, and it ended going to an organisation who wasn't part of the local decision making process. How serious are government to actually work with our communities? People sitting on the procurement process don't understand our community and our footprint. That's the frustrations in the local decision making space'
- 'non-Aboriginal organisations getting Aboriginal dollars, how do we know it's being utilised in the best possible way. Non-Aboriginal organisations are good at tenders, but not good at achieving outcomes on the ground. Should have Aboriginal people from those communities on the tender boards'
- 'local decision making should be sitting at every commissioning table for services and evaluations in our region'
- 'local decision making could play a huge role in evaluation. We know who is in the community and who has the expertise. We can deliver and work with community who are interested in evaluation to upskill. We can do the truth testing, we don't need someone else to come into community'

A lack of communication and coordination across government leads to community consultation fatigue and places a high burden on First Nations communities to participate in research.

- 'government should sort out communication within agencies and across the clusters so there is coherence across government as a whole, to understand who is trying to speak to community. There are silos resulting in high consultation burden on communities. How can we make the best

use of community's time? We also need to pay them for their knowledge and time. It's important to minimise impact on community and find ways of streamlining, because when government is not organised, community bears the brunt of it'

- 'important to focus on developing solid ongoing relationships in a structured way and have ongoing co-design so that community is shaping what is happening through all stages of policy and program development. Need to have the ongoing corporate knowledge and sharing'

- 'such a burden within communities to try and answer governments consultation'

- 'lack of visibility across government resulting in overlapping consultations, meetings and questions posed to community. Often find that there is already something that is happening in the space in community. There is no clear outline of the questions being asked to community'

- 'consultation fatigue and expectations placed on community. Guidance on alternative ways to consult would be needed. There are questions to consider about representation (who can speak for who) and it important to avoid tokenistic work. What other avenues could be considered and used in this space?'

- 'there is talk about having an ongoing asset that could be a governance structure to consult with. Key to reduce the burden on experts and important to have a coordinated effort about what the model could look like'

- 'burden on community for participation in research is enormous. If the expectation is that everything is evaluated – how can we work with priorities for community. There is a limit to what can be expected, and current approaches are not serving Aboriginal communities. Needs some community driven coordination'

- 'connection between departments and understanding that the world works from a cross departmental perspective. There is something about the connected nature of government and the investment approach'

Greater use of expert panels or advisory groups could ease community consultation burden and provide appropriate remuneration for community members' time, knowledge and expertise.

- 'some considerations around establishing a survey panel for government to use when it comes to consulting. Government would be paying people for their time'

- 'we could have a group of people in communities who are happy to be paid to do a survey. This is an idea for down the track'

- 'access when doing on the ground evaluation activities is challenging as there are gatekeepers in some spaces. Important to get guidance on how to access community and engage with the community'

- 'supporting more Aboriginal subject matter experts might be a way around consultation fatigue. Evaluation should include remuneration for community experts. Clients and people who give up their time to participate in consultation should be remunerated for their time'

- 'need to reduce the burden on demand for experts. Projects need to consider remuneration for the experts that sit on some of these panels'

- 'there are no Aboriginal people on the team, however, have established an all-Aboriginal advisory group that speaks to the cultural responsiveness'

- 'it is important to ask about remuneration and compensation for the time that people and community spend'

- 'looking across government – there are Aboriginal boards that can be used for advice and there could be ways to work across government to rely on these boards'

- 'developing the advisory boards around evaluations across the sector and drawing on these – reduce over-consultation, exhaustion and fatigue'

- 'how to get money to set up reference groups and community consultation groups. Could there be guidance on how this has been done?'
- 'need to pay Aboriginal people for their time and participation in consultation and co-design processes'
- 'looking at having Aboriginal panels at the start and getting co-design happening upfront in the process –such as an Aboriginal community reference group that provides ongoing governance – paid community members that provide advice on the evaluation. For example, consent forms, protocols, data collection and fact sheet drafts. When starting the projects, they co-design with the reference group and they are paid for all of this work'

3.6 Defining and evaluating outcomes

Outcomes measured by government do not always align with the outcomes that are the most important for First Nations people and communities.

- 'there is a mismatch between what is measured and what matters to the community. For example, increasing land handback and measuring how much land has been given may in fact be having negative consequences'
- 'having measurable outcomes that reflect the values of the community for that particular sector – environmental, cultural, social, economic and governance – long-term goals defined by the community which are locally specific and holistic'
- 'have not worked closely with Aboriginal people to understand what they value. The outcomes of the different groups are assumed'
- 'outcomes as defined by who? It would be really nice to figure out together with community on what the outcomes they want are'
- 'outcomes are not aligned with what Aboriginal people want. Set up to fail – if don't have the outcomes right then what is the point?'
- 'KPIs make no sense in terms of Outcomes. Don't measure anything that is meaningful. Reporting on things that don't actually matter. What are the outcomes the people participating in the program want, rather than arbitrary ones set by government?'
- 'the outcomes framework wasn't developed in consultation with Aboriginal communities. What do people mean by "outcomes" evaluations? A lot of different interpretations of this'
- 'generic outcomes which are predetermined and don't reflect what's on the ground. Tick-a-box mentality – why are we actually doing it?'
- 'KPIs should align to community and not just to the funder's desires'
- 'so many services in town that aren't really working. Evaluations don't measure outcomes that community thinks are important'
- 'when we define the outcomes we don't often consider Aboriginal groups as customers as the size of the population tends to be used as a reason that moves away from considering the weight and impact of their voice. How can Treasury enable us to connect and benefit Aboriginal people and communities and have greater weight on the views and values of Aboriginal people?'
- 'the extent to which the community has articulated what counts as outcomes for the community is a missing piece and if not done upfront, it means that they are not measuring outcomes that are genuine'

Outcome evaluation is a developing area of practice and there remains some confusion about what this means, how it differs from other types of evaluation and what 'good' outcomes evaluation looks like.

- 'not everyone is familiar with outcomes evaluations, but it is mostly understood in the evaluation community and would be good to utilise for Aboriginal programs'
- 'there are questions to be answered about what a good outcomes evaluation looks like. There are some examples of good practice – have previously worked with a consultant that has an Aboriginal reference group and they plan from the start to ensure a robust partnership, and the quality of reports they produce has been good and have observed a trend in how the projects they undertake often continue and get renewed funding'
- 'we want to do more constructive Aboriginal outcomes evaluation; we are learning about it and want to continue. Need guidance on what are the right questions to be asking relating to the outcomes of Aboriginal people'
- 'there is a variety of experience about what is evaluation and what is valuable and what is considered good evidence. Need to provide guidance on the evidence hierarchy and what should constitute good evidence to the people that are reading the reports'
- 'often see consultant reports and the level of rigor is poor. There is good work around the qualitative, but the outcomes component is a challenge'
- 'there are general issues in outcomes evaluations, not just a problem with Aboriginal evaluations. Rigorous outcome evaluations by contractors are few and far between'
- 'the methodology for outcome evaluation tends to be tricky. There is some good understanding in the cluster, but the key issues are around data'
- 'the flaw is around understanding differences between impact and process evaluation. Important that the distinctions are understood'
- 'there are variations in understanding between outcomes and process evaluations. Which goes to the inconsistency and confusion about what good evaluation looks like'
- 'historically a lack of focus on outcomes evaluations. Need for a greater organisational understanding of the benefits and the roles of evaluation in decision making'
- 'the definition of an outcome is different across agencies and depends what the agency is focused on. Need to also measure governance outcomes and how the benefits are flowing from this. Issues around sense of civic pride being measured. Outcome of cultural engagement is not being quite captured as a wellbeing benefit. Something that agencies should define'
- 'what is the definition of an "outcome"? Very different across departments'
- 'there is a lot of material out there and it's a bit of a minefield. A high-level graphic or simple steps are needed that outlines the basics on how program logics fit in the big picture of evaluation and how this moves into the mapping of outcomes and the development of the evaluation framework'

There are challenges with measuring outcomes, including issues around causality, access to baseline data and attribution. In particular, siloed outcomes and programs do not allow for more holistic policy design and evaluation.

- 'a certain lack of clarity in the Aboriginal social policy space. Wicked problems with wicked solutions needed. Difficult to actually identify causes and effects. Makes it hard to measure and isolate from other factors. Can't prove causation'
- 'cross-cluster outcomes is challenging to capture, in particular issues of attribution'
- 'core outcomes sit in the work of other clusters and that is the key challenge – attribution and reporting on these outcomes'

- 'how to capture outcomes that are transferrable is a challenge particularly when the focus is on the holistic perspective'
- 'two things that have impeded us are attribution and lack of baseline data'
- 'New Zealand's Maori commissioning is done in a holistic way, around the family. Not as a program specific model. Too siloed here. Need to flip the approach around in Australia. Have a look at Maori commissioning model evaluation. They are 10 years ahead of us'
- 'outcomes budgeting, and cluster reporting is creating silos. Everyone just focused on their own patch. Who is actually responsible for a holistic model focused on the family? Not built around the end service user'
- 'one of the issues with the service sector is that things are very siloed. Evaluation should take into account how things work together instead of looking simply at the project'
- 'many projects don't have good baseline data. In particular, some that started 10 years ago. Trying to retrospectively evaluate means a large barrier to proper evaluation'
- 'access to high quality data is an issue for many evaluations but particularly for Aboriginal people. Aboriginality is often not captured well in our data systems for a number of reasons. This makes it very difficult to identify our Aboriginal program participants and their program outcomes'
- 'underpinning this challenge is the data. There is no accurate sub-state Aboriginal population data which creates data challenges. There is a need to have common denominator'

Programs need time and scale to properly assess impact on outcomes. Government often wants to see results immediately and does not give enough time for outcomes to be realised.

- 'time is an issue, have to wait to measure outcomes and there are short political cycles to work with that may not allow for the outcomes to be realised'
- 'small scale programs are difficult to robustly evaluate and do so quickly. It is an ongoing challenge'
- 'need to make it more explicit for the evaluators to consider location of where the evaluation is occurring as the issue of scale remains a key challenge'
- 'time is a big challenge – takes time to get a sample size that is sufficient, in particular to measure outcomes. Leads to retrospective evaluation which is very limited'
- 'there are many contributing factors to the outcomes being realised and some outcomes will take years. So there should be consideration about intermediate measures and outcomes'
- 'the challenge with outcomes is it takes time for benefits to flow. We need intermediate ways to measure progress'
- 'most evaluations are focused on outputs and not on the outcomes because that's all the information that is collected. The outcomes that should be measured and desired are usually not the kind that can be achieved in three years, they require more time'
- 'low sample sizes are an issue as well as the timing around the evaluation – challenges around collection of data and picking the metrics. If there are not enough children for long enough there will be challenges with undertaking an outcomes evaluation'
- 'sample size is a big issue, especially when working on pilots in a specific area. Need to think about it from a more strategic way to work out the methodology and how to address some issues around the data that is collected'
- 'if you cannot detect the effect size, it is difficult to assess a lot and often initiatives are then cut off early instead of waiting for more people to go through the program to determine smaller changes because of the program'

- 'challenges around a longitudinal approach. Most programs are designed to have longer term impacts but often given about two years to demonstrate outcomes'
- 'challenge is managing government expectations as the work is a marathon not a sprint. Need central agencies to take the lead to manage the expectation and the challenges that come with evaluating, people are not getting feedback'
- 'there should be short, medium and long-term outcomes so there are things happening throughout the process which can be evaluated'

Outcomes for First Nations people and communities are often not considered in planning and decision making around infrastructure projects.

- 'quite a lot of work up-front for infrastructure planners, but not a lot of review at the end of the project. Don't look deeply at the social and environmental impacts of the project'
- 'I have never heard of us evaluating an infrastructure project and asking the Aboriginal community – how did this benefit you?'
- 'developing a lot of cost-benefit analysis and business cases based on traditional standard methodologies. Haven't considered methodologies to capture Aboriginal communities in this to date'
- 'need to get Aboriginal objectives into business cases at the start rather than an add on down the road, so that it's not a delay/cost to the project team'
- 'we don't define what the Aboriginal objectives are. Don't consider Aboriginal customers as a group'
- 'for infrastructure projects, project teams which carry corporate memory are disband at the end of the job, and therefore the evaluation becomes more difficult at the physical completion of the work'
- 'consider the dis-benefits, potential negative impacts. We're not currently looking at that from the beginning – only the benefits'
- 'infrastructure has a role in building economic outcomes and unlocking economic opportunity for Aboriginal people'
- 'we don't hold our delivery partners accountable for Aboriginal procurement outcomes. If they do not spend the 1.5 per cent on Aboriginal participation, it is supposed to go into the Fund'

3.7 Resources and funding

Funding for evaluation is often not built into programs up-front, leaving agencies and service providers with limited resources to conduct evaluations.

- 'funding is a real issue for evaluation, and we must make do with what is available. Goes back to evaluation not being considered at the program design stage. Important to get clusters thinking about funding upfront so that there is funding at the end. Would be helpful if there are links to Treasury processes that ensure there is guaranteed funding for evaluation'
- 'evaluation planning around the new policy stage, we have had to put in a block of approximate costs. There are also problems around LEC[5] budget – you get cash budget, but no LEC and it is impossible to estimate LEC beforehand. Not sure what the best way is to fund evaluations? Need new solutions – maybe cluster buckets'

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[5] Labour Expense Cap (LEC). This is the maximum amount that an agency can spend in any given financial year on employee related and other contractor expenses (excluding consultants).

- 'funding is an issue in all agencies. There are ongoing programs that have never had evaluation funding allocated and the programs tend to skimp on this. Agencies are trying to work within the resources already allocated'
- 'important to ensure evaluation planning is factored in at the new policy development stage as there are challenges that arise when funding is uncertain'
- 'key challenges the cluster is grappling with are around how to quarantine funding for evaluation when the allocation comes in as cash. There are challenges with ensuring that when the cash is required it would be available. Difficult to find an appropriate accounting solution that enables the cluster to have an evaluation fund internal to the department. This is especially tricky when you start getting to the outcome evaluation stages'
- 'impossible to meet the guidelines to evaluate when there are no resources'
- 'we are often scrambling to get funding for the evaluation. This needs to be done upfront when an initiative is announced. Need to understand the resources and limitations of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector and also build this into the assessment frameworks'
- 'difficult to plan in terms of budget and funding for the evaluation from the beginning. There is limited scope in the budget. Need to think about a cyclical approach to capturing evidence and the funding as well'
- 'depending on the scale of the initiative, the human resource aspect of things has been a challenge and has been very difficult. The evaluation itself has not attracted the level of attention and funding that is needed'
- 'driving systematic and structural approach to evaluation would also need to integrate functions that include the finance teams which are well placed to emphasise the importance of evaluation'
- 'need dedicated funding for research and evaluation as part of the normal work process. Then we need resources that could be use used to inform future decision making and to implement evaluation findings'

Short-term funding cycles for programs contribute to the funding burden and inability to forward plan for evaluation.

- 'getting funding for the review of programs that had been identified for review was a challenge and past experience has been that evaluation was an add-on. Some programs are long term, for example 10 years, but the funding has only been a year at a time'
- 'having the funding would assist. Currently the short-term funding is an issue'
- 'to do things in partnership with community it takes time, but we only get three years of funding'

3.8 Data and measurement

Evaluation practice should better accommodate qualitative feedback, including the stories and experiences of First Nations people in building the evidence base. More focus is needed on community data and storytelling.

- 'a missing piece in outcomes evaluation is community stories and voices. Too much focus is on just numbers. We need to have the qualitative research helping to shape and give context to the quantitative data'
- 'the qualitative stories are culturally important and enable things like social accountability, and would allow resource-poor communities to influence decision making'
- 'too focused on the statistical data but for the community it is the anecdotes that need to hold more weight. Hearing what the community has to say needs to count more'

- 'the cultural assumptions we (government) hold are an issue. The measures that we record are inappropriate and do not help us understand from the Aboriginal perspective. For example, under the old Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy there was positive and negative exit measure that was used. This was inherited from a previous strategy and the issue was that the positive and negative exits were related to people owing rent, rather than the lived experience of the client. The long run focus should have been to understand what community needs'

- 'the tension between qualitative and quantitative evidence is a challenge to navigate. Qualitative is just tacked on, but not integrated. Would be great to get a better perspective of the value and strength of different types of evidence and how the two can be integrated and work together'

- 'currently grappling with the collection of qualitative data in a consistent and quality manner. Trying to understand why some of the services work and often the answer is not in the quantitative but the relationships. Important to also have advocacy around this kind of data in this space'

- 'we're still too focused on numbers and statistical data when it comes to community. Need to give more weight to what community is saying and qualitative information'

- 'need more strengths-based data collection that tells the story that Aboriginal people want'

- 'stories are just as critical at telling us about outcomes, it's not just about metrics'

- 'how do you use cultural knowledge and use it to inform pathways and processes in the work that is undertaken in the departments?'

- 'there is a tendency to overcomplicate evaluation and what research is. There is a lot of value in storytelling that is overlooked. Creates barriers for people. Need to simplify our evaluation strategies and approaches'

- 'another barrier to coproduction is that policy makers, politicians and Treasury may value forms of evidence that aren't valued as highly by Aboriginal communities and vice versa. Need to acknowledge this and guidance on how to navigate relationships'

- 'how do we balance the need for quantitative metrics and the level of information that can be extracted from qualitative information, they are both so very important and need to be recognised together'

- measuring by numbers rather than measuring by stories and experiences – Doesn't fit into our ways of sharing knowledge'

- 'each individual tells a story, and all those stories together paint a picture. Treasury should help to build capability around storytelling'

- 'some concerns expressed about what happens with the information received from community consultation (a lot of this information is stories) and is being left out – how do you fit this into best practice and include in evaluation as it is really important information'

- 'trying to measure the social impact that has to do with culture as part of a program. It's easy to get the data and the quantitative side of things, but how do we measure the on the ground conversations that happen outside of four walls? That do not fit into the traditional evaluation measurement ways'

- 'statistics don't mean much without community data and need to have community involved in face-to-face meetings - surveys usually don't work with community'

- 'we're not evaluators, but we would need some realistic frameworks that are fit for purpose. Common sense evaluations that capture the data and people's attitudes. There is a lot more of the spoken culture that should be given a lot more value'

- 'typical view is that government and public servants are the experts, but the reality is that community are the experts about what happens on the ground and to their lives. Community data is community expertise and unfortunately this is not given the same credence as the bureaucratic

data which also often speaks about the deficits. Expertise is high but not what traditional evaluation folks would use'

- 'how do you capture mindset change? People's understandings? How do you capture systematic change? Measuring systems change of non-Indigenous systems. Not just the population level changes, but actually the system level change'

- 'for effective measurement of Aboriginal outcomes (from the lived community experience), qualitative evaluation should be embedded in the evaluation framework'

Data and measurement continue to focus on outputs over outcomes. In particular, understanding is needed that program data is not sufficient to assess impact on outcomes.

- 'community needs to define the outcomes, most measures are just around outputs'

- 'we want different things from the evaluation. looking at the outcomes that have been achieved and the impact. However, government has other program criteria to be met that do not focus on the measurement of outcomes – just outputs'

- 'the data that is being collected is focused on compliance and outputs'

- 'describing approach and methodology – a clear trend to use a breakdown of data on Aboriginality as sufficient. But haven't included Aboriginal people in the design'

- 'evaluations are based on the records that kept by the service delivery organisations or the program area. Unpacking data and definitions and who defines this, and aligns with stakeholders' expectations'

- 'evaluations being undertaken are more tick-a-box. Very predefined in terms of what is required and the information that is being extracted from community and there has not been a shift in the approaches'

Cultural change is needed within the evaluation community to better prioritise the collection and use of qualitative information in evaluation and the assessment of outcomes.

- 'moving towards outcomes focus, but executive still want us to report on numbers. Lack of training or capacity on how to tangibly move towards outcomes and get by-in from executive. Leadership who wants the quantitative data and facts and figures'

- 'need to get leadership to understand difference between outputs and outcomes'

- 'interested in whether Treasury will accept intangible outcomes, such as cultural wellbeing (commonly reported by Aboriginal clients) in Aboriginal program evaluation'

- 'capacity at an organisational level is really needed in order to do good evaluation, this is a common barrier and challenge. Need an authorising environment that supports investing the time and taking the time to do it properly. Programs take time to embed. It is often the case we are starting and stopping without understanding that changing outcomes is long term work'

- 'we are talking about big cultural change in government, in particular in what we should be measuring and who decides that. It is often non-Aboriginal people deciding'

- 'the focus on outcomes is essential to understanding the impact of the initiative, but the big gap had been around educating the senior officials to understand what is behind the outcomes and the numbers. Important to have capacity in Treasuries and for senior officials to understand this, seniors are far removed from the stories and there is no connection. There might be something about a mindset shift to understand the outcomes evaluation'

- 'it's critical in the Aboriginal outcomes space to have an executive leadership team that recognise the validity of qualitative reporting – "you can't count outcomes, you can only talk about them". Quantitative data collection needs to be backed up by qualitative reporting, what are the stories

behind the data? What do all the numbers and percentages actually mean for mob on the ground? The key to capturing this lies within the voice of community'

Data sovereignty is not well understood within government and often data is collected from First Nations communities and not shared back. This inhibits transparency and prevents learnings from being generated within communities.

- 'data sovereignty should be part of the core principles of evaluation – having that piece of information empowers the community and it all goes back to the issues of self-determination and empowerment'
- 'reporting on evaluation needs to include appropriate information that is also shared with the community. Evaluation must have the community in mind'
- 'in the initiatives there was no discussion about Aboriginal participation and what community would get out of it at all'
- 'lack of understanding about data sovereignty and issues of data. Research that the researchers want, not what community want'
- 'sharing back with community is an issue and there is no acknowledgement of that information sharing – due to time, resources and capacity within the teams'
- 'sharing of information back with community doesn't happen often'
- 'comes down to meaningful engagements. What happens to that information that you receive when you go into community?'
- 'free, prior and informed consent – community should know they can withdraw at any time' s
- 'how Aboriginal people understand data is different. There is a mistrust of government, and no understanding of what data is or how it is used. Need to let community know how their data will be used and why it is important'
- 'so sick of asking for data we don't get – put out data requests and nothing comes back'
- 'often the sense is that government does not want to share, and that government does not trust community or trust community to have power'
- 'when the data is bad, community can still have a look at it and they can work with it. Often the approach and response from government is patronising. The playing field is not level'

More thought and guidance is needed around how to evaluate outcomes for First Nations people within mainstream programs.

- 'more difficult to engage on mainstream evaluations for impact on Aboriginal clients'
- 'big gap remains within broader (mainstream) evaluations. More Aboriginal people are exposed to mainstream programs than they are to Aboriginal specific initiatives. When thinking about evaluating the experience of people it would be only looking at part if the focus is only on Aboriginal specific programs'
- 'a key area for improvement is evaluating whether mainstream programs are working for Aboriginal people, however, there is uncertainty among policy makers about what level of Aboriginal community control should be applied in these instances and what the governance should look like. Guidance on this would be helpful'
- 'thinking about the Aboriginal component of broader mainstream programs is still a bit of a gap'
- 'the programs we evaluate are typically mainstream programs, and don't have specific objectives or outcomes defined for Aboriginal people, meaning Aboriginal outcomes are often not explicitly considered in program evaluations'

- 'where Aboriginal objectives and outcomes are considered, Aboriginal people often only make up a small proportion or number of our program participants, making it challenging to evaluate as part of a broader evaluation, in a culturally sensitive manner or other than at a micro level. The robustness and generalisability of any findings to wider Aboriginal communities would also be questionable'

Data collection needs to start earlier and be set up during the program design stage. This would support real-time understanding of program impacts, rather than only being assessed at the end. This creates better opportunities for continuous learning, program adaption and improvement.

- 'service providers collect data and there is the idea about a big evaluation, but they also need to know in real time how they are performing towards outcomes'

- 'there is a need for collecting qualitative data in an ongoing way'

- 'embedding data collection requirements into contracts is something that the cluster has been incorporating. Cluster works with the principle that the person closest to the service is best placed to collect the data'

- 'example where the evaluator had great recommendations from the mid-point of the program – they knew of the challenges halfway through, but no changes were made to the initiative. No one knows what happens to the evaluation and what the impact on the program was'

- 'instead of a formal evaluation process there needs to be a constant feedback and adaptation process that happens throughout and there is a constant link with the community and how things are working'

- 'historically what happens with Aboriginal data, data is ad hoc and inconsistent and pulled together last minute. No unit consistently gathering data. No clear system for collecting data'

- 'a barrier is that, in some instances, program monitoring data aren't always available or of good quality, and so have limited utility in evaluation. Need to build evaluation planning into program design'

- 'different understandings of what evaluations mean. It should be about learning as you go, with structures set up at the beginning'

3.9 Purpose, accountability and transparency

Action on the recommendations and findings of evaluations appears to be limited with little impact on decision making, often leaving those undertaking evaluations unsure of the purpose or value add.

- 'the end outcome when you get a final report is usually unclear. It is unknown whether the evaluation is meeting the requirements of the people that are reading the report'

- 'another key barrier is the lack of understanding on what happens when an evaluation has been completed, particularly when it demonstrates that a program has not achieved the desired outcomes. Guidance on what to do with completed evaluations and how to use the findings would be helpful'

- 'what about the barriers when the evaluation is done? Evaluations sit on the shelf and don't get used when they don't show positive outcomes'

- 'another challenge is that in the reports there are discussions about the limitations and the mitigation. But what is missing is capturing the learning about what worked and why, or why not, and what could be done to improve on it'

- 'once you have the evaluation what do you do with the recommendations that come from this? The current approach to use of the findings has been variable and there has been a lack of enthusiasm on evaluating'

- 'where does the evaluation go after completion?'
- 'no one takes up the recommendations of evaluations. Nothing happens with evaluation recommendations. What happens to these reviews? Do programs change as a result of them?'
- 'government is still making decisions based on ideology rather than on evidence'
- 'unsure how evaluation findings are used, and if they are used to inform decision making'
- 'evaluations don't seem to be meaningful – seem to be a tick-a-box to make government look good, rather than actually evaluate anything. So many examples of projects that should not still be running but are, and projects that should be that are not – concerned as to what is actually happening in the evaluation space and seems like the evaluations are not informing decisions'

There is sometimes a lack of understanding about the purpose or value of evaluation. This has contributed to a lack of evaluation culture within program delivery teams and often results in evaluation not being seen as a priority.

- 'would need to build evaluation into the program which needs to be embodied and seen as genuine and authentic. Currently evaluation is seen as a compliance issue and not seen as adding to public investment'
- 'finding the time to make it a priority and then to go through the procurement process. Evaluation is seen as a "nice to have", the true value and benefit of evaluation is not fully understood'
- 'non-research base around programs, planning and the strategic work means that evaluation can be seen as an add on instead of it being seen as a beneficial tool'
- 'evaluation is not the priority of those delivering services and programs. Success is judged based on the number of people reached – its focused on getting engagement with participants'
- 'no incentive structure for the program team to do an evaluation. Incentive of the program team is to get funding and positive promotion of the program'
- 'evaluation is not a high priority for service delivery organisations and the cluster is working to set up some gates to make sure there is a plan and data is collected to ensure an evaluation is undertaken. For ongoing programs this is not yet there'
- 'limited resources and time early on in the piece for a co-design approach. Pressure of delivery is often put on us and co-design is the first thing to go'
- 'the maturity within the department also needs to be considered – evaluation is not built into the thinking of teams'
- 'at the moment, for the start of projects, projects are generally developed on traditional economic benefits'

Decisions around publishing evaluations are often *ad hoc* due to an inconsistent approach across NSW Government. This contributes to a lack of accountability and transparency, limiting community access to information and resulting in missed opportunities for communities to benefit from the findings.

- 'there are discussions about internal release versus external release. However, decisions are ad hoc, and they sit with the team that has commissioned the evaluation and at some points, even with guidance, there may be occasions those decisions are overridden'
- 'within our area it's a requirement upfront that if it will not be published then we would not undertake the evaluation. Note that it is not just about publishing, but the peer review process is essential so that there is rigor'
- 'cross agency evaluations are a particular challenge, when one agency has some push back about publication and for a lot of projects that do involve several agencies this can be an issue'

- 'we almost never go back to let communities know what we did with the information, let alone validated if we have heard community's views correctly'
- 'transparency is a good place to start, important to know what is working or not and for the views of community to be shared. Publishing aids community understanding and it helps to build trust'
- 'the baseline should be to publish when it comes to evaluation. Otherwise, whose evaluation is it? – there is a power dynamic that needs to be examined here around the commissioning and the publication of the reports'
- 'need to think about the different audiences for the evaluation – the reactions between government and the community to the reported findings can be very different'

There is a need to establish systems for boosting accountability for evaluations and more effective assurance processes to ensure that programs are regularly evaluated.

- 'there are no governance structures or mechanisms within the cluster to ensure follow through. Many programs continue without any evaluation or oversight'
- 'need to establish good working groups and steering committees that can be relied on and can boost accountability for evaluations'
- 'reporting needs to be transparent – people not held accountable'

The lack of consistent and transparent evaluation reinforces a lack of accountability among service providers and limits the amount of information available for government to make informed funding decisions.

- 'the challenge is not the money, but how the money is spent and the lack of accountability. There is a lot of money that is wasted in this space'
- 'when are these evaluations going to start to make people accountable'
- 'NGOs getting a lot of money, whether doing a good job or not – Aboriginal people and businesses have to jump through so many hoops and can't get the money'
- 'so much money given out, but this is not going to "close the gap" –governments won't listen– just keep giving out money. Giving money to the same people we will never close the gap. We will never change until we change the way government does business. It's not about the amount, it is about how it is directed and used. Directed to the wrong people'
- 'I would like to know how much money is going into non-Aboriginal organisations –how are we making sure the Aboriginal dollars are being utilised in the best possible way– a lot of current service providers who are not successful on the ground'
- 'money just given out year after year, without being reviewed. Non-government organisations are racking in money whether they are doing the job or not. White organisations and black cladding is an issue'

Evaluation is not effectively informing funding decisions for services, resulting in duplicated services within communities. Service mapping and data on government investment at the community level has been identified as a key tool needed to assist alongside evaluation.

- 'new organisations get funded by government, but we already have services doing the same thing – duplication with no outcomes. We need some sort of register of what services are already funded and what outcomes are being achieved. It confuses community, and then the funding is going to non-Aboriginal organisations'
- 'in Moree there are over 75 services, people want to know how much money is spent on them and they would like to have a say in how things are done and where the money is going and have that handed back to community. Hand the data over as a matter of practice'

- 'if people knew how much is being spent, there would be a willingness to have the conversation, it would have people at the table – stop being so patronising and hand the data over, yes there would be some uncomfortable conversations, but it would help the conversations and having the engagement'

3.10 Principles and ethics

A broad set of practice principles to guide evaluation is needed to set the foundations of good First Nations evaluation practice.

- 'it's important to have the foundational things and acknowledge that relationships with community are also political relationships. We need key principles of dignity and good faith – broad, deep principles that set the foundation for this political relationship are needed. Once we establish broad-based principles, then everything else would flow from this'
- 'principles provide the foundation for the relationships but are adaptable to the context and place. They give a shared understanding across government and communities'
- 'the AH&MRC are building research partnerships with communities and principles for engagement. While focused on research they are also focused on respect, co-design and partnership and it is a matured framework that could inform principles for working with Aboriginal people in an evaluation context'
- 'important to invoke good principles about involving First Nations people legitimately, this has to be front and centre and this changes how things should happen'
- 'it would be good to start from foundations –the basics– and having more guidance on the cultural lens that would help inform the approaches taken to evaluation'

Additional guidance is needed to help agencies navigate ethics processes, improve ethics capacity and address ethics approval backlogs.

- 'so many applications are going through for the ethics committees which creates a backlog. Are there ways that funding could be pooled at the NSW Government level for such a body, perhaps establish something in New South Wales or for the NSW Government that could be broadened out'
- 'guidance on the ethics and how to get through this as it has been a challenge'
- 'we have found it challenging to get ethics approval for our evaluations. Recently we have submitted an application for a mainstream evaluation with an Aboriginal component through the AH&MRC. They have raised different concerns in relation to each application, many of which are reasonable, and we have addressed, but one in particular is very challenging – the requirement to include Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations throughout each phase of our evaluation. The evaluation is of a government program which doesn't involve any community organisations. It has been difficult finding suitable contacts within these organisations to discuss the evaluation with and organisations are reluctant to get involved as they have limited knowledge of our program'

3.11 Cultural capability and structural bias

Improved cultural capability is needed at both the individual and organisational level, including among senior executives.

- 'cultural capability at the executive and ministerial level is needed. There is no understanding about some of the key issues and there is a lot of work to still do in this space. Ideally need to

have some cultural capability training that brings staff up to a baseline. There is work needed to ensure there is no watering down of information'

- 'requires a culture shift, including building the cultural capability of organisation and executives. For example, understanding the effects of the stolen generations. Need every staff member to have a level of cultural capability training. Knowledge about Australian history and genocide and cultural destruction'

- 'developing a register for Aboriginal organisations that do cultural competency training or have experience in providing traditional knowledge would be helpful. Currently there is a lack of knowledge on who the providers are'

- 'where to get training – cultural sensitivity, how to engage with community, general approaches to engagement with community. What is the mindset and approach?'

- 'cultural awareness and competency should not be so transactional. Need to be in the space and place of understanding, to have the time on the ground outside of the normal offices to comprehend the power that is involved in the qualitative side of things'

- 'training and the culture mindset shift. Finding the right ways to invest in people, so there is a true experience beyond just cultural competence training. It's about understanding the true experience from the metro, regional and community level. In the end its about people making decisions about people which is why that deep understanding is important'

Mainstream evaluation practice is built around Western understandings and values and does not fully accommodate First Nations perspectives. Institutional change is needed to challenge this underlying cultural bias and identify assumptions. This will create space for First Nations voices to be meaningfully integrated into evaluation practice.

- 'there is a lot of racism and structural violence in the approaches that government takes. There is a still a lot of unconscious bias and leaning towards settler colonial approaches'

- 'government structure is a settler-colonial way of doing things, and is continuing to create harm in communities'

- 'tokenism is an issue and the solutions that are proposed are not really addressing the needs of community and no thought for evaluation'

- 'white cultural assumptions are built into data – the measures we already record don't help us to understand from an Aboriginal client's point of view'

- 'how evaluation is approached and done tends to be from the white and western lens and the approach and views are white dominated. The tools and the approaches and frameworks are western centric and there is no Aboriginal lens applied to it as well as the data collection methods around this are not appropriate'

- 'focus is often deficit based when it comes to evaluation and community feeling like there is a lot of criticism and monitoring'

- 'we have created westernised colonial structures that we want people to interact with, but government needs to adapt to people, not people to government'

- 'there is a disconnect between what government says and what government does – process used is very western centric and the outcomes that are being measured are not aligned with what Aboriginal people want and need'

- 'often just an overlay of language "throw yarning in", but the intent isn't changed and it remains a westernised process'

- 'the process of evaluation and cost-benefit analysis is based on the western construct and objectives coming from the group in power and wanting to see certain results'

4.Lessons and reflections

Feedback from stakeholders supports the need for NSW Treasury to look at ways to improve evaluation policy and practice to better support outcomes for First Nations people and communities.

- 'big desire for more resources and information on how to do culturally informed evaluation'
- 'we want to do more constructive Aboriginal outcomes evaluations. Good to see advice like this coming from NSW Treasury'
- 'evaluation tends to be an afterthought, suggest that NSW Treasury advocate on the importance of this especially to the investment process'
- 'gap in understanding around what's important for evaluation of an Aboriginal program. Great that Treasury is filling in those gaps about how to do this better'
- 'this is a really good time for NSW Treasury to be doing this work'
- 'NSW Treasury's role should be to provide leadership across the sector about how we should be doing things differently'
- 'it's fabulous that Treasury is leading this work, it's really important'

At a high level, some of the key learnings and reflections from this consultation listening series include:

- Systems level change is needed to solve important issues – guidance on good practice will not be enough to create the change that is needed.
- Cultural upskilling is needed at all levels, from government ministers and senior executives to individuals in agencies. Not only to understand First Nations perspectives, but also to re-define who evaluation is for and who it should benefit and inform.
- Targeted guidance is needed to inform better practice in First Nations evaluation, however the impact of this in improving practice will be limited somewhat by the number of evaluations which are outsourced outside of government.
- Given this, it will be essential to have guidance around how to effectively integrate First Nations evaluation at the program design stage and through the RFQ process and how to do this in partnership with First Nations people.
- Outsourcing raises the question of what government's role and responsibility is in evaluation and what the right mix is of internal capacity and capability and external expertise.

Learnings from this report identify three broad categories of change that are needed to improve First Nations evaluation practice in New South Wales.

1. Targeted and culturally responsive guidance is needed to build capability in evaluation of policies and programs impacting First Nations people and communities, including the development of:

- A broad set of practice principles to guide First Nations policy design and evaluation.
- A First Nations cultural lens through which to frame evaluation.
- Practical guidance, including case studies and examples, around the development and testing of program logics and defining outcomes.
- An accessible list of First Nations providers and other culturally qualified evaluators; and
- Training and information sessions to build capability across government.

2. *Cultural change is needed at the individual and organisational level to holistically shift evaluation practice and to create genuine opportunities for First Nations centred approaches, including:*

- Building a culture of evaluation within government to ensure high quality, timely and effective evaluation practice.

- Embedding of a First Nations centred approach to bring lived experience and expertise to the development, delivery and evaluation of policies and programs impacting communities.

- Moving the evidence base towards outcomes from outputs to improve the quality of the evidence base and support informed investment decision making.

- Building tools around qualitative data where stories are utilised and valued alongside numbers, leading to more holistic and culturally informed evaluation practice.

- Critical self-reflection and mindset change among evaluation practitioners to adjust to alternative ways of approaching evaluation to support First Nations perspectives.

3. *As well as specific First Nations evaluation guidance, better systems and policies are also needed to improve evaluation practice more broadly, including:*

- Improving prioritisation processes for policy formulation and evaluation to ensure a coordinated and thoughtful approach across government.

- Better linking evidence through evaluation with decision making to ensure funding is going where it is most effective.

- Embedding funding for evaluation into the budget cycle and looking at ways to ensure flexibility and accessibility of funding for evaluation within agencies.

- Embedding evaluation planning into policy design upfront to avoid problems of retro-fitting evaluation to programs at the end.

- Building accountability mechanisms and incentive structures into government processes to encourage evaluation and its use.

- Better connecting people and resources across government to increase information sharing, reduce duplication and build cross-cluster capability.

5. Next Steps

This report represents the first step in the consultation and scoping for a First Nations evaluation framework in New South Wales. The FNEW Branch would like to thank everyone who shared their time and their story with us. We have heard you and look forward to sharing further details on how your contributions will shape this important work to bring First Nations voices and perspectives to the heart of government investment and decision making.

The next steps for the project will be to work through the learnings and insights from this report to:

- conduct a detailed scoping for the project, including goals, timeframes and resources

- inform future consultation with government and First Nations people; and

- identify priority areas for improvement and further guidance.

NSW Treasury, under its commitments to Closing the Gap, will continue to progress the development and delivery of this framework by 2024. Ultimately this work will contribute towards a broader First Nations focused policy and investment framework for New South Wales and will complement and build on the existing suite of NSW Treasury investment frameworks.

Importantly, many of the findings of the consultation series around general evaluation policy and practice align with issues being addressed in the cross-government collaboration (led by NSW Treasury CEE) to update the NSW Treasury Evaluation Policy and Guidelines (see Appendix B for further information).

Appendix A - Interview questions

A sample list of questions covered during the group interviews is provided below. Note that not all questions were covered in every interview and some questions were adapted to suit different stakeholder contexts.

Understanding current practice

Q: What would you say the level of expertise is within your organisation or agency to perform evaluation? Would this be the same when it comes to performing culturally informed evaluations of programs that impact on First Nations people and communities?

Q: Within your organisation or agency, are evaluations generally done in-house or outsourced? Is this the same for evaluations of First Nations programs?

Understanding barriers and gaps

Q: When outsourcing, have you found any challenges to procuring qualified and culturally informed evaluators?

Q: What are the biggest barriers for organisations or agencies in performing best practice evaluations?

Q: When looking specifically at 'outcomes evaluations' of programs that impact First Nations people, what are the current gaps in guidance/knowledge?

Identifying opportunities

Q: In Treasury advice around good practice in evaluation impacting First Nations people, what kind of information or guidance would be most useful and practical for you?

Q: Is there anything else you would like to share or you think is important for us to know?

Appendix B – NSW Treasury Evaluation Policy and Guidelines

NSW Treasury will publish updated evaluation requirements, recommendations and guidance, with supporting resources in 2022.

The Evaluation Policy and Guidelines (Evaluation TPG) is one of a suite within a framework of evidence requirements to inform policy and budget setting in New South Wales. These frameworks are designed to strengthen the evidence base of 'what works' to deliver outcomes and provide value for investment.

All NSW Government agencies are required to coordinate monitoring and periodic evaluation of their initiatives. Initiatives resourced by the NSW Government must be regularly examined to ensure they are achieving intended outcomes and providing benefits to the people of New South Wales.

The TPG update has been undertaken with extensive consultation, and in collaboration with NSW Government agencies, to support the government commitment to evidence-informed policy and investment. The updated evaluation policy and guidance, and supporting resources, include:
- building monitoring and evaluation planning into initiative design and implementation
- embedding funding for evaluation into business case funding submissions
- establishing data collection with initiative implementation (and ensuring that baseline data is collected)
- collaborating with stakeholders, including customers and the community, in evaluation design and implementation
- incorporating ethical considerations and requirements into monitoring and evaluation design and conduct
- designing and implementing outcome evaluation, including guidance on identifying when outcomes can be measured and evaluated
- integrating qualitative research into evaluation
- working with stakeholders to identify and test 'benefits'
- undertaking effective procurement (including discussion of the role of commissioning in providing independent perspectives)
- reporting evaluation, including public release of findings
- responding to evaluation findings
- using evaluation evidence in designing initiatives and funding submissions; and
- building a culture of evaluation within an agency.

The enhanced guidance on stakeholder collaboration in the updated Evaluation TPG is consistent with NSW Government's commitment to a different way of working with, and in support of, First Nations communities by building strong working partnerships that have at their heart respect for First Nations cultures, leadership and decision making.

The NSW First Nations evaluation framework will further build on this work through embedding a First Nations perspective into all aspects of design, implementation and evaluation.

Further information and contacts

For further information on the framework, please email the NSW Treasury First Nations Economic Wellbeing (FNEW) Branch at fnew@treasury.nsw.gov.au

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