



everyone's family

Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Draft

Productivity Commission

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Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for them by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive and create a better future for themselves.

The Smith Family delivers programs in 90 communities across all states and territories in Australia. In 2018-19, The Smith Family supported over 200,000 children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals of whom over 22,600 identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Further information on The Smith Family is available at www.thesmithfamily.com.au.

1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a further submission on the Draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (the Strategy) and commends the Productivity Commission for its high-quality work in this inquiry to date.

The Smith Family is not an Aboriginal owned organisation. Our comments are provided from our position as an organisation who is committed to Reconciliation in Australia and to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. We recognise that we are on a journey to increase our level of cultural competence and note that our comments are framed and shaped by this context.

Overall, The Smith Family endorses the Strategy, as it has the potential to support evidence-based policy and programs within the Federal Government. If implemented, we believe the Strategy can significantly improve the understanding, not just within the Federal Government but also local partners in civil society and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, of what policies and programs are successful and unsuccessful, and why. In turn, the Strategy can improve the way future programs are designed in the first instance, as well as how they are subsequently delivered. It will also help ensure public funding allocated to various initiatives across the country goes to programs delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We make the following points in this submission:

- The objective and scope of the Strategy are appropriate.
- The guiding principles of the Strategy form a suitable framework for evaluations.
- The proposed central clearinghouse needs to be sufficiently resourced to share evaluation findings in a timely and suitable manner with a range of audiences.
- There are several challenges relating to the Strategy that may affect its implementation as per the articulated timeframe.
- It is important that governance arrangements are streamlined and not duplicated with the implementation of the Strategy.

We briefly expand on these points below.

2. Objective and scope

The Smith Family endorses the objective and scope of the Strategy. Its central goal should be to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through having high quality evaluation and evidence informing policies and programs.

It is important that the scope of the Strategy applies to all Australian Government agencies designing and/or implementing Indigenous-specific or mainstream policies and programs, given that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples rely on mainstream policies and programs. The Productivity Commission notes that the Strategy holds implications for other levels of government, given the significant cross-over between responsibilities. Ideally, The Smith Family would like to see the Strategy adopted and applied, as relevant, by state and territory governments. It would be beneficial to policy and program development generally if there was a broadly consistent evaluation framework and approach, including regarding data collection, adopted across jurisdictions, including a commitment to share the findings of evaluations.

3. Guiding principles

The Smith Family endorses the guiding principles of the Strategy, including the overarching principle which recognises the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, knowledges and cultures is critical. This principle aligns with the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap which was signed in July 2020 by the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and all Australian Governments.

We think that the other four principles of the Strategy – credible, useful, ethical and transparent - form a suitable framework for evaluations. We also endorse the importance of building genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in undertaking evaluations, noting that this requires time, skill, trust and resources to achieve.

4. Creating a clearinghouse

We support the sharing of evaluation reports and learnings through a central clearinghouse as a practical component of transparency. Sharing findings in a timely, accessible and digestible manner is crucial if evaluations are to directly improve policies, programs and services delivered in communities across the country, and to improve the collective understanding of Indigenous policies and programs amongst civil society, including non-government service providers.

We endorse the proposed Indigenous Evaluation Clearinghouse sitting within an existing independent statutory authority. Such a clearinghouse should have a clear mandate to coordinate the synthesis of new evaluation evidence, contribute to the existing evidence base, and translate the knowledge into forms that are accessible and digestible to different audiences. The ability of the proposed clearinghouse to translate knowledge in this way is particularly important given the need to share evaluations widely. The clearinghouse will need to be sufficiently resourced to fulfil its responsibilities to work across the government, and likely with actors outside government.

5. Implementing the Strategy

Implementing the Strategy is an opportunity to refresh the Federal Government's systemic approach to the design and delivery of relevant programs. It puts the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people at its core and aims to empower them to provide leadership in future program design and delivery. We appreciate that there will be challenges in implementing across government an evaluation framework which is both centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and rigorous.

A range of factors may affect the implementation timeline outlined in the Strategy. Firstly, for the Strategy to be effectively implemented, the proposed Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation (OIPE) will require suitable capability, capacity and resources. The OIPE's mandate outlined in the Strategy is clear and broad, involving constant collaboration across the entire machinery of government. It will need to be able to work effectively in many different settings. As such it is important that the OIPE is visible and recognised as the go-to authority on Indigenous evaluation whose expertise is actively sought by different agencies. For example, we note that the Productivity Commission recommends a maturity approach to evaluation, acknowledging government agencies have different levels of sophistication in designing, delivering and evaluating Indigenous policies and programs. It is conceivable that embedding rigorous evaluation practices in a mainstream agency unaccustomed to such methods - such as ensuring they undertake a quality Indigenous Evaluation Threshold Assessment when developing a new program - will require a closer working relationship and greater level of strategic advice than a specialist agency with an existing strong evaluation culture and expertise. Resourcing the OIPE and ensuring a clear, authoritative mandate will be important to ensure it is firmly established within the machinery of government, and to minimise the risk it becomes a well-functioning but overlooked office in the day-to-day operations of other agencies.

Secondly, achieving a whole-of-government, coordinated approach to Indigenous evaluation that ultimately improves service delivery in communities across the country will be difficult on two levels. There is still considerable scope for improvements in inter-Departmental collaboration, including data sharing, even when there are clear synergies and strong rationales to collaborate between portfolios. There is also an inherent tension between locally-driven solutions on one hand, and an overarching whole-of-government evaluation strategy on the other. Whilst we agree that improved consistency in Indigenous evaluation is crucial, this should not result in a single or uniform approach. The OIPE will need to support nuanced, program delivery and evaluations tailored to the unique circumstances of different communities, while aligning to the guiding principles outlined in the Strategy. A core feature of quality evaluations is determining what works, for whom and in what circumstances. This involves understanding what qualities of a successful program are due to local measures, and what qualities can be applied in other locations as part of a more expanded practice.

Thirdly, it is important to recognise that non-government providers are pivotal in the delivery of Indigenous programs across the country, both where they are contracted to provide services on behalf of the Federal Government and where they deliver services separately of such funding. Where non-government providers deliver services for the government, it will be important that relevant data on Indigenous programs is able to be provided to the respective department consistent with privacy and confidentiality requirements. Otherwise undertaking rigorous evaluations may prove problematic and reliant on more limited information. Contractual relationships between providers and departments may need revision over time, including providing appropriate support and/or resourcing to ensure organisations' capacity to contribute to evaluations.

6. Governance

The Smith Family commends the Productivity Commission for ensuring that the interests and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are at the centre of governance arrangements under the Strategy. However, it is important that the arrangements implemented do not duplicate existing processes, and do not add layers of complexity to the current system within the Federal Government's development of Indigenous policies and programs. Implementation of the Strategy should seek to streamline such arrangements as part of the aim of creating a whole-of-government approach to evaluation.

7. Conclusion

Once finalised and implemented, the Strategy has the potential to significantly strengthen the Federal Government's ability to evaluate and in turn develop more effective Indigenous policies and programs. Not only does it have the potential to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country, but to place their interests and involvement at the heart of future programs. In that sense we can do service by the sentiment in the Uluru Statement from The Heart, that Australia be a country walking in two worlds and respecting the cultures of Indigenous communities everywhere. We wish the Commission well in its work and will follow the implementation process with great interest.