



# Children's Ground

Submission to Productivity Commission: 'Indigenous Evaluation Strategy'

***"Aboriginal people have been researched to death. We want to research ourselves back to life."***

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## Submission relevance

Children's Ground commends the Australian Government on undertaking this critically important Productivity Commission into 'Indigenous Evaluation Strategy'. We appreciate and are pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this nationally important review and work.

This Productivity Commission is particularly relevant to Children's Ground because as an organisation we exist to evidence the impact of First Nations led systems reform in community governance, service delivery, workforce, investment and evaluation. We achieve this through First Nations led monitoring, evaluation and research, over the short, medium and long-term.

The Productivity Commission's Issues Paper asks for examples of best practice. Children's Ground was informed but not limited by leading practice in national and international research evidence bases. It is an example of building best practice in service delivery and evaluation, designed by First Nations people in the Northern Territory.

As a contribution to this Productivity Commission, we are pleased to share our experiences and evidence about how communities who have been excluded and disempowered in current service systems have become the designers, deliverers and evaluators of the CG Approach that is changing the daily experience for children and their families and creating a different future for their children.

### ***About Children's Ground***

Children's Ground was designed to redress the failings of current service systems. This includes responding to the lack of monitoring and evaluation of programs and services for First Nations people, and the lack of research and evaluation led and undertaken by First Nations people in communities who services are seeking to engage.

The CG Approach was designed with Aboriginal people to achieve comprehensive system, service and practice reform. It was established as an alternative approach that can turn disempowerment into empowerment within systems for First Nations people and systemic exclusion into inclusion for children, families and whole communities. While the CG Approach was designed by and for First Nations communities, the model can be implemented with any community experiencing multiple and complex disadvantage, inequity and exclusion.

Children's Ground's Research & Evaluation framework articulate principles, approaches and a 25-year longitudinal Monitoring & Evaluation strategy embedded from the outset in each community we work alongside. Communities we work with have a range of indicators of change for Children, Families and Community across nine outcome areas that include health, education, culture, safety, economy.

Research approaches and methods that empower individuals and communities through the research process as well as the research findings are central to the Children's Ground's research and evaluation approach. Research and evaluation are designed and undertaken by Children's Ground's First Nations Community Researchers in each location. This ensures that the evaluation blends First Nations culture and practice with western methods to provide a rigorous and powerful monitoring and evaluation model. Using a Participatory Action Research approach and upholding First Nations data sovereignty is a key foundation for empowerment in research and evaluation.

Early evidence from our longitudinal evaluation has shown a cost-effective and efficient funding, systems and service delivery model that is demonstrating short-term impact (after three years) as building blocks to long-term change for children and their families.

Children's Ground is evidencing an approach and service system that seeks to ensure First Nations Australians can enjoy the same opportunities and life outcomes as the majority of Australians. For further information the following documents are also attached to this submission: An introduction to Children's Ground and Children's Ground's Research & Evaluation Framework. More detailed information about the Children's Ground Approach and evidence can be available upon request. Our first three-year formal evaluation will be available within one month and will be accessible on our website.

The submission is not presented to advocate for Children's Ground as an organisation. It is premised on our experience that most communities have services that focus on part or one aspect of the CG Approach and that there is minimal evaluation undertaken of service effectiveness in terms of process or impact. This submission is presented to the Productivity Commission to consider core elements of a First Nations led approach to Monitoring & Evaluation design and implementation.

## Submission context

First Nations people have been the subjects of research and evaluation in different forms since colonisation. In many cases, this research involved collecting data from people and taking it away to be analysed, with no direct benefit for the individuals or communities involved and no feedback on the outcomes of the research.

More recently there has been significant discussion on ensuring research is undertaken in a culturally respectful manner and in a way that benefits both individuals and communities. However, the majority of research and evaluation conducted with First Nations people continues to be driven by government and organisations rather than the communities themselves.

Designing an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy should not be undertaken without considering systems reform and the role that current services, initiatives and a lack of effective evaluation have played in Australia's inability to close the gap and improve outcomes for First Nations peoples. This work cannot be undertaken without First Nations people from communities as the leaders and decision makers. We cannot continue to have Western systems, services, research and evaluation imposed on First Nations communities without their leadership in design, implementation, analysis and reporting.

## An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy alone is not enough

As stated in the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Issues Paper "the overriding objective of the project is to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people"<sup>1</sup>. An evaluation framework alone will not achieve this. An Indigenous Evaluation Framework

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission: Indigenous Evaluation Framework Issues Paper. 2019.

needs to be considered, planned and implemented alongside genuine systems and service reform that empowers First Nations people and communities at all levels.

Previous reviews and Productivity Commissions have identified that the current service systems are broken<sup>2</sup>. Child and family services have become increasingly fragmented and targeted, resulting in a piecemeal approach of fractured service and program funding and delivery. In some areas the impact of this has been catastrophic for children, families and communities – it has resulted in increasing the complexity of the issues people are experiencing, and a service system that cannot keep pace with changes in families, communities, society and government.

Eleven years of Closing the Gap data is evidence of failed approaches and a failed system. This has been perpetuated by the lack of evaluation of key Indigenous policies and programs which means we do not have a national evidence base about why a decade of policies and service delivery have failed First Nations people and communities. The major Australian Government programs outlined in the Issues Paper have not demonstrated a significant impact for First Nations people nor have they evidenced any significant contribution to closing the gap. These initiatives need to be openly and transparently evaluated to understand how and why they were implemented in the way they were and if they were implemented as intended. Such an evaluation process will provide key lessons that can be used in future policy, service and program design that includes monitoring and evaluation from the outset.

Many government and non-government services have wonderful visions that start with a focus on people and outcomes. However, realising this vision can be compromised by the way the funding and service systems function. Extremely targeted and limited funding allocations are resulting in constant referrals of people between services and systems. For those most in need, service systems are often inaccessible, cannot respond to their multiple needs and these children and families are falling through the gaps of siloed service delivery. Funding allocations rarely include adequate resources to build evaluation into programs and services from the outset. Largely, if any evaluation is undertaken, it is considered and funded as an afterthought. This means that governments are defining the effectiveness and impact of programs and services based on strict and siloed targets and numbers reported throughout a funding period, rather than robust evaluation that thoroughly and genuinely understands impact from the perspective of those it seeks to serve and support – the participants.

A key objective in evaluating policies and programs affecting First Nations people should include an outcomes and evaluation framework based on how services and system can work with First Nations people – rather than how they currently work with and support First Nations people. Our major service sectors of education, health and wellbeing, economic and social support cater to the mainstream but are failing those at the margins of economic, cultural and social privilege. Decades of national and international research and reviews have consistently found and articulated core elements of 'evidence-based practice' that are important in achieving sustainable change and impact for children, families and communities experiencing extreme disadvantage. Yet policy, service and program funding and delivery has not been able to effectively respond to these findings and achieve service systems that provide equitable access and engagement for all. An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy built around Australia's current service systems will be culturally bias. It is likely to continue

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission. 2017. Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services.

to exclude those who do not benefit and are actively disadvantaged by mainstream service structure. Such a strategy will likely generate siloed evaluation and evidence-bases, rather than evidence about how holistic and integrated service systems can be responsive to all social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing. We do not want to exacerbate the negative impact of current piecemeal and fragmented service delivery and approaches by building monitoring and evaluation frameworks around broken systems.

The components of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy suggested in the Issues Paper will likely produce a well-intentioned document that theoretically would increase monitoring and evaluation of First Nations targeted policy, programs and service delivery. However, like many similar frameworks and policy documents, it could potentially end with the theoretical. Without a clear plan and mandate for implementation of monitoring and evaluation we are likely to see little change in the current levels of evaluation, let alone change in the effectiveness of evaluation and First Nations leadership and empowerment in evaluation. The suggested components of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy relate to identifying, encouraging, prompting and providing guidance. They are lacking a commitment to changing the status quo of little to no evaluation of policies, services and programs.

Components of an Indigenous Evaluation Framework and Strategy can include a flexible and locally responsive blueprint for implementation that is inline with the stated principles and provide standards for monitoring and evaluation of different policy, program and service types that enable local and national systemic evaluation at all levels and types.

An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy could be developed alongside a policy that mandates effective evaluation from the beginning of delivery that are responsive to program/service/policy types and local community populations and context. It is funded, supported and effective implementation of monitoring and evaluation that can make the difference – not a framework or policy document alone.

First Nations led and locally developed monitoring and evaluation strategies need to be mandated within all government funding agreements. Local program/service evaluations can link to high level regional, jurisdictional and national outcome evaluation frameworks and strategies that enable collated evaluation data for an understanding of progress at different population levels.

### Privileging First Nations culture and leadership in evaluation is critical

Cultural wellbeing is arguably the more important determinant to achieving health, social, educational and economic equity and equality for First Nations people – and this needs to include cultural safety, knowledge systems and approaches embedded within monitoring and evaluation. Evaluation methods need to enable not only encourage self-determination. Achieving self-determination and valuing of First Nations knowledge systems can only occur when approaches to and implementation of monitoring and evaluation is led by First Nations people in communities.

Individual, family and community empowerment are not the same as funding Aboriginal organisations. There is a danger that an Indigenous Evaluation Framework will confuse the voice and leadership of First Nations people in communities, with those funded to deliver and evaluate services. As services we are ultimately there to deliver better life outcomes for people using our services. It is the users voice that is critical in any Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. First Nations

people and communities who face the burden of daily life and unacceptable life outcomes must be afforded the right to articulate and lead their own solutions – this includes designing and implementing an approach to monitoring and evaluation that meet their needs to assess the impact and effectiveness of local services and programs and national and jurisdictional policy initiatives.

Organisations are not a surrogate for community voice and must instead define themselves through their outcomes and performance against community solutions and progress indicators. Once effective service provision and evaluation frameworks and tools are defined by communities, it is up to the service system to perform and meet the outcome and indicators set, both short and long term.

In relation to addressing mainstream programs in the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, there is also a need for robust and rigorous evaluation of mainstream services, programs and systems, including those that do and don't seek to engage and support First Nations people. If there are clear links between a national evaluation framework and strategy with locally led and developed frameworks and strategies, all services and programs can follow the same flexible blue print to achieve local relevance. For First Nations communities, their leadership in the development of a local evaluation framework will provide cultural safety and appropriateness in outcomes, measures and evaluation tools.

This Productivity Commission has the opportunity to set the standard for how evaluations of First Nations policies, services and programs are designed and undertaken with, not for, First Nations people. It is an opportunity to ensure that evaluating the impact and implementation of services and policies are informed by communities who define outcomes, targets and progressive indicators of change - so they better reflect the people, the users, consumers, children, families, adults and elders. It is critical that these voices are empowered and heard, so policies, services and programs designed to support First Nations people are delivered and evaluated in ways that recognise, reflect and strengthen cultural identity, law, land, kinship and approaches.

### Empowerment, respect, rights and equity as underpinning principles

The Productivity Commission's Issues Paper asked '*To what extent are the evaluation practices of Australian Government agencies consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples?*'. There is minimal evidence in literature, policy implementation and practice to suggest that we are on-track or putting the right policies, programs and evaluation in place at a national and jurisdictional level to be genuinely working towards achieving this. To begin making progress towards treating our First Nations peoples in line with the basic human rights outlined by the United Nations, our service systems and strategies for evaluating policies and programs need to establish empowerment of First Nations people in monitoring and evaluation, service delivery and in local, jurisdictional and national systems and policy development and decision-making. These should be informed and led by First Nations voices from all corners of Australia – from those who live in cities and large towns through to those who live in remote communities who have a different lived experience in relation to social, economic, education, health and wellbeing service access and outcomes.

As outlined in the Issues Paper, the first component of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy is developing a principles-based evaluation framework. This is positive because principles of First Nations empowerment, rights, leadership and participation are a necessary foundation.

Children's Ground has developed high-level research and evaluation principles that sit across the organisation and communities. These principles are the foundation of all our research and evaluation internally and with any external partners. They are grounded in ethical and evidence-based practice that ensure the rights and wellbeing of all First Nations peoples.

1. First Nations peoples right to control and own data, research and evaluation about them and on their country
2. Trust and respect
3. Community leadership and participation from end to end (design, practice, analysis and reporting)
4. Local context and knowledge must be privileged
5. Creating knowledge together through joint research that combines First Nations and Western evidence and research practice
6. Knowledge into action and impact ensuring what we learn is used to improve lives
7. Only undertake research and evaluation that is of benefit to the participants and their communities/groups

In each community and within each external research partnership and participation, these are discussed and implemented based on local meaning, local processes for implementation and are local adapted as needed.

### Collective and shared outcomes and measurement - nationally and locally

Many policy frameworks include aspirations and outcome measures across the life course. Yet service and system metrics are often based on outputs associated with extremely targeted and limited funding allocations that allows service to focus on one aspect/problem with individuals. This has resulted in competition rather than cooperation between services, which requires people/consumers to navigate a sea of services to meet their multiple and increasingly complex needs. There is no clear shared responsibility for outcomes amongst local services collectively - funding is attached to and service work towards individual output targets. Without shared responsibility for outcomes and measurement, linked to high level and local outcomes and evaluation, any evaluation will be evaluating a fragmented service system.

Overcoming fragmented and fractured service delivery requires re-focusing what and how services are delivered to be in the best interests of and outcomes for the consumer - and how delivery and progress is collectively measured with a shared responsibility and accountability for outcomes. Outcomes, rather than output based systems, service delivery and evaluation are necessary. It requires the service system to work in the interest of the community that it services, not in the interest of their singular organisation, program and siloed funding stream.

When an evaluative judgement of effectiveness is made by an organisation or government department based primarily on siloed outputs of engagement numbers, the real value, impact and effectiveness cannot be genuinely determined.

Collective outcomes and shared accountability for measures across services can compel organisations to work together in the interest of the people. The system needs to create the conditions to compel organisations to place the people at the centre of the system and to evaluate success not in terms of organisational viability but in terms of impact at the individual, family and community/population level.

By moving away from funding that is attached to siloed service targets and outputs, system and service funding/investment models can facilitate an environment for effective outcomes-based integrated service delivery that incorporates shared measurement and accountability for outcomes rather than outputs alone.

We also need to expand the national discourse and standards around program impact and effectiveness to provide the space for governments, organisations and service providers to transparently learn from failures in service/program delivery and policy. The current short-term, siloed and competitive funding environments mean that organisations and services are focused on financial survival and likely reporting only positive elements of their programs and services. Some of the greatest lessons will come from evaluating why an initiative, program or approach was not effective – and evaluating it with the people it sought to engage.

### Ensuring effectiveness in implementation can make the difference

There is a paucity of rigorous research and evaluation being undertaken in Australia about the long-term impact of community development and empowerment efforts in remote communities. Largely because there are few such approaches with sustained funding over the long-term for over time evaluation and measurement. There are minimal examples of good practice in relation to monitoring and evaluation of First Nations initiatives and policy that are evidenced in western literature and evidence bases. There is even less evidence about First Nations led research and evaluation.

There are pockets of good practice in research with First Nations communities, however there is a long way to go before we see empowerment of First Nations people achieved consistently and widespread in research and evaluation. Governments, services and researchers in Australia are needing to continue relying on overseas prescribed programs and research that are decades old and conducted in vastly different contexts.

In an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, evaluation concepts and practices need to be considered at multiple levels ensuring that the right method is applied to what is being evaluated. One evaluation method will not be appropriate for evaluations of policy, programs, services and systems. However, the methods identified need to have clear links to a high-level outcome evaluation strategy and framework nationally that cascades through to jurisdictional and community levels.

Any western evaluation concept and method needs to be considered and understood by people at all levels in government, services and communities. It also needs to be approved by local First Nations leaders for their context and paired with local First Nations approaches and priorities for evaluating services and programs.

A critical element of Children's Ground's evaluation work is that First Nations leaders and communities are generating evidence to understand the impact systems, service and practice reform. Short and medium and long-term progress indicators and measures include a combination



of standard western measures as well as culturally relevant measures. The western and cultural indicators enable Children's Ground to measure against western standards in early childhood, health, and employment outputs and outcomes, as well as the 'intangibles', such as the impact of empowerment/agency, cultural and physical safety and the influence of relationships on engagement and access. This could be important evidence and implementation experiences of interest to governments, services and other communities in relation to how First Nations communities are engaged with and leading the design, implementation and evaluation of their own solutions.

Children's Ground evidence is generated through:

- A longitudinal evaluation, across a generation to evidence impact, which is embedded within the CG Approach from the beginning.
- A commitment to gather, act on and share evidence of the educational, social, health, economic and cultural impact of our work.
- Both First Nations and Western researchers and methods.
- Teams of First Nations Community Researchers who lead local evaluation and research priorities.

Co-creation of knowledge about the impact of the CG Approach is imperative. First Nations communities leading the way in research and evaluation is a critical contribution to individual and community agency over their own lives, priorities and data. It is also a critical contribution to the Australian evidence-base in relation to how First Nations people lead research locally, from identifying research and evaluation priorities, through to designing methods, undertaking the research and presenting and reporting findings to their community and broader audiences.

An important question for governments and large program and service delivery organisations is how to achieve effective locally led monitoring and evaluation at scale at jurisdictional and a national level. In service and program funding agreements and contracts, all levels of government state they are seeking to achieve locally relevant service and program delivery. While this is not always achieved in practice, it is this mechanism through which locally relevant and led monitoring and evaluation can be funded to occur.

Currently, western sector service qualifications and short-term piecemeal funding allocations and cycles are barriers to locally relevant and led service/program delivery – and will also be barriers for locally relevant and led monitoring and evaluation.

Monitoring and evaluation needs to be adequately funded and resourced as part of all family/social service and program delivery. Funding allocations do not adequately resource monitoring and evaluation embedded from the outset. Largely, if any evaluation is undertaken, it is considered and funded as an afterthought. Where there is evaluation, short-term funding allocations have seen programs and services collecting data to demonstrate impact, often on a six-monthly basis. Short-term impact for service/program participants is unlikely to be achieved within a six-month period, yet participants are continually burdened with this frequency of data collection.

An Evaluation Strategy can map short, medium and long-term progress and outcomes and reasonable indicators of change. For children, families and communities who are amongst Australia's most disempowered and excluded, genuine and sustained change and impact is unlikely to occur over the short-term, but indicators and building block for change can be achieved.

Skills and knowledge for monitoring and evaluation of programs, services and policies needs to be incorporated into all university degrees and western sector qualifications. As does skills and knowledge for all service providers to work within a rights, strengths and empowerment model. Ideally services in First Nations communities are delivered by a local First Nations workforce. This should be the long-term aim for all levels of government. However, until that outcome is realised and achieved, when western sector trained service providers are working with First Nations communities, they bring only western sector knowledge, which needs to be combined with First Nations cultural knowledge and practices. This is the case for service delivery and monitoring and evaluation.

## Summary

This submission has outlined the importance of First Nations people being at the centre of decision making about policies, programs, services and evaluation planning and implementation. The key message throughout this submission can be summarised with the following quote from William Tilmouth, Chair of the Children's Ground board:

*"Nothing about us without us"*

These words go to the core of the CG Approach of local First Nations ownership, governance and empowerment, and can be central to all policies, delivery and evaluation with First Nations people. This will ensure First Nations people are making the decisions and leading all aspects of policy making, service design, delivery, measurement and evaluation. While genuinely working in this way not without its challenges, in Children's Ground's experience the strengths and visible impact of such an approach, coupled with our emerging evidence base, demonstrates that only through individual and community agency can enduring change occur for children, families and communities.

Children's Ground's experience with First Nations led evaluation of systems and service reform has identified that there are influencing and contributing factors that are challenging to measure quantitatively. However, these are the critical 'intangibles' that are the foundations for initial engagement and sustained participation in learning, health services, employment and social life. They are also the foundation for long-term sustainable change in improved outcomes. We are able to measure these locally at Children's Ground and believe that scaling these to national measures and evaluation approaches is possible.

Australia cannot continue to have such a disconnect between national outcomes sought and service system evaluation and effectiveness. The reason the Closing the Gap targets are not being met is not because First Nations people don't want positive outcomes for themselves and their communities - it is because services and systems are not working alongside First Nations people to address their priorities in a culturally responsive framework. In the development of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, we change this.

The Issues Paper asks, '*In what circumstances is evaluation of policies and programs unlikely to be feasible or cost-effective?*'. Monitoring and Evaluation of First Nations targeted programs and services need to be considered from the perspective of cost-effectiveness to implement, rather from the perspective of how cost-effectiveness and efficiency will be better understood and achieved from monitoring and evaluation. Over decades, there has been too high an investment in policies,

programs and services with too little monitoring and evaluation, and subsequently evidence. The lack of investment in monitoring and evaluation means that to design and implement an effective Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, a significant financial investment is required. However, it will also require a change in how current government system infrastructure works to achieve effective locally relevant and led monitoring and evaluation, let alone service delivery.

As part of the Productivity Commission and the development of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, it is the time and opportunity for governments to look systemically at why there has been minimal monitoring and evaluation of services/programs with First Nations communities, why programs have been ineffective, how funding is determined and why national targets have not been met over decades, resulting in Australia's inability to close the gap. Children's Ground's experience demonstrates that this begins with meaningful engagement with First Nations people who are the users of services and organisations with the time and space for genuine discussions and decision making.

Ensuring First Nations people are at the centre of service and system design, delivery and evaluation and in progress reporting is possible, and is the only way to generate culturally appropriate and meaningful outcomes and measures for their children, families and community. When people are involved in and have ownership over services, programs and measurement they understand what data is being collected about them and engage in collecting and using the data to inform and drive locally relevant solutions.