



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Evaluation Strategy

2025–2027



Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Social Services acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, water, culture and community. We pay our respects to the Elders both past and present.



Artwork: Reconciliation Journeys.

Artists: Mr James (Jim) Abednego and Ms Nikki Gallagher

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Secretary's foreword

I am pleased to present the Department of Social Services' Evaluation Strategy 2025-2027.

The Strategy will be a guide to help us understand the impacts of our payments, policies and programs, and what difference they make to Australians.

Learning from evaluation, data and evidence improves the long-term impacts of our work and allows us to focus in on delivering better services and supports to Australians.

Evaluation is an integral part of our work. We must continue to build evaluation capability and ensure findings are shared and used to drive positive outcomes and deliver better services for Australians.

The Strategy builds on work that is already happening, such as the department's Data and Analytics Strategy 2025–2027 and outlines the importance of planning evaluations early, asking questions and collaborating across the department.

All departmental staff have a role to play in supporting our commitment to serving the public with excellence and compassion. We do this work as honest, ethical and trusted public servants.

Michael Lye

Secretary

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Introduction

The Strategy provides a blueprint for our success. It is our first Strategy, laying out our aspirations and plans for a capable, evidence-informed and accountable evaluation culture.

The Strategy is grounded in evaluation good practice and supports learning and accountability. It draws on the leadership of Treasury's Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE). It guides how we use evaluation to improve the economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families and vulnerable members of Australian communities.

The Strategy enables us to:

- ensure Australia's social security system is sustainable and provides support to people when they need it most
- contribute to stronger and more resilient individuals, children, families and communities
- support independence and economic participation by people with disability.

Evaluation helps us gain insight into how well payments, policies, programs and services work for vulnerable or at-risk people, for carers, for people with disability, those experiencing family or domestic violence, for First Nations peoples and for communities.

Importantly, the Strategy enables us to address our wide range of interconnected issues including support for communities, families and children, ending violence and abuse, and disability employment. We aim to measure not only the impacts of our payments, policies, programs and services, but also to develop our understanding of how they work together as a whole.



Community support

Social security, ageing, financial wellbeing, online gambling harm, volunteering and community support.



Families and children

Raising children, adoption and family relationships.



Ending violence and abuse

Sexual consent, and child, family, domestic and gender-based



Work and study

Support for people looking for work or studying, and information for education providers.

Vision

Our vision is that evaluation supports better payments, policies, programs and services to improve the economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families and vulnerable members of Australian communities.

Purpose

The Strategy outlines how the department will achieve its evaluation vision. It will help us better understand, share and use evidence to improve of our payments, policies, programs and services.

The focus of evaluation under this Strategy is to go beyond evaluation of individual initiatives and examine joined-up impact. We want to make the most of evaluation resources to understand the collective impact of policies and programs on the ground. It lets us learn and share better practices across our areas of responsibility.

The Strategy commits to strengthening evaluation practices, culture and leadership, and capability to deliver better payments, policies, programs and services.

The Strategy recognises there is no one size fits all approach to evaluating social policy. Different payments, policies, programs and services call for different types and methods of evaluation. This depends on the initiative and the questions the evaluation is seeking to answer. This means the Strategy encourages us to design evaluations and choose methods considering:

- the range of evidence needed to inform decisions
- the evaluation questions being asked
- the stage of the payment, policy, program or service in its lifecycle
- the maturity of the payment, policy, program or service (e.g. innovative or well-established)
- the kind of initiative being evaluated (e.g. a program or place-based initiative).

Place-based initiatives, or those striving for collective impact, have unique requirements and challenges which influence the selection of evaluation approaches. The department plays a leading role in providing guidance to support place-based evaluation.

To maximise usefulness, the Strategy calls for all formal evaluations to have a clear purpose, shaped by:

- the purpose and context of the initiative, including where it is in its lifecycle
- the information needs of stakeholders
- ethical and cultural considerations.

The Strategy is also guided by:

- the [ACE State of Evaluation Report](#) (2025), which highlighted the importance of high-quality evaluation in informing policy design and decision making, and the need for better planning, and increased capability and resourcing to support this
- [Budget Process Operational Rules](#), which require evaluation planning in policy development

- [Commonwealth Resource Management Framework](#), established under the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (PGPA) Act 2013
- [Commonwealth Evaluation Policy](#), which came into effect on 1 December 2021
- [Australian Public Service Commissioner's Directions](#), for a new APS value of stewardship in 2024
- an emerging State of Evaluation maturity assessment toolkit
- our review of evaluation strategies from across the APS including the Departments of Health, Disability and Ageing, Industry, Science and Resources and Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
- staff feedback through engagement with the Evaluation Hub and the Disability and Carers Evaluation Community of Practice.

The Evaluation landscape

The [Commonwealth Evaluation Policy](#) provides a principles-based approach for the conduct of evaluations across the Commonwealth.

Evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of the design, implementation or results of a government program or activity for the purposes of continuous improvement, accountability and decision-making.

It provides a structured and disciplined analysis of the value of policies, programs and activities at all stages of the policy cycle.

Commonwealth Evaluation Toolkit - Australian Centre for Evaluation

Commonwealth entities and companies are expected to deliver support and services for Australians by setting clear objectives for major policies, projects and programs, and consistently measuring progress towards achieving these objectives.

Evaluation principles

Evaluation principles guide practice. This means that the department takes steps to ensure evaluations are conducted to a high standard so that findings are used and shared. The Commonwealth Evaluation Policy provides the principles for what is a high standard – evaluations need to be:

- Fit for purpose
- Useful
- Robust, ethical and culturally appropriate
- Credible
- Transparent where appropriate.

How the department puts these principles into practice



Evaluations are planned early, to ensure ethical and culturally appropriate approaches for working with communities.

Evaluations are conducted at the right time in the policy lifecycle.

Evaluation planning is included in Budget proposals. Resources are in place for robust baseline data collection.



Evaluation grows evidence about social policy to improve the lives of Australians. We also draw on evidence from other sources, including evaluations of other agencies' programs, and both local and international research.

Evaluation needs to be responsive to the diverse lives of people, families and communities that the department supports.

Evaluation in the department involves methods that support people to share their lived experiences, or to participate in the conduct of evaluations.



Evaluations have good governance arrangements to support use.

Evaluations use robust methods to ensure the findings are credible.



Evaluation findings are visible, and shared across the department so that others can learn. Findings are shared with the public where appropriate.

Timely and quality advice is provided to Ministers and the Executive.

We share what we learn from and how we use evaluations, including in the department's annual report.

A formal evaluation may not be required if there is an appropriate performance monitoring framework in place, or there is an audit already planned or underway. The decision about what level of evaluation is required has to consider the value, impact, strategic importance and risk profile of the policy, program or activity. The prioritisation framework (on page 12) assists in determining the evaluation approach. The key is ensuring any evidence collected meets requirements under the [Commonwealth Resource Management Framework](#), particularly the [Public Governance Performance and Accountability Act 2013](#).

These requirements are outlined in the [Commonwealth Evaluation Policy](#). This is intended to improve the way entities assess implementation, measure the impact of government programs and activities and frame policy decisions on revised or new programs.

Our journey so far

The department continues to make progress in lifting its evaluation culture and building capability. This involves using robust approaches to performance monitoring and evaluation.

An internal review of the department's evaluation function conducted in mid-2023 found limited oversight actions and structures were in place to facilitate an evaluative culture, the conduct of fit for purpose evaluation, or transparency of reporting. The review informed the theory of change underpinning this Strategy. It identified 3 key issues for continuous improvement:

1. a lack of upfront planning of evaluation design and data requirements resulting in a need for more robust approaches to doing and using performance monitoring and evaluation
2. limited ability to understand and assess the value or impact of policies and programs
3. low understanding of evaluation practice and its use.

Following the review, the department:

- established a new model of Evaluation Partners based in a central Evaluation Hub
- increased the visibility of the Evaluation Forward workplan
- refreshed internal resources and guidance including a set of Secretary's expectations for evaluation
- invested in foundational and intermediate evaluation training.

Our action areas

The Strategy is guided by a theory of change for developing evaluation **practice, culture and leadership**, and **capability**. Our 3 action areas will deliver short, medium and long term outcomes towards our vision.

Figure 1: Theory of change



Action area 1: Evaluation practice

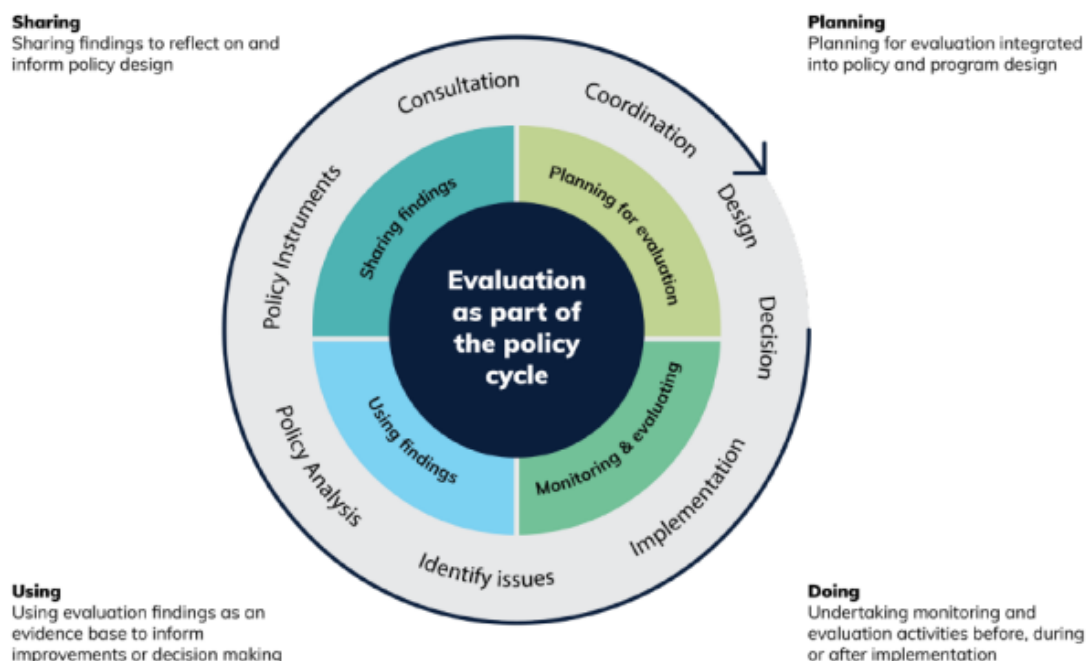
How evaluations are planned, commissioned, undertaken and used. This includes the technical approaches, social science methodologies, analytical techniques and data sources adopted.

Evaluation can take many forms. But ultimately, it means using evidence to make an informed judgement about the value or quality of something. Any new or existing policy, program or strategy or any type of intervention – for example, a payment or place-based initiative – may be evaluated.

Evaluation readiness should be set up early in the lifecycle of a payment, policy, program or service. Performance monitoring and evaluation planning is not an end of program or budget cycle activity.

It is important to consider the resources needed to evaluate a program or activity across the policy cycle. Data collection can be built into existing administrative systems. It can be factored in at a time of a new information technology build, for example, to reduce costs and increase coverage. Any necessary governance arrangements can also be integrated to ensure the evaluative approach remains fit for purpose over time. The role of external partners involved in delivery of programs or activities also needs to be clearly articulated in any evaluation or performance monitoring strategy.

Figure 2: Evaluation as part of the policy cycle.¹



Effective evaluation planning is essential to put in place the appropriate evaluation methods, resources and funding level required to assess the impact of policies and programs.

To strengthen our ability to know 'what works?' the department is working in partnership with the ACE. This partnership helps consider options for robust impact evaluation designs. Impact evaluation requires planning from the start of the policy lifecycle.

¹ Source: Australian Centre for Evaluation Strategy, 2024

Action area 2: Evaluation culture and leadership

The organisational framework for evaluation within DSS – including leadership, policies, structures and processes.

Evaluation culture and leadership starts at the top. The roles and responsibilities of individuals, Senior Executive Leadership Group, the Evaluation Hub and Executive Committees are to:

- align resources with evaluation priorities
- be proactive in evaluation planning and commissioning
- discuss evaluation findings, including what we can learn from them and how and where they could be applied.

How the department puts this into practice



The Senior Executive leadership group strategically focuses evaluation purpose and appropriately resource evaluation management. They have a key role to play in supporting a culture of evaluation, championing high quality practice and ensuring evaluation findings are shared and used.

The department's governance for evaluation is led by the Policy Committee.

Governance and leadership is supported by the department's Evaluation Forward Work Plan and reporting on the [Annual State of Evaluation](#) to ACE.



All staff need to **plan early** and **build their capability**.

Planning early means to identify the evaluation purpose, timelines, stakeholders, resources, and plans for use of evaluation findings, including engagement with Ministers and external stakeholders.

All staff can build capability by seeking advice, resources and training.



Evaluation Partners in the central Evaluation Hub **advise and support** by offering expertise to enable staff to undertake fit-for-purpose, useful evaluations.

Evaluation Partners can provide advice on design options, impact evaluation, ethics, baseline data and performance information.

Evaluation partners support all stages of evaluation with technical advice and offering learning on the job. This includes development of evaluation strategies, program logics or theory of change, performance measurement, evaluation reporting and use. Evaluation partners also offer advice for resourcing in new policy proposals.

Prioritising evaluation efforts

Evaluations of strategic significance generally involve a greater level of evaluation resources and effort, as well as more defined governance and oversight arrangements.

To inform the Policy Committee's prioritisation of the Evaluation Forward Workplan, planned evaluations will be classified into one of 3 groups (A, B or C) based on the following:

- **Joined up impact:** how evaluations that join up major initiatives can demonstrate impact on the ground.
- **Strategic importance:** how significant the policies or programs being evaluated are to overall departmental outcomes.
- **Funding:** the overall funding for the policy or program.
- **Risk:** which may include how difficult it is to estimate the impact of the policy or program (the outcomes are uncertain or difficult to measure).
- **Evidence:** what is the strength of evidence of policy or program effectiveness, to date.

Figure 3: Framework for prioritisation of evaluation by policy or program characteristics²

Evaluation category	A	B	C
Indicative characteristics of policy or program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High strategic significance or flagship initiative • High joined-up impact (social and economic outcomes) • High level of funding • High risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium strategic opportunity or impact limited to specific policy or program • Moderate funding • Medium risk • May be pilot initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low risk and strategic significance • Small funding • Similar initiatives have been previously evaluated or reviewed
Evaluation activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meta-synthesis across programs and policies • Extensive consultation • High resource allocation • Robust mixed methods including comprehensive qualitative component • May involve impact evaluation, economic modelling and/or value for investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate consultation • Medium resource allocation • Formal evaluation/s supported by robust ongoing monitoring • Mixed methods, including targeted qualitative component 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primarily existing quantitative administrative data • Desktop research • Low resource allocation • Limited consultation to existing stakeholder engagement • Simplified report
Evaluation governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope beyond a policy or program (meta level) • Reference group (SES level, may include co-design) • Public release of final report • Reporting on implementation of findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioned by policy or program area (external consultant), may also include some internal analytics to contribute to the report • Reference group (SES B1 or EL2) • Findings may be publicly reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaken in-house by responsible policy or program area • Existing reporting channels report outcomes

² Source: Adapted from Department of Health and Aged Care Evaluation Strategy 2023-2026 and Department of Industry, Science and Resources Evaluation Strategy 2024-2028

Action area 3: Evaluation capability

The knowledge and skills required to do and use evaluation – includes individual (both generalist and specialist roles in DSS) and organisational levels.

The department is supporting good evaluation practice by strengthening our capability. This fosters a culture of our staff 'learning from experience' when conducting or planning for evaluation activities in diverse areas of social policy. A combination of foundational knowledge, practical insights, situational awareness, stakeholder relationships and a focus on outcomes will underpin stronger evidence-informed policy and delivery.

This approach combines international good practice with the needs of our department. This strengthens evaluation maturity through tailored support, training and advice.

Supportive partnerships

Evaluation Partners based in the Evaluation Hub support policy and program areas to 'learn by doing'. This collaborative support increases understanding of evaluation in real-world learning and assists to embed evaluation into practice and use.

The department is working with the ACE to grow evaluation capability and capacity across the APS. We are working closely with the ACE to pilot an APS evaluation maturity model, which features an assessment tool that supports a tailored and flexible approach to evaluation capability. Through this pilot, the department's evaluation capability will grow based on learning while an APS Evaluation Profession is being established.

Capability actions include

- Increasing and enhancing resources and guidance materials tailored to the department's evaluation needs.
- Delivering and facilitating in-house training and learning.
- Exploring possibilities for micro-credentials alongside the [establishment of the Evaluation Profession](#).
- Delivering the Data and Evaluation Network and supporting evaluation communities of practice and peer learning opportunities.
- Sharing good evaluations across the senior executive leadership group.

Measures of success

The ACE maturity assessment being piloted during 2025 describes levels of maturity across domains of evaluation leadership and culture; evaluation capability; evaluation design, planning and delivery; and evidence and evaluation use. We have used this to inform our measures of success.

Action area	Measures of success	Metrics
Practice	Evaluations are planned early and fit for purpose.	<p>Proportion of new policy proposals that include advice from the Evaluation Hub on appropriate evaluation planning and resourcing.</p> <p>Number and proportion of evaluations completed within the last 12 months with an associated knowledge translation activity.</p>
Culture and Leadership	Senior executive stewardship to strengthen demand for quality evaluation and understand impact of policies and programs.	<p>Proportion of policies of high strategic importance (group A) with monitoring and evaluation frameworks in place.</p> <p>Proportion of completed evaluation reports presented to the Policy Committee.</p>
Capability	Strengthened knowledge and skills to lead and manage evaluations.	<p>Increased knowledge and skills transfer (self-assessed) for staff completing in-house evaluation training and workshops.</p> <p>Participation by staff in communities of practice.</p>

Next steps

The Strategy will be implemented through an Action plan. The Action plan will use in-house resources, the Commonwealth Evaluation Toolkit and ACE or APS-wide initiatives. This will help to mature our evaluation culture through guidance, tools, information sessions and advice.

We will assess the Strategy's progress through:

- an annual assessment of evaluation maturity, incorporating a pilot of the ACE maturity assessment tool and learnings from the Capability Review (evaluation and review)
- annual reporting towards the ACE State of Evaluation, drawing from the Evaluation Forward Workplan updates provided to the Policy Committee
- monitoring the take up and use of the support services of the Evaluation Partners
- monitoring the take up and use of capability building activities.

The Strategy will be reviewed as we learn from experience and respond to changing environments.

A mid-term review will be done in-house during 2026. An approach to performance measurement and progress monitoring will be developed as part of the review, following piloting of the ACE maturity assessment tool during 2025.