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What makes place-based evaluation different?

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What Makes Place-Based Evaluation Different

Evaluation Essentials

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Acknowledgement to Country

Hands Up Mallee acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land where we work, live, and connect with the community and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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Different Scales, Timeframes and Insights about Complexities

Government

High Level, Broad Scale, Quantitative Population Level Changes

Place

Small scale, Short Term & Intermediate Changes

Early signs of impact and systemic changes in the local context

Challenge for Place: What doesn't show up easily in the data

3 Aboriginal mothers gaining employment as a result of volunteering in co-design will not show up at population level

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Essential for Place-Based Data Driven Decisions

Four-Legged Stool

- Hard to get data for many reasons
- Hence need to bring different forms of intelligence together for decision-making closest to the ground



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Place-Based Evaluation Essentials

MEL Framework

1. Theory of Change

2. KEQs

    Look For Signs of:

    Impact

    Systemic Changes

    How well we are working and collaborating together

    What are we learning to inform further decision-making and testing



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Evaluation Tool Kit – Baking Evaluation Into Our Work

1. HUM's Ethics, Privacy and Safety Framework to guide evidence collection



2. Evaluation Toolkit

Favourite Participatory Evaluation Tools

- Pattern Spotting
- Journey Mapping
- Most Significant Learning
- Most Significant Change



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Ethics, privacy and safety framework



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Six MEL Practices frame our approach



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Thank You

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Place-Based Evaluation

An Empowered Communities Perspective

A community-led answer to what makes place-based evaluation different

AUSTRALIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY — PANEL DISCUSSION

empowered COMMUNITIES

WHO WE ARE

Empowered Communities: locally led, since 2013

Empowered Communities is an Indigenous-led empowerment, development and productivity reform agenda. It is built on the principle of subsidiarity: decisions should be made as close as possible to the people affected by them.



1

10 regions, shared reform principles, with regional priorities

From North-East Arnhem Land to Ngarrindjeri — each region governs its own priorities through Local Indigenous Leadership.

2

Joint Decision-Making (JDM)

Since 2017, regions and government have made real funding, policy and service decisions together — not just been consulted on them.

3

The test we hold ourselves to

Not participation in evaluation. Authority over the decisions that shape investment, services and implementation.

A PLACE-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Evaluation Has to Follow the Shift in Power

The object of evaluation changes when a place-based system — not a bounded program — is what's being evaluated.

PROGRAM-BASED LENS

Did the program work?

Effectiveness measured against a model with fixed boundaries and a fixed logic.

Did delivery follow the logic model?

Fidelity to the plan is the measure — even a well-designed plan.

Was the funding acquitted correctly?

Evaluation closes the compliance loop, then the file is closed.

PLACE-BASED LENS

Who defined success?

Success is negotiated locally, against community priorities — not fixed in advance by the funder.

Who governs the evidence?

Who decides what's collected, who holds it, how it's interpreted, and who can act on it.

Who gets to act on what we learn?

Findings return to the people who supplied them, with real authority to redirect investment.

Indigenous participation in evaluation is not the same as Indigenous governance of evidence. Meaningful evaluation requires both.

JOINT AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING

A Seat at the Table, Not Input Into One

The independent Lessons Learned Review defines JDM as government and Indigenous decision-makers meeting at the same table to deliberate as partners — a standing table, not a single meeting.

EVIDENCE

Community knowledge and government or provider data come to the table together — before a decision is made.

DECISION

Indigenous leaders and government decide jointly, as partners, at the same table — not consultation, shared authority.

LEARNING

Outcomes track back to the table, and what counts as success can shift as a result.

"…government decision-makers coming to the same table with Indigenous people to deliberate as partners."

— INDEPENDENT LESSONS LEARNED REVIEW, DEFINING JOINT DECISION-MAKING

The same Review found EC has "set a clear benchmark for how place-based initiatives aimed at Closing the Gap should operate."

WHAT EVALUATION CAN MISS

Evaluation Needs to Look Below the Surface

What surfaces through regional dialogue is often more than conventional evaluation measures — and often what makes change possible.

ABOVE THE WATERLINE

•Activities • Outputs • KPIs
• Funding Services • Outcomes



BELOW THE WATERLINE

• Trust • Relationships
• Community authority • Governance
• Cultural and local knowledge • Capability
• Feedback • Learning • Adaptation

EC LEARNINGS — SIX DOMAINS

- Indigenous people are empowered and heard
- Partnerships
- Buy-in
- Two-way knowledge sharing
- Enabling systems
- Systemic impact

The point isn't that outcomes don't matter — they do. The point is that evaluation looking only above the waterline can miss what's producing, or preventing, them.

Community Knowledge Is Part of the Evidence

Here's what that looked like in practice — East Kimberley, 2017. A shared decision making panel and place based evaluation judgment changed what the funder itself counted as success.

EVIDENCE

The Local Management Committee reviewed what was and wasn't working — before any funding decision was made.

DECISION

$3.2m in the service mix was repurposed, including new investment in the Miriwoong Language Nest — a priority NIAA hadn't funded as education strategy before.

SYSTEM LEARNING

Over 7–8 years, language education grew from Year 3 to Year 6 — and NIAA's own definition of a successful educational outcome shifted with it.

BOX 13 — KUNUNURRA JDM ROUND

"Renegotiating whose values actually count in funding decisions is really what JDM is all about. That's what you're trying to broker."

— EC BACKBONE LEAD, LESSONS LEARNED REVIEW (BOX 13)

ADAPTIVE PRACTICE

Built to Learn as It Goes, Not Just Judged at the End

Program-based evaluation asks whether we got it right. Place-based evaluation also asks what we're learning now, and what needs to change.

1

Course correction was designed in, not bolted on

EC's design assumes it will take time to 'get it right' — monitoring and evaluation are built to let partners learn as they go.

2

Rapid feedback loops, not just annual reports

Local knowledge managers and delivery-unit tracking were built to surface implementation lessons in real time, so directions can be corrected while there's still time to act.

3

Adaptation still answers to community authority

Course-correction is judged against the Change Agenda and regional leadership — not left to drift. Accountability and adaptation have to hold together.

Source: Empowered Communities Design Report (2015) — implementation, monitoring and evaluation chapter.

Evaluation should not simply tell us whether something worked.

It should give people in place the evidence, authority and feedback they need to make it work better.

Thank You

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Scan the QR Code to connect with me on LinkedIn

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What makes place-based evaluation different

AES International Evaluation Conference 2026, Darwin

Acknowledgement of Country

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

What is different about place-based evaluation?

1 Long-term, population-level change

Outcomes are distal, influenced by macro economic, social and environmental factors

2 Systems focus

Focus is on the system, not individuals

3 Attribution is difficult to determine

Technical expertise and administrative datasets are required. The timing of evaluation may not support the work of backbone teams and communities

4 Shifting goalposts

Activities and outcomes are emergent and non-linear; course correction is built in

Role of a commissioned evaluator

01

Surface

Identify evaluation audiences and how they intend to use the evaluation findings

02

Prioritise

Work with key stakeholders to understand the context and identify the priority purpose/s for the evaluation

03

Design

Collaborate with key stakeholders to develop a rigorous, feasible, fit-for-purpose evaluation

Stronger Places, Stronger People evaluation

EFFECTIVENESS

System change outcomes

IMPLEMENTATION

Continuous improvement

COMMISSIONED BY GOVERNMENT

Initiative-level focus

EVALUATION DESIGN

01 Largely qualitative design

02 **Implementation assessed using a rubric**

03 **Outcome harvest to identify all outcomes, including system changes**

04 **Contribution analysis to understand how system change has occurred**

Australian Government
The Treasury

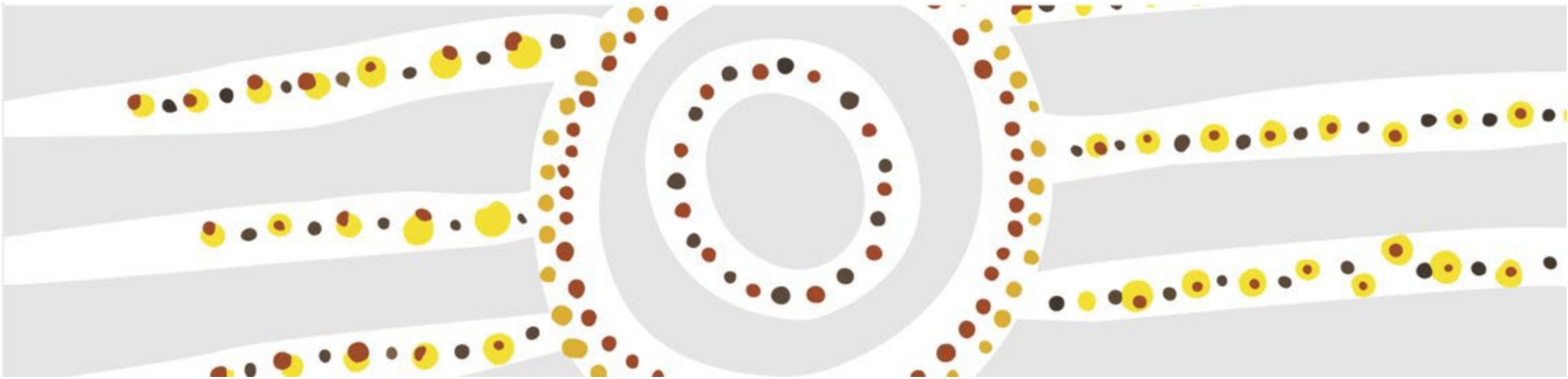
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Australian Public Service Place-based Evaluation Guide

evaluation.treasury.gov.au

16 September 2026

Acknowledgement of Country



The ACE's vision and mission

Our vision: Evaluation evidence supports better policy and programs to improve the lives of Australians.

Our mission: We help put evaluation evidence at the heart of policy design and decision-making.

- By improving the volume, quality, and use of evaluation evidence
- By embedding a culture of evaluation across the Australian government



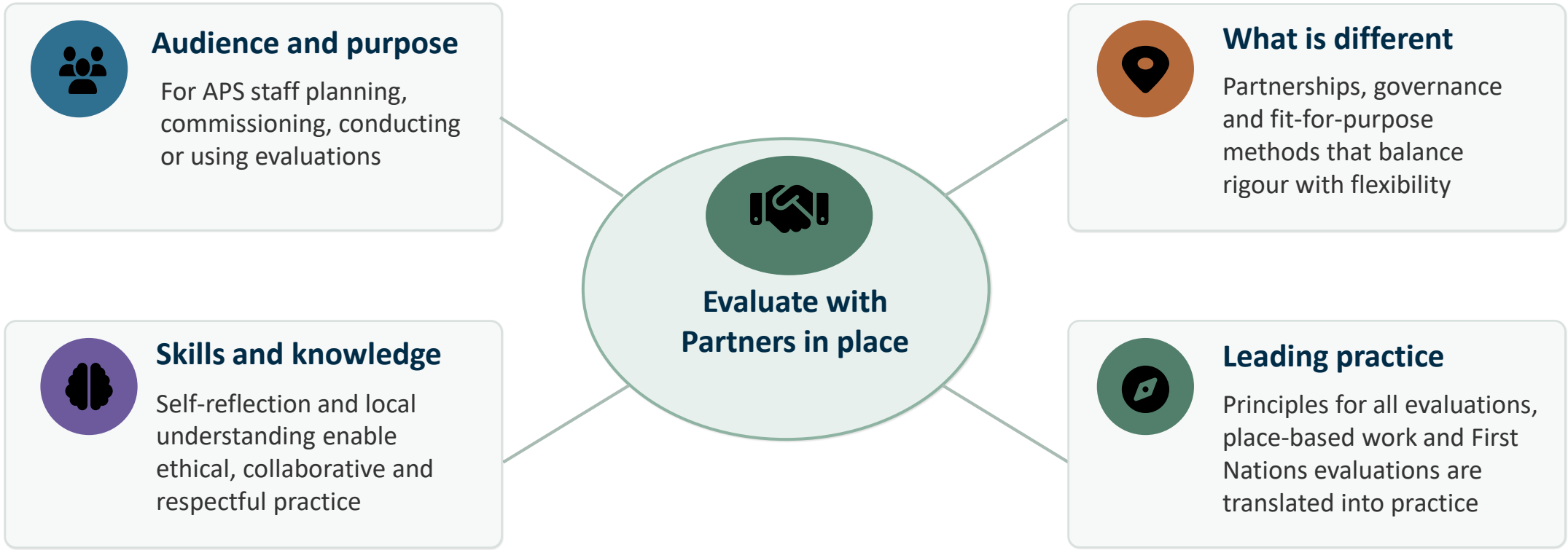
The ACE worked with the Department of Social Services on an APS Place-based Evaluation Guide



More information: [Australian Public Service Place-based Evaluation Guide | Department of Social Services]

The Guide helps APS staff support place-based evaluation

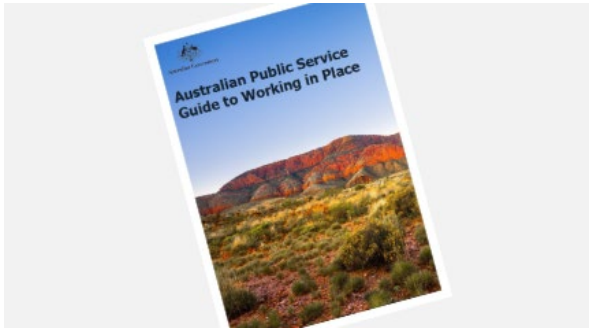
Four elements support practical, partnership-based evaluation



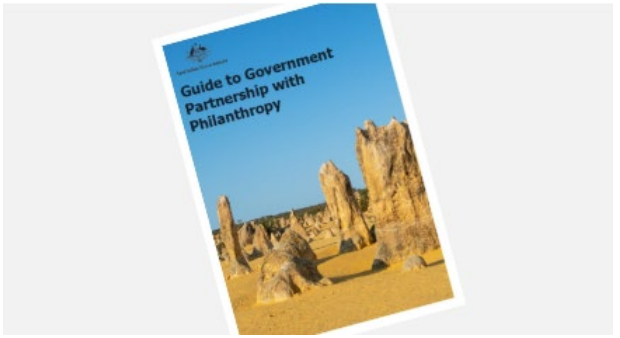
This Guide adds to other new resources to help government work better with local communities

The Commonwealth Department of Social Services is leading work to support communities, governments and partners to work together to reduce disadvantage, with a focus on:

- Working together with communities
- Using data and evidence
- Partnering in different ways
- Supporting projects







Source: Supporting community change | Department of Social Services

The ACE has also created a place-based evaluation collection on the ACE Evaluation Library



See: [ACE Evaluation Library | APO]

Questions for the panel