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Evaluating a 'bold experiment': Whole-of-Government policy evaluation in Indigenous affairs

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On 15 April 2004, the Government announced sweeping reforms to the way in which services are delivered to Indigenous Australians. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) would be abolished and programs provided by ATSIC delivered by mainstream departments. New advisory and administrative bodies were also created including Ministerial Taskforce and Secretaries' Group on Indigenous Affairs, the National Indigenous Council, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) and a network of Indigenous Coordination Centres. Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, described these changes as a 'bold experiment in implementing a whole-of government approach to policy development and delivery'.

This paper outlines the 'lessons learned' approach that OIPC has adopted in its key role of evaluating these arrangements. The paper also raises a number of critical issues in Indigenous whole-of-government evaluation including the accessibility of performance data; attributing shared outcomes to particular initiatives; working with multiple agencies; the problem of evaluating processes such as 'better coordination'; and the type of evaluation capability that is needed. Over time, the lessons learned from evaluating the new arrangements should contribute to broader discussion of evaluation of whole-of-government approaches to other areas of public policy.