

# Submission from the Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association to the Productivity Commission's 'More Effective Social Services' Inquiry

## About ANZEA

The Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association (ANZEA) supports and represents evaluation practitioners in their professional development, and to promote safe and high quality evaluation services to NZ communities. We promote the integration of theory and practice in evaluation, specific to the needs of Aotearoa, and we stimulate debate and research on evaluation practice and its role here. We also seek to enhance evaluation capacity within local, Maori, Pacific and global evaluation communities.

ANZEA has grown since its inception in 2006 to now have a membership of over 400 people who work in the evaluation sphere, including in academia, the public sector, the NGO sector, and as commercial practitioners in companies or as independent providers.

## This submission

ANZEA is pleased to provide this brief submission to the Productivity Commission on its inquiry into more effective social services. In this submission, we focus specifically on the quality and capacity of evaluation in New Zealand, as a key contributor to supporting more effective social services, and enabling innovation.

In so doing, we believe that this provides important context to the two overarching questions of *'What institutional arrangements would support smarter purchasing/contracting?'*, and *'What market arrangements, new technologies and contracting or commissioning tools would help achieve results?'*

## Outcomes, performance, measurement and learning

Questions 41 to 50 of the inquiry issues paper sets out a range of specific questions regarding attributability of outcomes, measuring and managing the performance of services, learning within the social services system, experimentation, and use of data.

In essence, these questions all point to the evaluative capacity of the social services sector to review its delivery, understand its outcomes and impact, and foster an environment in which learning and innovation can contribute to advancing improvements in services and their benefits to populations.

In our reading of the issues paper, this overarching issue of evaluative capacity within and supporting the social services sector, is a critical gap in its framing of the issues. The issues paper tends to treat issues of collecting data and specifying outcomes as individual issues for consideration within service delivery, and does not consider broader framing of evaluative capacity of government, provider organisations and individuals that these issues are part of, and should sit within.

Accordingly, we focus this submission on evaluative capacity – at individual, provider and governmental levels – to draw attention to key areas that we believe need to be addressed to support more effective social services.

## The role of evaluation

Evaluation is widely considered to be an integral part of public sector management.<sup>1</sup> The promise of evaluation is that it will contribute meaningfully to the decisions made and the actions taken around policies, programmes, projects and operations. Evaluation is, at one level, viewed as a taken for granted ‘good’, i.e. as something that will contribute to better government, better policy, better delivery etc. It is considered an important part of ensuring government accountability, trust and credibility. Underpinning the public sector management frameworks of many developed countries is an assumption that public agencies will focus on results, and use empirical evaluative information to adjust activities and revise policy settings<sup>2</sup>.

In 2003, a review by the State Services Commission gave recognition to the importance of ‘evaluative activity’; which seeks evidence of actual performance of policies or programmes once they are being, or have been, implemented. This includes formal evaluations of policies and programmes as well as monitoring and performance audit.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, this is not restricted to standalone evaluations of programmes and services, but on the culture of inquiry in the public sector.

The term evaluation however, has come to have a more significant meaning which has particular relevance to the Productivity Commission’s inquiry. Evaluation focuses in particular on the quality, value or importance of a service or policy, and can be applied to support improvements in programmes, policies and systems. The systematic determination of quality, value and importance is what is unique about evaluation as a discipline (reaching evaluative conclusions) to other fields of research, review or audit. At the end of an evaluation process, an evaluation needs to be able to say whether something is of merit or worth, or not, and to be able to articulate why.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of the Productivity Commission’s inquiry, evaluation is therefore critical to supporting (i) understanding of the overall performance of social services in contributing to outcomes; and (ii) public sector learning. We propose that if the Commission wishes to strengthen the effectiveness of social services, then both evaluative activity and evaluation have key roles to play to a much deeper degree than is set out in the issues paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Aucoin, P. (2005). *Decision-making in Government: The role of program evaluation*.

<sup>2</sup> Pollitt, C. (2008). *Performance blight and the tyranny of light? Accountability in advanced performance measurement regimes*. Paper presented at the The Kettering Seminar; SSC, & Treasury, T. (2005). *Getting Better at Managing for Outcomes*. Wellington: State Services Commission and The Treasury.

<sup>3</sup> State Services Commission. 2003. *Doing the Right Things and Doing them Right. Improving Evaluative Activity in the New Zealand State Sector*. Wellington: SSC

<sup>4</sup> ANZEA and SuPERU. 2014. *Proposed Evaluation Standards for Aotearoa New Zealand: Exposure Draft September 2014*. Wellington: ANZEA and Families Commission.

## Strengthening Individual Capacity: Evaluator Competencies and Evaluation Standards

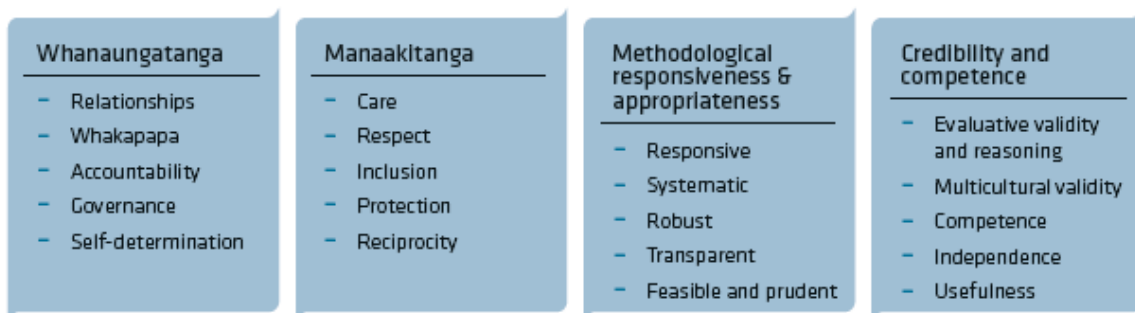
In recent years, ANZEA has pioneered the development of two important foundation areas of evaluative activity: evaluator competencies and evaluation standards.

The Evaluation Competencies, developed by ANZEA, are intended to:

- Inform and guide high quality and ethical evaluation practice in Aotearoa NZ
- Provide evaluators with a self-review tool and professional development guide
- Support the development of employment criteria for evaluator roles
- Provide guidance to evaluation trainers, teachers and tertiary institutions
- Provide commissioners of evaluation with a 'tool' for assessing evaluators or evaluation teams
- Provide broad guidance about evaluation standards
- Enhance the professional accountability of evaluators and commissioners
- Increase public awareness about what makes 'good' evaluation practice in Aotearoa NZ<sup>5</sup>

The evaluation standards are currently under development in collaboration between the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (SuPERU) in the Families Commission, and ANZEA. The draft standards, released in September 2014, are principle-based and focus on ensuring evaluation is done with integrity, which is respectful of people and relationships; methodologically responsive and appropriate and credibly and competently done.<sup>4</sup>

Twenty standards, across five principles, have been identified as essential to practicing and achieving high quality evaluation in Aotearoa New Zealand, which are summarised in the diagram below.



The importance of these developments lie in the formal documentation of the skills and knowledge that people working in evaluation are expected to attain, and in establishing principles of quality evaluation that are accepted and understood. We would argue that by accelerating the adoption of the competencies and standards, among evaluators and within evaluative activity respectively, will support more effective social services, this will strengthen a drive towards more effective social services.

<sup>5</sup> Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association. 2011. *Evaluator Competencies*. Wellington: ANZEA.

## Systems Evaluation Capacity: A key foundation to more effective social services

As noted above, evaluation is generally recognised as an important underpinning of public sector policy, service funding and delivery, and indeed is utilised across many parts of the public sector. The development of evaluation standards and the establishment of evaluation competencies can further strengthen the quality of evaluation, in particular the evaluative practice of evaluation commissioners, providers and users.

However, despite the efforts of ANZEA and many leaders in the public sector, if the systems-level capacity to deliver robust and systematic evaluation is not maintained, this will undermine the ability of the sector to improve outcomes, performance and learning and the end goal of more effective social services.

A decade ago, the review of evaluative activity, cited earlier, noted a series of areas for improvement in the state sector's use of evaluative findings, specifically:

- Variable commitment to using evaluative findings
- Poor understanding of evaluative findings
- Shortage of evaluative skills
- Information and methodological constraints
- Findings that are not always useful.

We would contest that many of these remain. To give this issue some context, UNICEF and EvalPartners have set out a useful framework for evaluation capacity,<sup>6</sup> encompassing:

1. **The enabling environment** that fosters (or hinders) the performance and results of individuals and organizations. This is driven by the extent to which a culture of learning and accountability is in place; in particular the degree to which information is sought about past performance, the extent to which there is a drive to continuously improve, and to be responsible or accountable for actions taken, resources spent, and results achieved.
2. **The institutional environment** that provides a system and structures to perform and attain results individually as well as collectively as countries and organisations, and to support the delivery of independent and credible evaluation.
3. **The capacity of individuals** to deliver credible evaluation, and for commissioners and managers to strategically plan for evaluation and to make use of their findings.

Taken together, these three affect the quality of demand for robust evaluation evidence, and the supply of highly skilled evaluation practitioners. We would argue that there remains a need to build evaluative capacity across all three levels in order to realise the goal of more effective social services.

On the supply side, a critical enabler of evaluation quality and competency development (for commissioners, managers and practitioners) is the availability of evaluation specific professional development and formal evaluation training. Currently there are a range of informal, introductory level evaluation opportunities available through private and some public sector funded courses.

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<sup>6</sup> Segone M, Rugh J (eds). 2013. *Evaluation and Civil Society: Stakeholders' Perspectives on National Evaluation Capacity Development*. UNICEF, EvalPartners and IOCE.

However, whilst some university courses offer training in evaluation methods, the only formal tertiary qualification in evaluation, offered through Massey University, is understood to have a precarious future. This has the potential to significantly disrupt the development and recruitment of people with the theoretical and practical expertise needed to foster evaluation capacity at all three levels.

## Conclusion

At its core, evaluation is the application of critical reasoning, engagement with evidence and values, and providing clear answers to important questions of merit, worth or significance. It is of fundamental value to delivering effective and efficient social services, and extends well beyond measurement, data and outcomes.

Evaluation has a key role to play in both understanding of the overall performance of social services in contributing to outcomes; and in fostering public sector learning. It is important that there remains a path for the development of evaluation in the New Zealand, from informal training opportunities to structured formal professional courses in evaluation; the latter having an uncertain future.

As New Zealand's professional association for evaluators, we would welcome opportunities to engage further with the Productivity Commission in this review, beyond this written submission.