

# EVALUATORS AND THE ENHANCED COMMONWEALTH PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

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## ABSTRACT

The enhanced Commonwealth performance framework was introduced on 1 July 2015 under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*. It should allow the Australian Parliament and public to understand the proper use of the public resources, whether the accountable authorities of Commonwealth entities and companies are achieving their purposes, and who is benefitting from Commonwealth activity. Demonstrating the achievement of purposes amounts to demonstrating outcomes and impact. It requires Commonwealth entities and companies to move past an over-reliance on input and output-focused performance measures. There is a clear role for evaluators in helping entities make this important adjustment. The opportunities lie in helping a larger cross-section of the Commonwealth public service understand and use the evaluators' toolbox – for example, program theory and qualitative analysis – to improve the quality of published performance information available to the Commonwealth's stakeholders. The evaluation community has the opportunity to become a centre of key expertise, and to make a critical contribution to building the capability of 'performance professionals' across the public sector.

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## INTRODUCTION

Performance in the public sector is more than financial. The business of government is complex and so public sector performance is complex. Providing meaningful information on the results achieved from the use of public resources is a cornerstone of the Australian government's accountability to the Australian Parliament and public. This line of accountability is dependent on the quality of performance information. By establishing a single performance framework across the Commonwealth – with common reporting arrangements – the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) aims to improve performance information and strengthen lines of public accountability. Like other elements of the PGPA Act, the enhanced Commonwealth performance framework is based on principles, and so provides a flexible approach that can accommodate the diversity, complexity and contestability of public sector activity and performance. It is worth stressing that the framework is not focussed on enabling performance based budgeting or results-based management (for example, as described as 'direct performance budgeting' at page 2 of OECD 2008) Its role is to provide robust information as one of a number of inputs used to inform the allocation of public resources by parliament. In this regard, the enhanced Commonwealth Performance framework has similar objectives to the *Government Performance and Results Act 1993* in force in the United States (U.S Congress 1993).

The performance framework commenced on 1 July 2015 and applies to all Commonwealth entities<sup>1</sup> and companies<sup>2</sup> captured under the PGPA Act. It places renewed attention on demonstrating the value created when public resources (including taxpayer contributions) are used. It establishes a space in which to trial new approaches to increase the relevance of performance information generated by Commonwealth entities and companies. It creates opportunities for evaluators to use their tools and way of thinking to frame questions about what counts as meaningful performance information in particular circumstances, and what this information says about the extent to which an entity or company is achieving its purposes. Evaluation studies will continue to have a role in the performance framework. However, an emphasis on challenging entities to use program theory to identify more meaningful performance information, and on combining quantitative and qualitative information to tell rich performance stories creates a larger space in which evaluators can have influence. Evaluators are comfortable with such concepts as qualitative styles of analysis and constructing narratives, but the broader public sector is not. The wider opportunities for the evaluation community are likely – in the short to medium term – to consist of adapting relevant tools to wider operational use.

The draft report of the statutory independent review of the PGPA Act states that the Commonwealth performance framework has been a positive reform, and that it has begun to make a significant, albeit patchy, contribution to improving on the quality of performance reporting (for example, pages. 1-15 Alexander and Thodey 2018). Through a comparison against performance reforms established in other countries (for example, recent initiatives implemented by the New Zealand and United Kingdom governments), the reviewers' draft report implies that Australia's approach confronts similar issues being faced elsewhere, and that it represents an appropriate response to these challenges in the Australian context.. They acknowledge 'rich and insightful performance information is unlikely to come from the application of hard and fast rules or the widespread use of a template approach'. Notwithstanding the generally positive attitude, independent the reviewers stress much remains to be done to build on initial success. This includes addressing a decline in the use of evaluation as part of broader strategy for strengthening public reporting of the outcomes and impact achieved with public resources.

This article is intended as an insiders' view of the enhanced Commonwealth performance framework. By including details not published elsewhere it places readers in privilege position of knowledge. If the presentation of evaluation methods and practice seems naive and simplistic, it is because the authors are not evaluators, and make no claims to be considered so. Discussion of methodology is not intended as a technical contribution, nor does it serve as a critique of any particular mode of application. Instead it serves as a demonstration of how evaluation practice are understood by those who are not evaluators, and the kind of language likely to resonate with the broader public service. The authors want to encourage evaluators to engage with a diverse audience to understand how modern evaluation methods might best support the objectives of the enhanced Commonwealth performance framework. If there are scant details on exactly how evaluators are being asked to adapt their mode of working, it is because the authors do not wish to prejudice the response. Rather, they wish to empower the Australian evaluation community to determine for themselves the impact they wish to make and the effort they are prepared to invest.

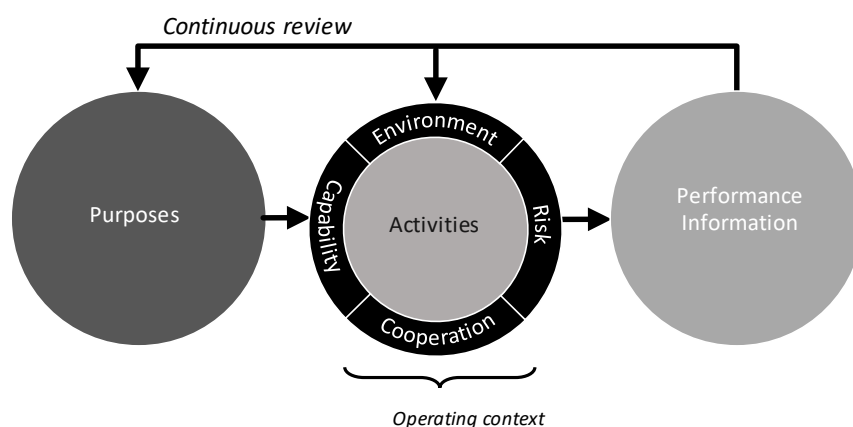
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<sup>1</sup> Bodies taken to be Commonwealth entities are defined by subsection 10(1) and (2) of the PGPA Act. Commonwealth entities include departments of state (for example, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet or the Department of Health), parliamentary departments (for example, the Department of the House of Representatives) and bodies established by acts of the Australian Parliament other than the *Corporations Act 2001* (for example, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation established by the *Science and Industry Act 1949*).

<sup>2</sup> Under subsection 89(1) of the PGPA Act, Commonwealth companies are all companies established under the *Corporations Act 2001* that are within the control of the Commonwealth of Australia. Examples include the Australian Rail Track Corporation Ltd and Aboriginal Hostels Ltd.

## THE PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 describes the enhanced performance framework in terms of the three inter-dependent elements – purposes, operating context and performance information used to demonstrate the achievement of purposes.



**Figure 1:** key elements of the enhanced Commonwealth performance framework

Section 8 of the PGPA Act defines the **purposes** of a Commonwealth entity or company as its objectives, role or functions. They are the reason an entity or company exists. Guidance issued by the Department of Finance (Finance) suggests that purposes are expressed well when it is clear who benefits from an entity’s efforts, how they benefit and what has been achieved when purposes are delivered successfully (Finance 2015 and 2017a &b). Purposes describe the value an entity seeks to create or preserve.

Purposes are achieved within an entity’s (or company’s) **operating context**, characterised as the:

- **activities** undertaken by an entity or company to deliver on its purposes;
- **environment** (for example, economic and social context) in which the entity pursues its purposes;
- **risk** associated with pursuing purposes and the way in which the entity engages with these risks (i.e. the entity’s risk appetite);
- **capability** (for example, skills, digital infrastructure, capacity for collaboration, etc.) required to achieve purposes – both over the short and longer term; and
- **cooperation** with key delivery partners (for example, other Commonwealth entities and companies, state governments, private enterprise and not-for-profit organisations) on whose contribution an entity or company relies to achieve its purposes.

The elements of an entity’s operating context interact in a complex way. In general, it makes no sense to discuss one in isolation from the others. The economic or social environment in which an entity works will have a bearing on what risks it will need to manage (for example, changes in the economic climate that impact on the ability to collect revenue). An entity’s capability – or its ability to develop capability in a timely fashion – will impact what activities it can undertake to deliver its purposes in an efficient and effective manner. Capability and environment will also be shaped by – and shape – the risks related with pursuing a purpose. Something that negatively impacts capability (for example, unexpected changes in the labour market) is likely to increase the risk of failure (as a result of not having the necessary level of skills to achieve the volume and quality of activity specific purposes demand).

**Performance information** is used to gauge the extent to which purposes have been achieved. Performance information is more than simply ‘measures’ or ‘indicators’ of success (as highlighted in

*RMG 131 – Developing good performance information*, Finance 2015). It includes quantitative and qualitative modes of analysis to demonstrate the contributions made by specific activities or (groups of activities). Narratives describe how contributions from various activities combine to produce outcomes over the short to longer term. Performance information, defined in this way, forms the basis of an entity's (or company's) performance story and help stakeholders (for example, the Parliament and public) make judgements about the value created through the use of public resources.

Understanding how the elements of the framework interact is critical. Continuous review of the impact of one element on the others creates a continuous feedback loop. Improvements in performance information create an improved understanding of the activities that make positive contributions against purposes, which, in-turn, supports adjustments in how activities are undertaken to improve the return on investment. The performance framework supports not only reporting on performance, but also continuous improvement to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of an entity's (or company's) activities within the constraints of the context in which it operates.

The central influence of an entity's (or company's) context is key. It shapes what is possible – both in terms of the extent to which a purpose can be achieved, and what counts as purposes worth pursuing. What works in one context will not necessarily work in another context, and what counts as evidence of good performance in one context will not necessarily be accepted as evidence of success in another. The situation is similar to the stance taken during a realist evaluation. In this case it is assumed that understanding why certain outcomes were achieved entails understanding the mechanisms in play in the context in which the outcomes emerged (for example, as in Westhorp 2014). For the purposes of the Commonwealth performance framework, this proposition could be rephrased to remind us that how activities modify or sustain a particular context will (in general) determine what counts as good performance against purposes framed in that context.

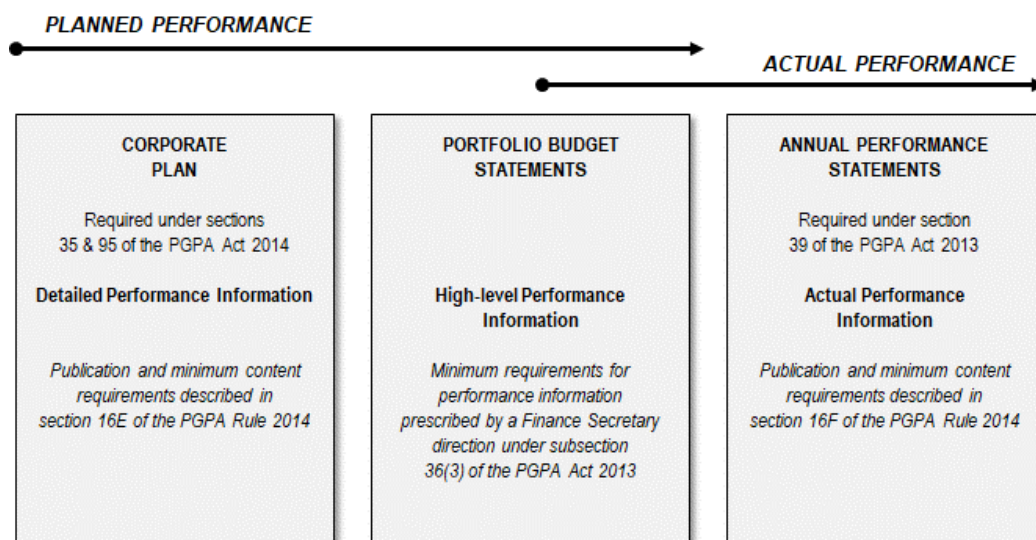
An entity's (or company's) operating context mediates how the entity's (or company's) purposes are understood, and what information counts as evidence of achievement of those purposes. This is why the framework is conceptualised as shown as Figure 1. Other ways of conceiving of performance across the public sector include in terms of a:

- policy cycle that incorporates evaluation as part of a staged process, which makes use of performance information to judge the progress of policy implementation, to identify issues and agree changes to policy settings to address these issues (for example, as described at pp. 32-42 of Althaus, Bridgeman and Davis 2013); or
- generic logic that links the use of public resources (or inputs) to the production of outputs that lead to outcomes and impact on individuals, groups or institutions (for example, as proposed at pp. 15-18 of Bouckaert & Halligan 2008).

The difficulty with these alternatives is that the influence of context tends to be treated peripherally – or completely neglected – when used operationally. Take, for example, the output and outcome framework used as the basis for making public resources available to Commonwealth entities and companies. At its introduction in the mid 1990's, it was intended that it also form the basis for monitoring and reporting of performance in terms of the extent to which outcomes were achieved. However, over time the rigour applied to understanding and tightly defining outcomes declined, and reporting tended to focus on reporting outputs at the expense of information on the benefit that followed these outputs (for example, see commentary at pp 230-255 of Bouckaert & Halligan, 2008). Widespread frustration with the quality of performance information this produced was one of the drivers for including new principles for performance reporting in the PGPA Act and for creating conditions under which an enhanced framework could be established.

## Reporting regime

Figure 2 illustrates the formal channels through which an entity or company tells its performance story. This is not the only way performance is communicated, but it is the primary mechanism through which performance information is provided to the Australian Parliament and public.



**Figure 2:** Reporting arrangements under the performance framework – applied to entities reporting on a financial year basis.

The PGPA Act requires the accountable authorities of Commonwealth entities and companies to publish annual corporate plans that describe what achievement against purposes will look like over a minimum four-year period. Commonwealth entities are also required to include annual performance statements in annual reports tabled in the Parliament. These annual performance statements report on whether an entity achieved what they committed to in their corresponding corporate plan. Commonwealth companies are not required to publish annual performance statements, but, nevertheless, are expected to acquit against planned performance somewhere in the content of annual reports.

Detailed requirements for matters to be addressed in corporate plan and annual performance statements are set out in sections 16E and 16F of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014* (PGPA Rule), with guidance on how these requirements might be addressed provided in Finance 2017a, b & c. A Finance Secretary direction under section 36(3) of the PGPA Act (Finance 2017d) sets out what performance information is to be retained in Portfolio Budget Statements (to facilitate Parliament’s consideration of appropriation bills that propose the funding to be provided to Commonwealth entities over the coming financial year).

It is intended that corporate plans, Portfolio Budget Statements and annual performance statements (or annual reports for Commonwealth companies) be read together. Together they tell an entity’s (or company’s) performance story over a reporting cycle (i.e. financial year). Such performance stories will typically unfold over a number of reporting periods in non-linear and complex ways. This is because an entity’s (or company’s) activities will generally contribute to achieving the entity’s purposes on different timeframes, and produce results that are not simply the sum of the individual contributions.

## TRAJECTORY TO MATURITY

It should be clear that the performance framework is more than a system of rules and centrally mandated reporting processes. It should produce information that drives a more meaningful conversation between Commonwealth entities and their stakeholders (for example, the Parliament and the public). This represents a substantial shift in how performance information was treated before the performance

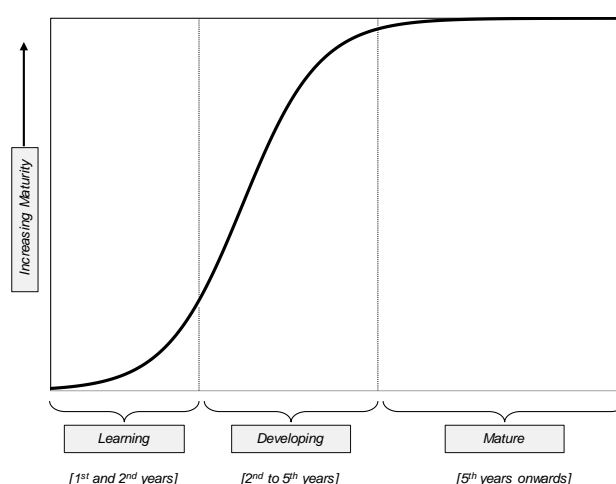
framework commenced – when the publication of performance information was largely in an entity’s Portfolio Budget Statements and acquitted through ad hoc reporting in annual reports. Scrutiny of information in Parliament was infrequent and tended to focus on specific activities, rather than what was being achieved by an entity as a whole. It is hoped that Parliament is finding better quality information more valuable, and that a renewed interest in this information is providing a mechanism for both quality assurance and continuous improvement.

There are indications that Parliament is beginning to interact with the performance framework and value that it aims to achieve. Reports of the JCPAA on its inquiries into development of the framework have been largely supportive of the direction being taken and initial progress (see JCPAA 2015, 2016 and 2017). During a recent hearing to inform an inquiry into the publication of the first round of annual performance statements, the JCPAA members encouraged public officials to engage with the performance framework to the ‘fullest effect’. Committee members place particular value on a greater use of case studies and narratives to build on quantitative reporting of outputs, as a means of demonstrating outcomes (Committee Hansard, 2017).

Meaningful performance information does more than sustain a conversation about the value created or maintained when public resources are used. It enables a ‘culture of performance’. An entity or company with a well-developed understanding of success against its purposes is likely to be a high-performing organisation. Such an organisation undertakes activities in a way that is focussed on producing outcomes, and has access to the tools and data that facilitate this. Employees within the entity understand how they are contributing to success and seek out opportunities to be more efficient and effective.

### Progress so far

It was envisaged it would take three to five years for the performance framework to mature, and for progress to become evident across a broad enough cross-section of Commonwealth entities and companies (see p. 11 of Finance 2017e). At the time of writing this article over two years had elapsed since the commencement of the new performance framework. These first two years have been a learning phase, during which entities came to grips with new planning and performance reporting arrangements (as shown Figure 3). There is also evidence that many entities and companies have understood the value of investing effort into well-expressed purposes and the need to overhaul how they approach the collection and analysis of performance information.



**Figure 3:** Trajectory to a mature Commonwealth performance framework

Implementation of the performance framework is entering what Finance has previously identified as a developing phase (Finance 2016a). This phase is expected to last three or so years, and will entail a steep climb to a final state of maturity (see Figure 3). Finance, the Commonwealth Auditor-General and

the JCPAA expect the accountable authorities of Commonwealth entities and companies to use this time to develop and embed performance monitoring frameworks across their organisation, and to deliver performance information that plays the role described above. The Auditor-General has signalled that Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) performance audits (for example, Auditor-General 2016a, 2017a & b and 2018) will focus on whether entities are making satisfactory progress, and will report to Parliament on the ‘commitment of entity leadership to implementing appropriate strategies to meet their obligations to the Parliament’ (Auditor-General 2016b).

## **MEANINGFUL PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORKS**

The development of the performance framework is at a critical stage. Those responsible for implementing it across entities and companies are looking for guidance and tools that will allow them to make the leap the new approach demands. Finance has sought to stress that what works for an entity or company will be dependent on its context and the nature of dialogue with its stakeholders. There will be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach or templates that Finance can provide to guarantee that entities and companies will make the progress expected over the next three or so years. Entities and companies need to develop a deep understanding of the relationship between their purposes and operating context, and invest effort in telling compelling performance stories.

Although entities and companies are likely to take different paths, they will undoubtedly benefit from asking similar questions. Figure 4 presents a way of thinking that Finance expects will have broad utility in identifying these questions and facilitating reflection within an entity or company. The approach suggested draws heavily on ideas common to theory driven evaluation. A program logic – applied in some form or another – helps focus attention on what needs to happen to deliver an entity’s planned performance, and how it will know (or measure) when it is successful. Figure 4 describes a conceptual model rather than a design or analytical process that, if followed faithfully, will necessarily deliver a high-quality product. It is the effort invested into answering the questions the model poses that will largely determine its value in a particular context.

In addition, the mode of thinking proposed by Figure 4 is not limited to understanding at the level of purposes. It is likely that it can be used to provide insights at a more detailed level (for example, at the level of specific activities that contribute to an overarching purpose) or at a coarser level (for example, how activities performed by different Commonwealth entities combine to deliver on common outcomes at the whole-of-government scale). The model could also be used to design activities or groups of activities aimed at one or more purposes and, as urged earlier, support a culture of performance that continually asks ‘how are we doing?’ and ‘could we do better?’

### **Meaningful purposes**

Anecdotally, it is a common public service lament that it is hard for others to understand the value of what they do because it can rarely be expressed in economic terms (for example, equated to the profit made by a private enterprise). But a demonstration of the value of public sector activity is exactly what the public sector’s customers or shareholders (for example, the Australian Parliament and the taxpaying public) are entitled to. Reaching a common understanding of what particular activities will achieve is critical if Commonwealth entities and companies are to understand what is expected of them when they receive public resources, and if the Parliament and the public are to judge if they got what they paid for. Purposes can be thought of as statements of the value an entity or company produces – the specific difference that it makes through its activities – who benefits, how and why (for example, p. 8 of *RMG 131 – Developing good performance information*, Finance 2015). By making the actual accountable authority (i.e. the head of a department or a company) responsible for achieving the purposes of their organisation, section 15 of the PGPA Act makes the accountable authority responsible for using public resources to deliver value.

Figure 4 encourages development of purposes through thinking akin to that associated with theories of change. A meaningful expression of an entity’s (or company’s) purpose will provide a sense of what

needs are being met, for what individuals, communities or organisations, and what will be different for this target group. This understanding of needs is at the heart of defining the problem to be solved. An understanding of who is best placed to solve it (for example, who has the authority to act) – and of constraints on solving the problem (for example, resource limits and resistance to change) – will provide the main insights required to define meaningful purposes. These insights will also help flesh out the operating context in which a purpose is pursued and help define the range and type of activities likely to be effective.

Failure to clearly express the intended impact of government interventions (i.e. as outcomes, purposes, etc.) has probably contributed to the shortcomings of past performance regimes. This is because that standard against which to assess performance is unclear if what entities and companies are seeking to achieve is unclear. Comparisons across 2015–16, 2017–17 and 2017–18 corporate plans suggest that the requirement to express purposes is enabling entities and companies to reconsider the difference they aim to make and how this difference will be observed. Finance has noted that most 2017–18 corporate plans included clear and concise statements of purposes (Finance 2017f). Entities and companies will need to continue investing effort in ensuring purposes reflect changes in their operating contexts and the expectations of government. Sustained focus is essential if purposes are to underpin robust planning and reporting, and provide a meaningful basis for assessing performance.

### Meaningful performance information

Prior to the introduction of the performance framework, there was broad agreement that the quality of performance reporting was generally lacking sophistication. Reports to the Australian Parliament (the Auditor General, 2007, 2011 and 2013, and JCPAA 2013) noted performance information tended to focus on inputs and outputs (in other words, the resources that were consumed to produce a number of ‘widgets’), rather than outcomes (how these widgets improved the circumstances or behaviour of some target group). Other issues included the quality and integrity of information (p. 21 of the Auditor-General 2013) and inconsistencies in how performance information was reported publicly (p. 32 of the Auditor-General 2007). There was a concern that it was often difficult to get a system-wide view of performance in the Commonwealth, even though some thousands of key performance indicators were tracked and reported on (p. 16 of Finance 2012 and p. 19 of the Auditor-General 2013).

**Table 1:** Criteria for appropriate performance information

<b>RELEVANT</b>	Performance information should clearly state who benefits and how they benefit from the entity’s activities.
<b>RELIABLE</b>	Performance information should use information sources and methodologies that are fit-for-purpose and verifiable.
<b>COMPLETE</b>	Performance information – when read as a whole – should articulate whether the purposes of an entity are being achieved.

Finance guidance (Finance 2016b) describes appropriate performance information as being relevant, reliable and complete, as shown in Table 1. Performance information that is relevant, reliable and complete informs judgements of the extent to which a Commonwealth entity or company is achieving its purposes. Just as important is the concept that performance information should be fit-for-purpose (as described in Part 2 of Finance 2015). Fit-for purpose means that the methods used to develop and collect performance information must be consistent with the operating context of the entity or company reporting them. For example, cutting-edge approaches may not be fit-for-purpose if they are too expensive, cannot produce information on timelines consistent with the reporting cycle, or produce information not easily understood by an entity’s stakeholders.

It is likely that performance information will be broadly considered appropriate (or judged to be good) if it is underpinned by the kind of program logic represented in Figure 4. Such performance information



will do more than count inputs and outputs; it will also say something about the efficiency at which inputs are converted into outputs. Perhaps more importantly, performance information informed by a relevant program logic will get to effectiveness – for example the outcomes of providing outputs to the intended recipients. These outcomes will, at least in part, reflect how recipients value the conditions or opportunities the outputs help create for them. Understanding outcomes necessarily implies some kind of qualitative analysis. Where outcomes emerge over different timeframes, this analysis will need to consider what happens over the short, medium and longer term.

Most entities and companies are aware of the need to dramatically improve performance reporting, and are searching for solutions (as evident during discussion and questions put to Finance during community of practice<sup>3</sup> events). However, there remains much uncertainty about how to arrive at the end-state aimed for, or even what the journey might look like. There are opportunities for experienced guides to help find the way. Even though these guides may not find an appropriate path at the first attempt, they should, at least be able to equip others with the skills and tools to recognise the right path when they are on it.

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<sup>3</sup> Finance facilitates a Performance Community of Practice open to officials across Commonwealth entities and companies. This community provides a forum for members to exchange experiences and share knowledge related to meeting the requirements under the performance framework. It is also a primary mechanism through which Finance communicates how the framework is evolving and its views on what constitutes better practice.

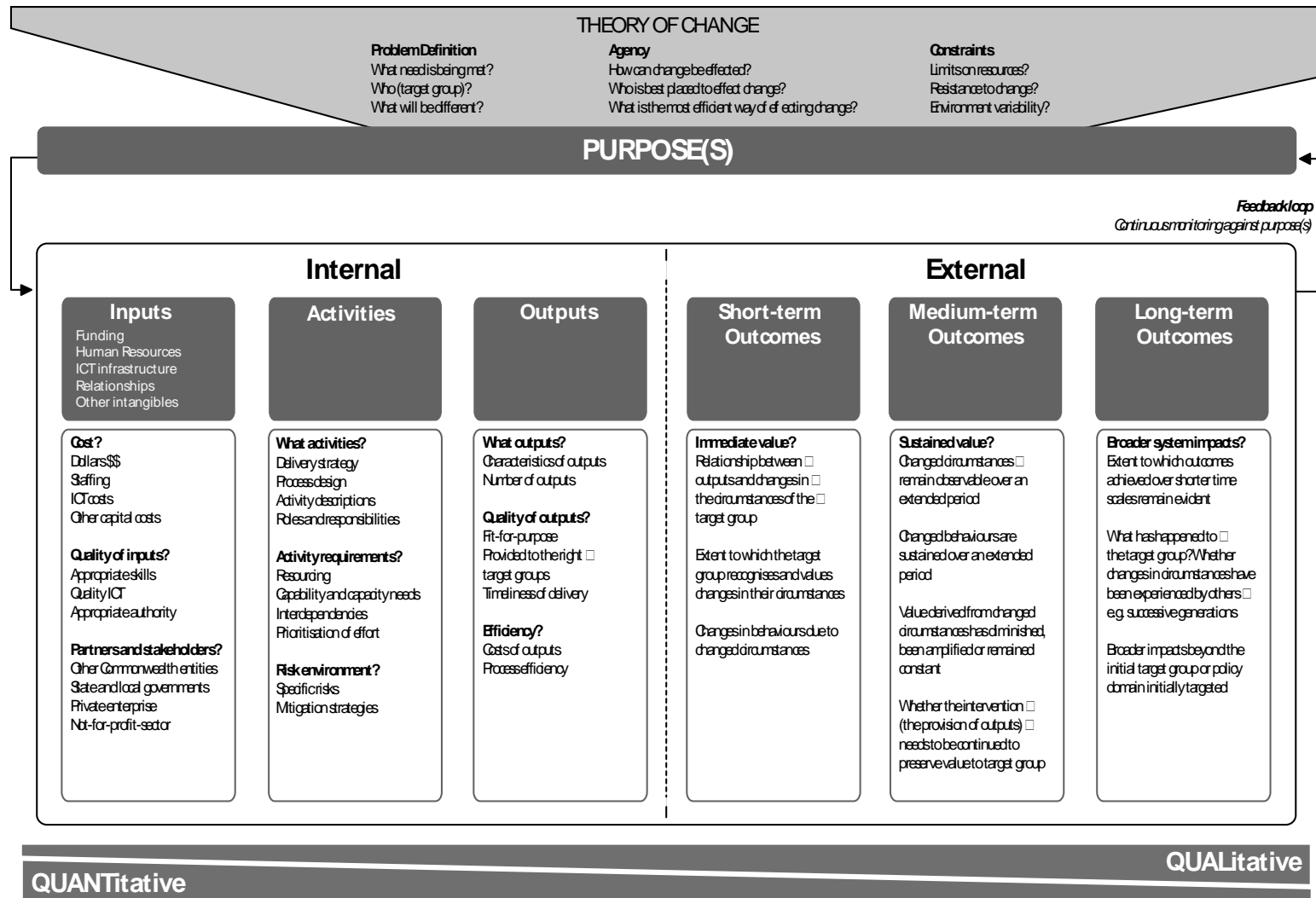


FIGURE 4: A conceptual model for developing meaningful planning and performance frameworks

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EVALUATION COMMUNITY**

Improved performance reporting must recognise there are different stakeholders that require different information, even when the objective of activities (for example, ensuring everyone benefits from high-quality education) is the same. Consider a service delivered by a Commonwealth entity to a range of communities that span rural and remote locations. Ministers might, for example, be focussed on whether the government's broad policy objectives are being achieved. Public officials might care about process, and whether the tangible outcomes of service delivery (for example, payments to individuals or the provision of advice) are being provided in a timely and cost-effective manner. The electorate – as a whole – might care about whether the provision of the service is appropriately balanced against the other ways public resources might be spent. Recipients of the service will care about whether they are better off, and the opportunities created for them. Service delivery managers need to consider these diverse questions, posed across disparate scales (from the scale of the individual to the scale of the national economy) when thinking about what counts as good performance information.

The enhanced Commonwealth performance framework is built on the notion that past performance reporting was missing something. Past practice demonstrated how much was spent on producing outcomes, but stopped short of demonstrating the impact of government activity. Finance has asserted that the shortcomings of past practice were symptomatic of an over-reliance on quantification. Those with an interest in better performance information (for example, the JCPAA and the Auditor-General) agree that it is not only about measuring more or different things more accurately. They agree that what has been missing includes a qualitative dimension to performance. Whilst this seems intuitively correct, and there is little argument that this is what is required, there remains little understanding of what a broader qualitative element looks like, and how it can be used to fill the gap. Finance guidance on developing good performance information (for example, Finance 2015) urges the use of qualitative and quantitative information to tell rich performance stories. It is left to entities and companies to identify these different sources and how they are to be combined.

The opportunities for the evaluation community are obvious. They lie in helping Commonwealth entities and companies come to terms with what it means – in practical terms – for performance information to include a qualitative element that speaks to different interests. Of the resources available within the Commonwealth context, the products of evaluations are the closest to what is thought useful, and the methods of evaluators are likely to be an appropriate starting point for building missing capability. It is not, however, simply a matter of raising awareness of what evaluators do, and convincing a wider audience to take note of the insights gained through specific evaluations. Table 2 has been developed by the authors to make the point that the evaluators standard toolbox goes some way to meeting the demands of the performance framework, but that there are important ways in which it needs to be adapted to be of broader use within the enhanced Commonwealth performance framework.

**TABLE 2: THE EVALUATOR'S TOOLBOX AND THE PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK**

<b>Tool</b>	<b>Typical definition</b>	<b>Application to the performance framework</b>
<b>Theory of change</b>	<p>Theory of change is essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context... It does this by first identifying the desired long-term goals and then works back from these to identify all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place (and how these relate to one another causally) for the goals to occur.</p> <p>(Centre for Theory of Change 2016)</p>	<p>Identifying purposes by reflecting on what needs warrant attention and who (for example, which individuals, groups or communities) would benefit from these needs being met.</p> <p>Providing a conceptual framework that allows those with diverse knowledge and experience to enter into a dialogue on what changes are feasible, who can take action to pursue change and understand the influence of environmental constraints.</p>
<b>Program logic</b>	<p>The program logic model is defined as a picture of how your organisation does its work – the theory and assumptions underlying the program. A program logic model links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/processes and the theoretical assumptions/principles of the program.</p> <p>(p. iii of Kellogg 2004)</p>	<p>Promoting a systems approach to thinking about the activities an entity or company undertakes to achieve its purposes. Allowing those across an entity or company to understand how they contribute to broader outcomes and how the outcomes link across entities to provide impact across policy domains.</p> <p>Acting as a putative cause and effect model that can be used to: test assumptions about the links between inputs, outputs and outcomes; as a basis for live performance monitoring; and to identify proxy measures when outcome measures are incomplete (for example, by relating the quality of outputs to the outcomes expected to follow).</p>
<b>Qualitative analysis</b>	<p>Qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world... qualitative research involves an interpretative approach to the world... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.</p> <p>(p. 3 of Denzin &amp; Lincoln 2004)</p>	<p>The collection and analysis of qualitative data to complement insights from quantitative sources and statistical analysis. Uses of qualitative data include understanding the difference government intervention makes to individual, groups and organisations, including, for example, how it changes behaviour or increases choice and opportunity in specific circumstances.</p>
<b>Mixed methods</b>	<p>An approach to research in the social, behavioural and health sciences in which investigators gather both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two and draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems.</p> <p>(p. 2 of Creswell 2015)</p>	<p>Providing an approach to combine quantitative and qualitative modes of data collection and analysis to get closer to a relevant and complete description of outcomes over the short, medium and longer-term.</p> <p>As a means for demonstrating the utility and value of using data sources collected from differing perspectives to provide rich insights into the value created (or maintained) as a result of public sector activity.</p>
<b>Narrative</b>	<p>Narratives are the common vehicles people use to understand and to communicate the value of their actions and social practices... Narratives illuminate, in other words, the value and meaning of a program or policy and indicate which actions need to be taken to improve it or how failures can be prevented in the future.</p> <p>(p.1 &amp; 5 of Abma 1999)</p>	<p>Drawing information together (for example, from diverse contexts and for different times) to describe an entity's 'performance story'. Providing stakeholders with a sense of the diverse ways in which an entity or company seeks to respond to complexity encountered in its pursuit of its purposes.</p>

## **Program theory and the performance framework**

The potential use and benefits of program theory in the context of the performance framework have been put succinctly at p. xx of Funnell and Rogers (2011):

When done well, program theory can produce many benefits. It can develop agreement among diverse stakeholders about what they are trying to do and how, or identify where there are legitimately different perspectives. It can help improve plans by highlighting gaps and opportunities for collaboration with partners. It can help set realistic objectives. It can support the development of meaningful performance indicators... It can provide a framework to bring together information from many sites...

Program theory is used well when it allows individuals and teams to see beyond their local context. It is used well when what counts as adding value is commonly understood, and when there is an understanding of the diverse information sources needed to demonstrate the extent to which this value is being created. Take – for example – the delivery of an information campaign. In the first instance, managing it well means that it is delivered within budget, on time and to the right audience (for example, as measured by the reach of television advertising). If the campaign is aimed at changing behaviour, then the program managers will benefit from engaging with the target audience (for example, through focus groups) to gain an understanding of their motivations. Understanding longer term objectives will help them understand what counts as a positive change in behaviour, and the timeframe over which this change is likely to be observed. Program theory will help those managing the advertising campaign to move beyond mechanics (for example, activities and the outputs they produce) to understanding the impact on others – it will help them identify their stakeholders and their diverse interests.

The authors recognise that program theory is not new to anyone other than novice evaluators. Generic program theory (for example, as represented in Figure 4) would not normally warrant attention in a journal focussed on evaluation, where it can be taken as assumed knowledge. It is mentioned because the authors wish to draw attention to its potential beyond the evaluation profession. They want to encourage evaluators to convince others that a background in evaluation is not required to use it to ask the right questions about what counts as value.

Program theory provides a broadly applicable basis for representing how some purpose is conceived. It provides a basis for testing an understanding of how activities contribute to achieving particular purposes, and whether assumptions about the value activities will create are well-founded. In promoting the broad use of program theory, it is likely that we should not be too concerned about the precise technical details about how a specific theory is conceived or used – for example, it does not matter whether the elements can be explicitly identified as such things as program logic, a theory of action or theory of change. All that matters is that the application of something represented as program theory leads to the right questions being asked. As noted in the introduction, it is not intended that program theory (or program logic) be applied rigidly, or as a process that necessarily leads to good performance information. Instead, it is proposed as a useful tool for situating generic concepts in the specific context in which an entity's (or company's) purposes are pursued.

## **Qualitative analysis and the performance framework**

Finance's experience suggests qualitative analysis remains under-utilised in the performance information published in the initial cycles of corporate plans and annual performance statements (Finance 2016c & 2017f – h). There is work to be done if development of the performance framework is to add the qualitative element missing from past reporting regimes. A useful starting point could be demonstrating the value of some existing source of qualitative information in a familiar context. This might involve identifying examples of qualitative analysis included in past program evaluations, and reinterpreting them to show how they might be used to draw conclusions about the contributions the evaluated programs make to associated purposes. Such demonstration would help overcome perceptions that qualitative information is less authoritative than quantitative information, and help create a commitment to building capability in the design, collection and analysis of qualitative repositories.

Ready access to fit-for-purpose qualitative analysis will be a key critical characteristic of a mature performance framework. The development of the framework creates opportunities for specialists that can help the broader Commonwealth sector understand methods for collecting and making sense of qualitative information – including an understanding of the limitations of quantitative data and statistical analysis, and how qualitative data that provides insights into why something is valued (or how it is experienced) deepens the understanding of the outcomes of public sector activities. For example, consider a survey designed to understand how well a Commonwealth service is being delivered. The authors assert that common practice is often to ask clients to score aspects of the service (for example, timeliness, relevance of advice or fairness) and aggregate responses to generate mean satisfaction ratings. If respondents are given the opportunity to elaborate on their ratings through free-text fields, the information is often used as specific quotes to illustrate some particular conclusions drawn from the quantitative data (for example, as a testimonial supporting a broader notion that clients are generally satisfied with the service). Typically, it is not common practice to subject textual responses to some form of rigorous qualitative method (for example, coding and thematic analysis). The absence of such analysis means that the opportunity to understand the context in which the service is valued is missed, the opportunity to understand what is valued is missed, and what is worth preserving when attempts are made to extend the service to other contexts.

There is a sense in which qualitative analysis needs to be operationalised within the performance framework. Pilots need to be conducted to demonstrate how qualitative information can be collected in a timely and cost and effective manner. Modes of qualitative analysis need to be adapted to the everyday of Commonwealth entities and companies. Although analysis of rigorous coding and thematic analysis holds much promise, it is unlikely this potential will be realised if it can only handle small and specialised information sets, and takes weeks or months to deliver results. While there may be some up-front investment in establishing qualitative information stores, they must be readily accessible on an ongoing basis, and capable of being used to answer questions on timescales characteristic of fluid policy environments. As described above, performance information must be fit-for-purpose. There is work to be done to understand what fit-for-purpose qualitative information looks like in the context of the performance framework. Work needs to be done to demonstrate why it should be used to inform such things as the extent to which purposes have been achieved.

### **Mixed methods and the performance framework**

It not intended that qualitative information replace quantitative information, or that one would be used at the exclusion of the other. As noted at p. 22 of Finance 2015:

Good performance information will draw on diverse sources to support a rich performance story told over time, with **quantitative data typically sitting alongside qualitative data**. [Emphasis added]

If this is to be the general rule, questions along the following lines immediately arise: ‘How are qualitative and quantitative data to sit alongside each other, how are they to be combined to tell a performance story?’ One answer might be to use mixed methods conceived as integrating and interpreting data from different sources (as described in Creswell 2015). For example, it would seem reasonable to expect that a program logic – along the lines of the generic form described by Figure 4 – could be used as the basis for integrating quantitative and qualitative information associated with an activity (or group of activities). The causal link between outputs and outcomes – i.e. the explanation of how outputs lead to an outcome for some target group in some specific context – could be the basis for integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data – how the results of activity are valued by target groups – could be used to assess outcomes. Quantitative data could be used to describe what physical attributes outputs must have (for example, how many at what time) ‘to cause’ these outcomes. Whether this is a viable and useful basis for combining quantitative and qualitative sources is something for someone with relevant technical experience to explore. In addressing this point, the main aim would be to describe what mixing sources means in practical terms, and the circumstances in which it might

help to describe the contribution activities make to the achievement of an entity's (or company's) purposes.

The opportunity to establish mixed methods as standard practice within the performance framework is not limited to establishing a practice of combining quantitative and qualitative data sources. There seems to be potential for extending the use of mixed methods to include mixing of studies which employ different methodological approaches (regardless of what data types they produce). This is consistent with the broader definition of mixed methods argued at p. 17 of Greene 2007:

A mixed methods way of thinking aspires to better understand complex phenomena by intentionally including multiple ways of knowing and valuing and by respectfully engaging with differences, both those presented by the inquirers mental modes and those located in the social world.

It is easy to see how such a 'mixed way of thinking' might prove useful in the context of a Commonwealth performance framework. Insights from the perspective of different cohorts (for example, those at which a government intervention is targeted and the taxpayers that fund the intervention) allow for a more complete picture of how some or other activity is valued across diverse stakeholders. It also provides a means for understanding how ostensibly disparate activities can combine to contribute to common outcomes. This mixing of perspectives – or how outcomes are seen differently by different people at different times – seems to have great promise in addressing the inherent contestability of any government activity that seeks to address substantial policy issues. If nothing else, it seems to support that kind of informed and sophisticated dialogue about the use of public resources, which is one of the main objectives of the enhanced Commonwealth performance framework.

Mixed methods – in the context of the performance framework – are to be viewed as more than a means of triangulation (i.e. using analysis from different perspectives to verify consistent findings). They provide a means for different perspectives to come together to identify common ground – consistent with the dialectal approach to mixing methods encouraged by Greene 2007. Conceptually, this can be illustrated in terms of the example of how different stakeholders might think about the delivery of a government service in different terms. Different studies could be conducted to create insight into the extent to which recipients consider themselves better off, how those responsible for delivering the service feel they have contributed to the lives of recipients and whether others (for example, ministers or interested stakeholders) consider the value created as being justified compared to the value that may have been created if public resources had been used differently. Each of these studies, if done well, will provide insights into the perspective of each stakeholder group. However, they also have the potential for providing a basis for the different groups to agree on what they collectively regard as value, by providing the basis from which a constructive dialogue can be entered into.

### **Narratives and the performance framework**

The Commonwealth performance framework gives Commonwealth entities and companies greater flexibility in monitoring and reporting performance (p. 9 of Finance 2015). This flexibility facilitates the greater use of qualitative analysis, but also includes the use of narrative and story-telling to place performance in context and explain the significance of progress in achieving purposes:

good performance information allows a **meaningful performance story** to be told... performance reporting is about telling a meaningful story about what has been achieved. [Emphasis retained from original]

The concept of a performance story includes that proposed by Dart and Mayne 2005. However, Finance's use of the term is intended to expand this to include description of concepts that cannot be conveyed by data alone. Narrative, or telling a performance story, should be regarded as a mode of presentation; a way of presenting information from mixed sources that speaks to diverse interests simultaneously. With reference to our generic government service described above, a well presented performance story would hold the interest of ministers, public servants and parliament all at once, and allow them to talk to each other in common terms. Narrative also helps convey the complexity not easily

captured through other means. For example, narratives can be used to provide an understanding of how discrete activities that produce discrete outcomes (at different places, at different times and directed at different target groups) combine to produce some outcome on a broader scale (for example, over the longer term or across diverse target group). Narrative used in this way also addresses potential issues of scale – i.e., by providing a means for relating stories about the outcomes achieved in local contexts to conclusions drawn about purposes defined at a larger scale and in more generalised circumstances.

The emphasis on telling a meaningful performance story is intended to address past experience that the Parliament and public tended to find it hard to engage with the information previously published in Portfolio Budget Statements (for example, as in implied in the Auditor-General 2011 & 2013). Part of the issue was the quality of performance information, but the way it was presented (for example, as tables of data against key performance indicators) also contributed. Performance information was largely presented out of context, so that its meaning and relevance was difficult for others to identify with. The use of narrative and performance story telling can help address this. It has been noted elsewhere that stories provide an effective and efficient means to create understanding that can percolate across diverse interests, be self-sustaining and generate trust (for example, at p. 7 of Snowdon 1999). Evaluators, with their expertise in describing evaluation findings and facilitating discussions about value, would seem well-placed to help develop a practice of telling and engaging with performance stories. To do so, will require an understanding of the Commonwealth's stakeholders interests (including those of Parliament) and then working with entities and companies to understand how performance against their purposes can be described in a way that speaks to these interests.

### **Evaluators and the performance framework**

The performance framework demands the input of performance professionals. Evaluators have many of the skills, tools, knowledge and way of thinking that professionals making a positive contribution to a culture of performance across the Commonwealth will need to exhibit. The message here is twofold. The first point is one alluded to earlier – that it is unlikely that the greatest role for evaluators in the new performance framework will be in performing larger evaluations more often. The second is that the evaluators – or any other profession looking to make a significant contribution to shaping the framework – need to understand what is being asked for and how their expertise can be applied to add the value being sought. If the performance framework leads to a stronger performance culture across Commonwealth entities and companies, then it will be a broad church of professionals that make this so. It does not matter who contributes requisite skills and practical solutions, only that they are available when needed.

The authors acknowledge that what they are proposing is likely to be challenging. They are asking evaluators to see their role as other than performing discrete evaluation projects commissioned by some Commonwealth entity or company acting as a client for evaluators' services. We are making the similar demands of other professions and experts (such as academics and consultants). Take, for example, the call for greater use of mixed methods to describe outcomes that contribute to performance against purposes. Such use demands mixed methods to be removed from the familiar context of some discrete research project and applied in some manner in the unpredictable everyday environment of public policy, where the framing of 'the research question' is liable to change on a regular basis. The challenge in this case is for those applying a mixed method to keep pace with this change and adapt their approach to continue making a useful contribution.

Evaluators making a contribution within the performance framework will, to some extent, need to modify their mode of working. They will work with other performance professionals to make a difference to the performance of entities and companies. They will rarely apply their arsenal of skills and knowledge in the sequential manner that may be more typical of a more traditional evaluation project (for example, problem definition and framing followed by theory construction, collecting data, analysis and synthesis of evidence and presentation of findings in a report). Instead, they will use whatever skills



are required to meet the demands of particular circumstances – for example, ‘Is this activity making the contribution we thought it would?’ or ‘How can we demonstrate to these particular stakeholders that recipients in this specific context are benefiting from what we are doing on their behalf?’ Evaluators working as part of a broader performance community will become part of an entity’s (or company’s) core capability. They will become integral to that entity’s (or company’s) performance against its purposes. They become more than an occasional advisor or source of specialised expertise.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

There will always be a place for evaluations conducted as discrete projects within the Commonwealth and broader public sectors. There will always be stakeholders needing evaluation findings to inform judgement of the value of a specific government activity. The introduction of the new performance framework did not change this. However, what it does provide is an opportunity to extend the role of evaluators beyond this, to contribute to shaping more meaningful performance information, and to building the dialogue this information supports. In this way, evaluators will become a critical element of a broader community of Commonwealth performance professionals, providing their invaluable insights to stakeholders, Parliament and the Australian community.

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