



STRONG FAMILY, STRONG COMMUNITIES ABORIGINAL-LED CO- DESIGN EVALUATION

JULY 2023
COMPENDIUM



Aboriginal
Housing
Office

Authors

This is a compendium report developed by AHO Research & Analysis, summarising findings from an independent evaluation undertaken by an Aboriginal consultancy Cox Inall Ridgeway, of the AHO *Strong Family, Strong Communities* Co-Design Evaluation.

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Terminology and Glossary

Terminology

In this report, the term **Aboriginal** refers to the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters of New South Wales. In NSW it is common practice for government agencies and community organisations to use the term Aboriginal, rather than Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or First Nations, to refer to services or policies which are primarily for Aboriginal people but are also inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people who are living in NSW. In this report, the term **Aboriginal** is used, however, it is acknowledged that Torres Strait Islander clients may also access these services and programs.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO)	An incorporated Aboriginal organisation, initiated, based in, and governed by the local Aboriginal community to deliver holistic and culturally appropriate services to the Aboriginal community that controls it.
Co-Design Assessment Tool	Developed by AHO as a mechanism to support reflection, monitoring and learning between partners involved in co-design. It is based on peer-reviewed evidence of co-design best practices.
Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO)	A NSW government statutory body established under the <i>Aboriginal Housing Act 1998</i> (NSW) to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to affordable, quality housing. The AHO is governed by an all-Aboriginal Board.
Aboriginal-led	An initiative that is recognised, endorsed, and controlled by Aboriginal community members. It is based on community-identified needs and shaped by the perspectives of community members and commitment to the principle of self-determination.
Client Experience Initiatives (CEI)	Small-scale projects funded for one year to focus on improving a social need for Aboriginal people, families, and communities.
Client Outcomes Team (COT)	A team within AHO focused on progressing programs under the 'Client Outcomes' pillar of the Strong Family, Strong Communities Strategy. COT team members were involved in co-design teams that are the focus of this evaluation.
Co-design	An emerging practice without a universally recognised definition. Typically used to describe an approach to engaging communities that are the focus of policies, programs, and services in the design process, with an intention to create innovative and tailored solutions. A participatory and democratic process based on the idea that people affected by decisions should be involved in the process of making those decisions.
Cultural safety	Cultural safety is met through actions that recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal people. Only the Aboriginal person who is a recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.
Leading Community Demonstration Sites (LCDs)	Pilot programs funded for three years, designed to target vulnerable Aboriginal cohorts who may need support to resolve their housing needs, while addressing at least one other social issue.
Strong Family, Strong Communities (SFSC) Strategy	AHO's ten-year plan to support improvements to the health and well-being of NSW Aboriginal families and communities through housing.



INTRODUCTION

From 2019 to 2021, AHO worked with four Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to co-design and implement four housing-related programs. The aim of each project was to improve outcomes for Aboriginal tenants in NSW through addressing a social need identified by their communities. In late 2021, AHO engaged a First Nations-led research and consultation agency, Cox Inall Ridgeway (CIR), to conduct an independent evaluation of the co-design process and experiences of participants across each of the four projects.

This report is a summary of the key findings in the full report which found that AHO successfully co-designed the programs with ACCOs by championing **self-determination, flexibility, and investment in local strengths**.

“Governments are usually not very innovative, and I think in this case they were really innovative – to give community organisations a chance to come up with an idea and see where it will go.”
ACCO participant.

How Evaluation findings can benefit Aboriginal communities.

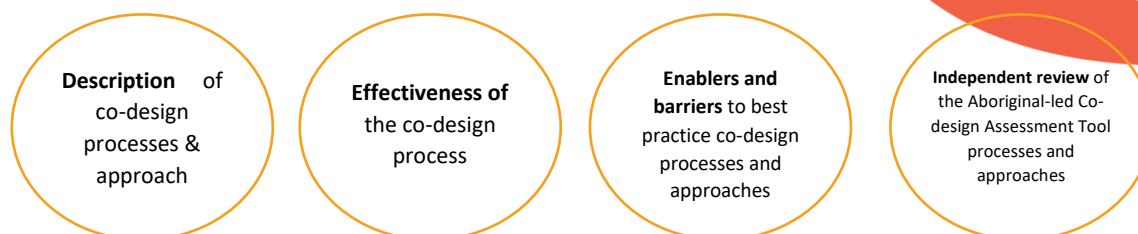
ACCOS can draw on these insights to advocate for a genuine Aboriginal-led co-design process that will be beneficial and appropriate for them, with the resourcing and support needed to effectively participate. NSW Government agencies can draw on what worked well and not so well, to more effectively engage Aboriginal communities in co-design while being culturally respectful and acknowledging Aboriginal organisations' role as the knowledge-holders of their programs.

Evaluation Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation was to build an evidence base on what successful and culturally appropriate co-design looks like in the context of designing programs and services with Aboriginal communities. By exploring the process AHO took with the four ACCOs to co-design their programs, AHO aimed to capture the best practice elements of an Aboriginal-led co-design process from an Aboriginal perspective. Understanding what worked well, what enabled the process, and what could be improved on will inform future projects. The evaluation also included an independent peer review of the AHO developed *Co-design Assessment Tool* (the tool). The tool is a mixed method design combining elements of quantitative and qualitative data capture to support co-design partners in monitoring the quality of their co-design processes and relationships. The purpose of the tool review was to determine whether the tool is fit-for-purpose and capable of gathering valid

and appropriate data to produce trustworthy findings for monitoring, learning and evaluation. See **Figure 1** below for a summary of the evaluation focus and scope.

Figure 1 Evaluation scope



Project Background

The four projects involved in AHO's co-design work are part of the *Strong Family, Strong Communities* Strategy (SFSC). SFSC is the NSW Government's 10-year Aboriginal Housing Strategy which aims to create positive change and boost opportunities for Aboriginal families and communities in NSW through housing.

The high-level aim of AHO's Aboriginal-led co-design approach was to demonstrate how Aboriginal community leadership and decision-making control can produce stronger community outcomes. AHO engaged the ACCOs to lead the design of their place-based programs, receiving assistance from an Aboriginal consultancy of their choosing and the AHO's Client Outcomes Team (COT). This approach has been defined as the Three-party model. In this way, AHO prioritised Aboriginal community leadership and decision-making control. **Figure 2** below outlines the different programs carried out by each organisation.

Figure 2 ACCOs' programs



EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This evaluation was a mixed methods process evaluation that sought to capture how the co-design process was implemented and experienced across the four projects. Purposive selection of participants and a focus on qualitative data capture and analysis through semi-structured interviews ensured that the focus was on the views and experiences of the Aboriginal people directly involved in the co-design process. The co-design approach extended into this evaluation whereby ACCO priorities informed the framing of evaluation questions, data collection approaches, and the analysis and interpretation of findings. ACCOs input and feedback was sought at each stage to acknowledge their role as the knowledge-holders of their projects.

Five reviewers undertook the peer review of the Co-design Assessment Tool (the tool) using the Table of Specifications method¹ to estimate the overall representativeness of the co-design process characteristics being assessed (content validity), appropriateness for its intended purpose (face validity) and user experience for consistency in interpretation and data capture (reliability).

Figure 3 Methods and Participants



Data Collection and Analysis

Over a three-month period in 2021-2022, CIR engaged 17 individuals over virtual videoconferencing due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic. Participants represented the following stakeholder groups: Four ACCOs (n=9), Two Aboriginal consultants who assisted ACCOs in co-design (n=4), one State Government co-design partner (n=2), AHO's Client Outcomes Team who represented AHO within co-design teams (n=2).

¹ Newman, I., Lim, J., & Pineda, F. (2013). Content validity using a mixed methods approach: Its application and development through the use of a table of specifications methodology. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 7(3), 243-260.

Quantitative analysis of the co-design assessment tool data, inductive thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from the Co-Design Assessment Tool and interviews were completed to identify common themes emerging from participants' views. Researchers also drew on theory and research concepts in co-design literature to determine themes. Each researcher preliminary coded the data and assigned themes before coming together in group analysis session to reach common agreement on what the data was saying. On completion of analysis, a validation workshop involving all evaluation participants provided an opportunity to discuss and validate findings, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented in the evaluation.

Evaluation Questions

Prior to the commencement of the evaluation, the two LCD ACCOs worked with AHO to co-develop evaluation questions to guide the evaluation. These questions were revisited and affirmed in the early stages of the evaluation to ensure they were appropriate for application across all four projects. The evaluation sought to answer the following key evaluation questions.

Figure 4 Evaluation Questions

Co-design description and context	What does Aboriginal-led co-design look like? • How did the process differ from other ways of designing a program? • What activities were undertaken as part of the process? • Who was involved and how did their contributions support the process?
Co-design process effectiveness	To what extent did the process follow the co-design principles? • To what degree did the voices of Aboriginal stakeholders, shape and lead program design? • How well did stakeholders embrace Aboriginal perspectives and learn from each other? • How effective were the working relationships between stakeholders? What value did the co-design process have for stakeholders involved in the process? • What does co-design mean for the community and stakeholders involved? What worked well and not so well during the co-design process? • Were there any enablers or barriers experienced?



FINDINGS

This section outlines key findings from the evaluation aligned to the key evaluation questions that guided the evaluation process.

Co-design description and context

1. What does Aboriginal-led co-design look like?

The evaluation found that the co-design process was comprised of the following three core elements.

Figure 5 Essential elements

Three Party Model	Self-determination focused	Adaptable
A working partnership between ACCO, AHO and a skilled Aboriginal consultant and/or other government agency to co-design a localised program.	- A power shift compared to other ways of working with government. All parties prioritise self-determination. - ACCO led direction and endorsed every step.	AHO provided a framework of key steps and template documents for local teams to adapt: program logics, service models, budgets and Business Cases.

- How did the process differ from other ways of designing a program?**

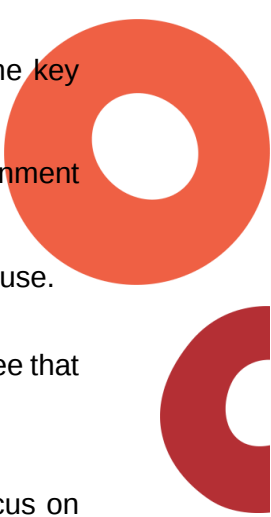
Participants identified that Aboriginal-led co-design championed innovation in ways that other program design approaches have not because each project concept was drawn from local community ideas. The co-design process not only empowered ACCOs by enabling them to lead the projects their way, but there was also more flexibility, and the focus was more on cultural appropriateness. Participants acknowledged that AHO positioned themselves as advocates working for the ACCOs, which was fundamentally different to ACCOs' previous experiences of designing programs with government or other funders where the focus of ACCO engagement was often to help the funder reach pre-determined goals. Participants reported that it was a 'power shift'.

"It starts with, 'How can we help you in what you want to do?'" AHO staff.



- **What activities were undertaken as part of the process?**

In the early stages of the process, there were a series of co-design workshops that brought project teams together to build a shared understanding of the project and to establish working principles. To facilitate the co-design process, the AHO Client Outcomes team provided a framework consisting of the following key components:

- Development of an in-kind agreement between all parties, outlining how all the key players would work together.
 - Selection of skilled Aboriginal consultancies and/or nominating other government partners.
 - Project planning and management templates for co-design teams to adapt and use.
- 

ACCOs reviewed and endorsed draft planning documents before finalisation to guarantee that the documents accurately captured the ACCO's intentions.

All participants emphasised that a strength of this approach was that there was a focus on making co-design principles explicit and locally specific, rather than 'implied' as was often the case. Participants also highlighted that having an adaptable project management framework was a successful element of the co-design process. Working from templates created time efficiencies and supported ACCOs to address gaps in skillsets and/or capacity. Participants also reported that a key outcome of this process was strengthened relationships with agencies that could assist their organisations, and an increased awareness of each other's roles and how they can work better together to support their mutual clients.

- **Who was involved and how did their contributions support the process?**

Participants reported the three-party model to be highly productive and beneficial as it brought together individuals with different strengths, underpinned by a shared commitment to the project concept and respect for ACCO expertise. The key roles and contributions of each of the key players in the co-design model are summarised in **Table 1** below.

Table 1 Key roles and contributions

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED ORGANISATIONS	AHO CLIENT TEAM	OUTCOMES	ABORIGINAL CONSULTANCY
Identified the need and engages their community, Board and Elders to create the program concept.	Provided the project framework and template planning documents to guide the co-design of programs.		Facilitated co-design workshops to understand what the ACCO wants and help them be realistic and measured to align with government requirements.
Defined the program objectives, implementation approach and outcomes.	Offered guidance to overcome issues, in the form of suggestions rather than directives.		Led the drafting of documents to help shape local knowledge into what is required.
Signed off all project decisions.	Regular check-ins with ACCOs to track and maintain momentum.		Provided connections for additional resources or support if required.
Owns the Intellectual Property of the program.	Advocated to the AHO/broader government on behalf of the project, such as reasons for delays or changes to budgets.		Offered technical skills and independent advice to support program design and project management.
Continues the program after the co-design process is completed.	Assisted open communication between ACCO and AHO through trusting relationships.		Supported the ACCO to advocate to AHO. Mediate between ACCO and AHO if needed.

“Having (senior Aboriginal leaders at the ACCO) involved was priceless. They knew what they wanted and how to put it into practice. You can’t gain that without lived experience.” ACCO participant.



Co-design process effectiveness

2. To what extent did the process follow the principles of best practice co-design?

- To what degree did the voices of Aboriginal stakeholders, shape, and lead program design?

ACCOS noted that compared to previous experiences of working with the government they were 'surprised' by the amount of autonomy they held throughout the co-design process. ACCOS were able to work in the ways suited to them, that is, organically and in response to community context rather than bureaucratically. This approach enabled ACCOS to make locally appropriate decisions and uphold their community's interests. ACCOS reported that they were given the opportunity and authority to review, adapt and endorse every project decision. This gave ACCOS the ability to guide the direction of their projects, supporting local leadership and enhancing cultural appropriateness in the co-design process and its outcomes.

"We switched the power back to the community and let them drive and lead. We feel we're going to get better outcomes through our communities." AHO staff.

- How well did stakeholders embrace Aboriginal perspectives and learn from each other?

The co-design process facilitated knowledge exchange between ACCOS and the AHO. ACCOS expressed that working with the AHO's Client Outcomes Team (COT) provided their organizations with a deeper understanding of government protocols and priorities. On the other hand, COT participants emphasized that an important outcome of the co-design process was educating the AHO internally about community dynamics, the genuine needs and wants of the local communities, and the value of Aboriginal leadership. All participants perceived that this strengthened bilateral relationship held significant potential for long-term benefits for both parties.

"I always walk away feeling humbled, like my own cultural story gets richer." Aboriginal Consultant.

In addition, Aboriginal consultants reported that as a key outcome of working with the ACCOS, they gained an increased understanding of the realities of working in the Aboriginal youth, community, and housing sectors, and how community systems are set up and operate in practice. They also learned about the approaches that are most appropriate when working in Aboriginal cultural spaces knowledge exchange between

stakeholders was essential as it created an openness to skills development by Aboriginal participants representing all parties in co-design teams.

- **How effective were the working relationships between stakeholders?**

Stakeholders across all projects acknowledged that the main driver for productive working relationships was the ability to establish trust and open communication within teams. This trust within teams also encouraged honesty and transparency about challenges within the project. ACCO participants gave strong positive feedback about the members of the AHO Client Outcomes Team for listening to their perspectives, checking in with them frequently and staying in touch beyond project deliverables. ACCOs were confident that AHO would be receptive if project scope needed to be adapted or additional resources needed. This facilitated project innovation and resilience. ACCOs also reported that the Aboriginal consultants displayed genuine respect and appropriately positioned themselves in a supportive role - to listen, understand, and facilitate, but not direct.

The evaluation emphasized that the success of co-design working relationships is also grounded in the individual qualities of the people involved. Individual qualities that participants attributed to the success and effectiveness of the working relationship between all stakeholders included: *active listening, open communication, humility, willingness to share power, honesty, transparency, accountability, flexibility, adaptability, sector and cultural knowledge, and strong self-identity.*

3. What value did the co-design process have for stakeholders involved in the process? What does co-design mean for communities and stakeholders involved?

"It was very refreshing and different from the usual process. I didn't feel like we were committing ourselves to something we can't do. Sometimes with other projects, you feel you are trying to put a square peg in a round hole." ACCO Participant.

Co-design is a concept that emerged from outside the context of First Nations peoples (in the design, business and planning sectors), so it was necessary to draw on the perspectives of evaluation participants to define co-design principles relevant to them. Aboriginal participants defined co-design by the elements of the approach that reinforced their agency to take the lead in shaping program design and direction and included: being involved from the outset, being heard and trusted, having license to do things in the ways they know will work in their local context. Common to all projects, Aboriginal-led co-design referred to a process of working in partnership that holds community interests at the centre throughout.

4. What worked well and not so well during the co-design process?

- Were there any enablers or barriers experienced?

The evaluation identified the following enablers that contributed to the effectiveness of the Aboriginal-led co-design process.

Figure 6 Success factors

1. **Establishing co-design working principles:** Taking time to explicitly define local co-design principles at the outset helped ensure a common understanding among team members.
2. **Documenting team member roles:** Clearly mapping roles and contributions supported accountability and open communication. Projects that did not clarify roles experienced challenges with task follow-through.
3. **Flexibility and resilience:** The ability to adapt to unforeseen challenges, such as COVID-19 or natural disasters, was crucial. AHO demonstrated understanding by adjusting timelines, budgets, and plans as needed, allowing projects to still achieve outcomes.
4. **Culturally safe environment:** Having All-Aboriginal teams facilitated rapport-building and created a comfortable space for open communication. Teams could work closely and efficiently without having to explain the nuances of Aboriginal culture.
5. **AHO support for ACCO leadership:** AHO empowered ACCOs by minimizing bureaucratic requirements and allowing them to set the terms of engagement. Milestone payments were made on time, and AHO advocated for project needs, enabling ACCOs to focus on implementation.
6. **Aboriginal consultants reducing administrative burden:** Skilled Aboriginal consultants provided neutral advice, lightening the workload for ACCOs, and assisting in articulating project outputs in ways suitable for the government.
7. **Focus on knowledge exchange and capacity development:** Allowing ACCOs to identify their priorities for capacity development enhanced outcomes and supported self-determination, recognizing that different organizations have diverse skill sets and gaps to address.
8. **Continuity of staff in project teams:** Maintaining consistent team members throughout the process fostered strong relationships and sustained momentum. Turnover of key staff posed challenges in teams where continuity was disrupted

The evaluation identified the following factors that hindered optimal implementation of the Aboriginal-led co-design process. Many challenges were COVID-19 related impacts.

Figure 7 Challenges

1. **The shift to virtual co-design planning:** COVID-related travel restrictions forced planning workshops to be conducted online, in smaller sessions and less in-depth face-to-face interaction, impacting relationship building. This also led to a loss of momentum, increased impact on ACCOs operations, and challenges for participants to consistently attend meetings.
2. **Pandemic-related disruptions:** Delays in suppliers, deliveries, securing properties, and staff recruitment challenges due to the pandemic caused disruptions to project plans and impacted the strength of outcomes. These delays negatively affected client and community outcomes.
3. **Competing priorities for ACCOs:** ACCOs engaged in frontline service delivery faced challenges in adhering to original timelines, especially when their attention was diverted to supporting their community during the pandemic. This compromised the equal and trusting relationship between ACCOs, AHO, and consultants.
4. **Extended project timelines:** Delays in project timelines, as a result of disruptions and challenges mentioned prior, necessitated additional meetings, increased costs and pressure for all parties involved. Smaller ACCOs and consultancies faced difficulties in extending their commitment to see projects through to completion.
5. **Some lack of clarity about AHO processes:** ACCOs occasionally felt rushed to meet requirements before the end of the financial year, even though AHO had been flexible throughout the process.
6. **Absence of project closure and debriefing:** In some projects, representatives from all parties reported a lack of clarity regarding when the process officially concluded, which reduced opportunities for reflecting on lessons learned and conducting post-internal evaluations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation made recommendations to strengthen the way AHO, and other stakeholders more broadly, approach co-design with Aboriginal organisations. These recommendations can enhance the benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

On a strategic level, it was proposed that Aboriginal-led co-design be adopted as a best practice approach for working with Aboriginal organisations across all relevant program areas. This evaluation demonstrated that Aboriginal-led co-design partnerships, when carried out in accordance with best practice principles, ensure that programs are designed in culturally appropriate ways, to respond to real community contexts, and by drawing on and building up local skills, knowledge, and connections.

A second strategic recommendation is that the AHO promote their co-design work to the broader community to highlight the best practice and innovative work they are involved in and to share knowledge and outcomes with sector stakeholders across the state. As one participant noted:

“It would make the community happy to know they [AHO] are doing this”

...and that AHO communicating their pride and achievements would help to build trust and brand awareness as an agency that works for the benefit and interests of the community.

Several practical recommendations have also been proposed based on the findings from consultation to support strong and effective co-design processes and strengthen working relationships between the government and Aboriginal communities through co-design.

These recommendations are presented in two parts in the tables below:

- a. Opportunities for continuous improvement for AHO in its delivery of Aboriginal-led co-design (Table 2).
- b. Success factors of effective co-design processes to be prioritised by any organisation in the implementation of Aboriginal-led co-design (Table 3).

Table 2. Areas for continuous improvement for AHO in its future delivery of Aboriginal-led co-design

Recommendation	Description
1 Explore opportunities for AHO and ACCOs to share learnings of effective Aboriginal-led co-design with other government agencies and stakeholders.	• There may be opportunities for AHO to share skills and learnings on effective co-design through government or public/media communication channels, professional development opportunities, or conferences. They may also support ACCOs to promote their work, noting in all communication that the owners of the IP of specific co-design processes remain with ACCOs.
2 Review and refine project planning document templates to increase clarity and accountability within teams	• Co-developed documents such as Terms of Reference and Project Plans that outline accountabilities, milestones and timeframes, meeting schedules, risk management plans, and mitigation strategies can support working relationships and assist in keeping projects on track. • It was heard that existing versions of these documents need to be reviewed and refined to ensure they are fit for purpose and provide sufficient clarity to guide co-design teams. However, in refining these documents, it is essential that a priority commitment to flexibility and adaptability to the local context is maintained.
3 Build in regular opportunities to check in and debrief within teams, such as through regular implementation of the <i>Co-Design Assessment Tool</i>	• A need was identified to increase opportunities for checking in as a group for early risk identification, addressing issues, seeking internal team feedback, and capturing learnings. This will build project resilience in the face of disruption. • The <i>Co-Design Assessment Tool</i> was evaluated as being a user-friendly and effective tool to support feedback conversations within groups and could be utilised on a semi-frequent basis throughout a co-design term, such as quarterly or half-yearly.
4 AHO increase its role in matching ACCOs with appropriate support partners and negotiating appropriate skills development opportunities	• It was recommended that AHO take a stronger focus on building skillsets and addressing resourcing gaps to ensure that programs maintain momentum when co-design activities are complete. • Some organisations reported not being aware of the range of skill development options that were available to them from consultants or the flexibility that existed in how this support could be accessed (for example, consultants working alongside them in ongoing retainer-type arrangements). • AHO may create a package of 'service options' that gives examples of the types of services that are available to ACCOs to support the delivery of co-design projects.

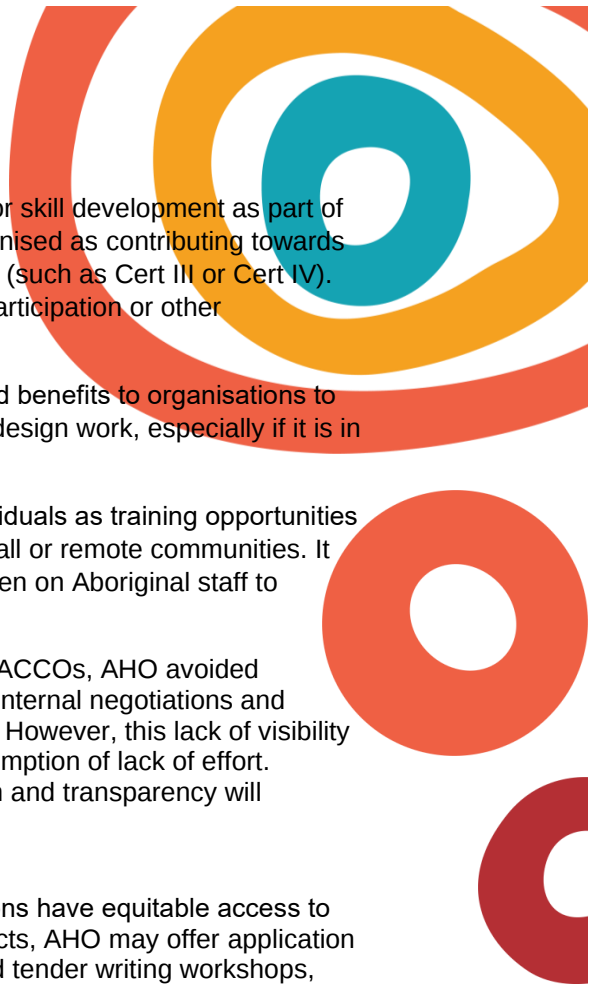
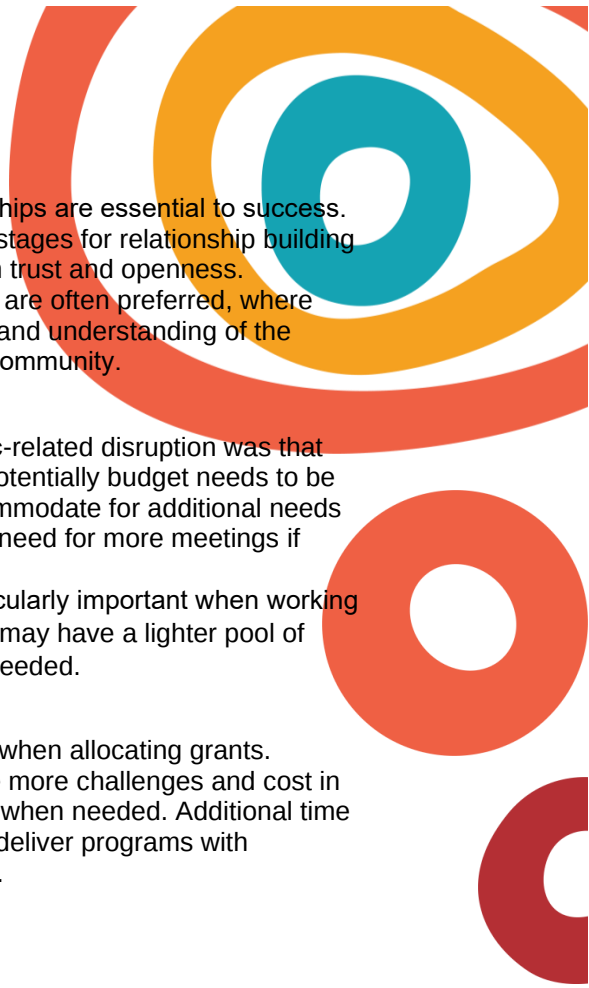
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- 5 Explore opportunities for ACCO participants to receive formal demonstrations of achievement in skill-building exercises if required
 - There may be opportunities for skill development as part of co-design activities to be recognised as contributing towards formal accreditation or learning (such as Cert III or Cert IV). For example, a Certificate of Participation or other demonstration of achievement.
 - This can create incentives and benefits to organisations to allocate staff resources for co-design work, especially if it is in addition to core business.
 - It can create benefits for individuals as training opportunities can be difficult to access in small or remote communities. It also reduces the potential burden on Aboriginal staff to complete
 - 6 Increase communication from AHO to ACCOs about their internal processes and work 'behind the scenes'
 - To avoid adding pressure on ACCOs, AHO avoided providing some details of their internal negotiations and advocacy on behalf of ACCOs. However, this lack of visibility in some cases created an assumption of lack of effort. Increased open communication and transparency will continue to build trust.
 - 7 AHO to provide support for tender writing and application processes to support equitable access
 - To ensure smaller organisations have equitable access to participating in co-design projects, AHO may offer application support in the form of facilitated tender writing workshops, professional mentorship, or alternative application processes (such as phone interviews over written forms).

Table 3. Success factors of effective co-design to be prioritised by any organisation in the delivery of Aboriginal-led co-design

Recommendation	Description
8 Ensure each party is represented by an Aboriginal person with the appropriate qualities (wherever possible)	• Aboriginal leadership on all sides was identified as a critical element of success. It supports communication, trust, openness, understanding and cultural safety within working partnerships. • Appropriate qualities include strong interpersonal and listening skills, an understanding of Aboriginal community dynamics and lived experiences. • For some agencies or organisations, employment or retention strategies may be needed to ensure they have the right people in these roles.
9 Consider at the start of each co-design project whether there is the benefit of additional external parties being involved	• As co-design partnerships contribute to strengthened relationships and increased mutual understanding among members, there may be a benefit in including other stakeholders in co-design teams beyond the key three players. For example, Land Councils, other government agencies or other local organisations may have shared local objectives.

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- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 10 | Project Plans to build in additional time for relationship building and site visits, especially if team members have not worked together before. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong interpersonal relationships are essential to success. Allocating time in early project stages for relationship building and yarning supports long-term trust and openness.• Occasional face-to-face visits are often preferred, where possible, to build relationships and understanding of the program's wider context in its community. |
| 11 | Strengthen contingency planning to accommodate unforeseen disruptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A key learning from pandemic-related disruption was that additional time, flexibility and potentially budget needs to be built into Project Plans to accommodate for additional needs as they arise, for example, the need for more meetings if timeframes extend.• Contingency planning is particularly important when working with smaller organisations that may have a lighter pool of resources to draw from when needed. |
| 12 | Consider additional challenges and costs of delivering programs in regional areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Location must be considered when allocating grants. Regional areas can experience more challenges and cost in accessing resources and skills when needed. Additional time and budget may be needed to deliver programs with organisations in regional areas. |

CONCLUSION

This evaluation determined that the AHO's approach to Aboriginal-led co-design was effective and appropriate in designing programs to improve client outcomes. By centring Aboriginal perspectives, ACCOs were empowered to act autonomously and leverage their expertise to develop innovative and responsive place-based programs. The three-party model involving ACCOs, AHO, and Aboriginal consultancies worked well by allowing ACCOs to maintain decision-making control while reducing administrative burdens. AHO and Aboriginal consultants played a supportive role, offering technical skills, networks, and advice without leading or directing the process. Successful working relationships were built on the personal qualities of the stakeholders involved, and the creation of culturally safe and trusting environments, guided by explicit working principles.

Participants widely agreed that this way of working represented a power shift that championed **self-determination, flexibility, and investment in local strengths**. AHO's framework approach and template documents facilitated effective communication and a smooth process, with mutual knowledge exchange emerging as a key outcome of co-design. ACCOs gained a deeper understanding of AHO and government processes, while AHO developed an increased awareness of community priorities. The strengthened collaboration between ACCOs and AHO will enhance their future capacity to work together.

There were some areas for improvement identified in opportunities for professional development with a desire for AHO to better clarify available support options and assisting ACCOs in finding appropriate partners. Finally, while COVID-19 and other external factors caused disruption, the ability of all stakeholders to be adaptive created some resilience and enabled project outcomes to still be realised.

“Usually working with government is about KPIs and expectations. This was about the program we wanted to deliver. We were the runners of our own business.”

ACCO participant.



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