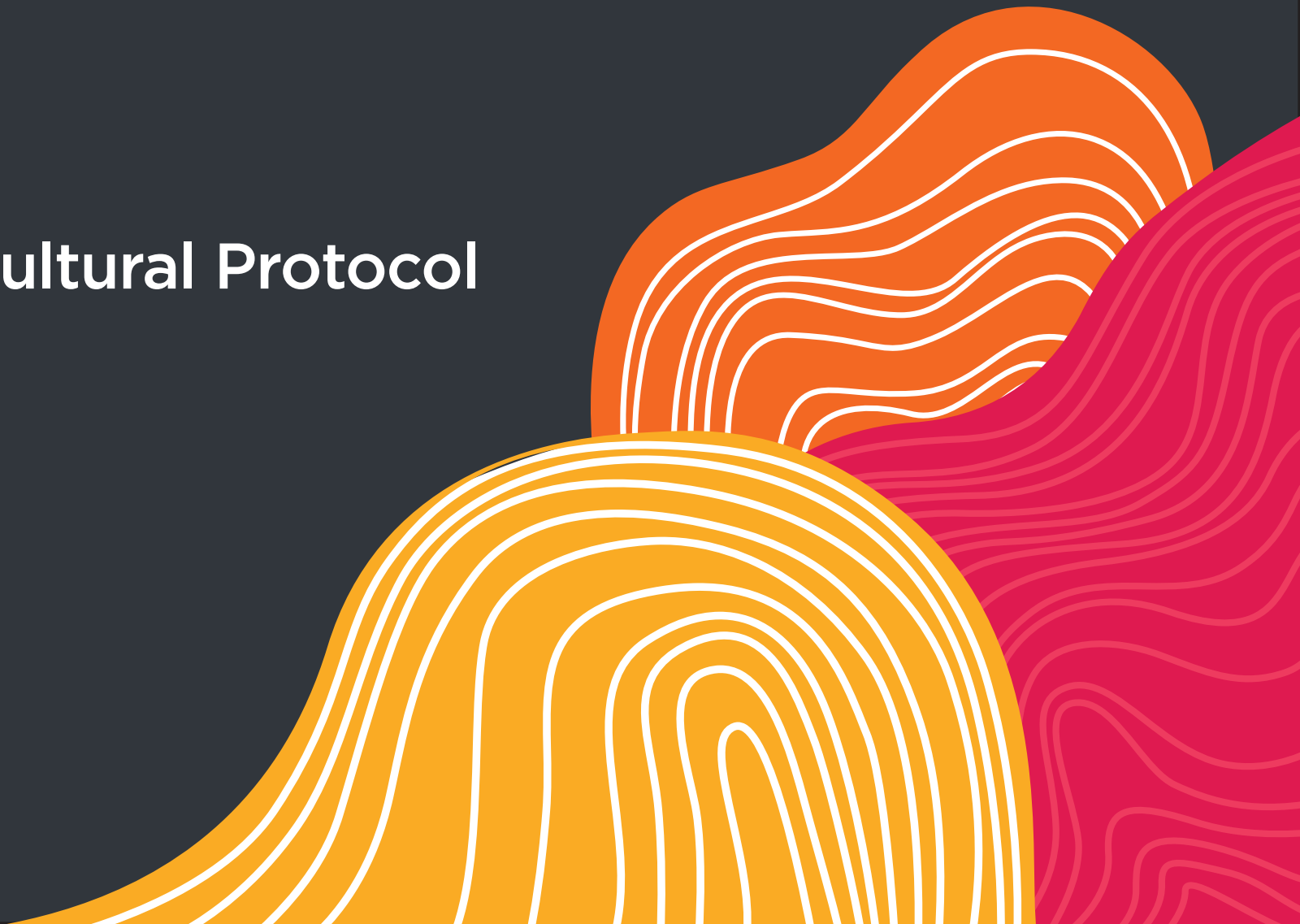




Transport for NSW

# Aboriginal Cultural Protocol

2020-2022





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# Executive Summary

Transport for New South Wales is committed to *Closing the Gap* and working collaboratively with Aboriginal people to celebrate the diversity of our culture across NSW. We do this by working in partnership, designing and delivering projects that respect and promote Aboriginal cultural understanding.

In July of 2019, Transport for NSW's *Reconciliation Action Plan* foreshadowed the development, implementation and communication of an Aboriginal cultural protocol document for our staff. The following *Aboriginal Cultural Protocol 2020-2022* is our action on that commitment.

Protocols can include ways of being and working with Aboriginal people, within the work environment and also in less formal community settings.

By being open to learning and understanding Aboriginal culture, Transport staff can become more skilled at engaging with the Aboriginal community.

This resource is intended to be used as a guide for Aboriginal cultural protocols. However, Transport staff are advised to first check with the Aboriginal community they are planning to engage with, to identify whether there are variations to these protocols that are more culturally appropriate for that community.

This two-way exchange and checking of protocols between the Aboriginal community and Transport staff, is highly recommended and represents the best way of avoiding protocol issues before they emerge.



# Introduction

The following Aboriginal Cultural Protocol is designed to strengthen your Aboriginal engagement activity by providing a number of practical hints and tips. The protocol should be used as a guide that allows for the flexible adaptation of your delivery in line with identified community needs at the local level.

If you are planning on engaging with Aboriginal people, we suggest you first consult with this protocol's companion resource: Transport for NSW Principles and Framework for Aboriginal Engagement, "Ngiyani Winangaybuwan Bunmay" that will provide a strategic overview of key considerations for your approach.

You are not in this journey alone. If at any stage during your Aboriginal engagement planning you are experiencing any issues, please reach out to the Transport Aboriginal Engagement Team who are here to support you.



# Definitions

“Protocol: the system of rules and acceptable behaviour used at official ceremonies and occasions”

(Cambridge 2020)

## **Aboriginal**

Aboriginal person means a person who:

- i. is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, and
- ii. identifies as an Aboriginal person, and
- iii. is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal person.

For the purpose of this document, use of ‘Aboriginal’ is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## **Culture**

Ways of being, doing, expressing and relating to others, that are at the centre of Aboriginal identity.

## **Protocol**

An approved way of behaviour that respectfully acknowledges the cultural authority of an Aboriginal person, ceremony, event, custom or place.

## **Protocol Compliance**

To accurately observe Aboriginal cultural protocol in a manner that is genuine, sincere and promotes greater understanding of Aboriginal ways of being and doing.

# Why a Cultural Protocol?

## Why do Cultural Protocols exist?

Some Transport staff may be wondering why Aboriginal cultural protocols exist in contemporary Australia?

Prior to colonisation, Aboriginal Australia had a system of rich laws, lore, customs, languages, commerce and ways of being.

Since colonisation, some of these Aboriginal practices and customs fragmented due to the geographical displacement of people and breaks in the oral tradition where Aboriginal knowledge was passed on to the next generation.

In order to grow and protect Aboriginal culture, everyone needs to play their part and assist the honouring and observation of Aboriginal cultural protocols in the community.

In this way, each Transport staff member can help embrace our rich Aboriginal culture and increase the inclusivity and diversity of our workplaces across NSW. Moreover, our Transport customers can share our commitment to respect and acknowledge Aboriginal cultural protocols leading to an improved service experience across the network.



# First impressions

## Meeting protocols - Who's your Mob?

When Aboriginal people first meet, they often exchange information about their family group and local area to map out connections and relationships.

The origins of these enquiries relate back to the complex Aboriginal system of "skin names" that helped different Aboriginal groups make decisions about sharing resources, cultural boundaries and even the matching of potential partners.

If you are a non-Aboriginal person, don't assume that Aboriginal people are not interested in your cultural background, as they often know other people with similar backgrounds who are significant to them or equally, they may have part of your cultural background in their own family.

Accordingly, if you are asked about your culture and heritage and are able to respond in a way that is light and informative, then you are more likely to create rapport with the Aboriginal person you are speaking with.

## Good Practice example

Staff member "Sally" was introduced to a friendly Aboriginal man "Reggie" who asked

"Hi Sally, who's your mob?"

Sally replied

"Mum was born in Ireland and dad was born in Dubbo. His parents were both German and Jewish".

"New South Wales has Australia's largest Aboriginal population represented by more than 80 different language groups"

(NSW Govt 2018)

# Values

## Values

Core values for Aboriginal people are community, culture, country and family.

Most Aboriginal people have a strong respect for culture or ways of doing and being that reinforce Aboriginal identity. For example, the process of “returning to culture” for an Aboriginal person can be equivalent to spiritually “returning to centre”. In this way, culture holds a special value for Aboriginal people, because it is inseparable from wellbeing.

Likewise, the emotional and cultural connection of Aboriginal people to their country stems from the life-giving importance of land and waters to the community. Aboriginal people view their “country” as a collective asset that belongs to the whole community as opposed to just one individual or another.

“Culture and country are central to Aboriginal people’s wellbeing”

(PMC 2019)







# Words and Terms to Avoid

AVOID	REASON	USE INSTEAD
<b>Aborigine</b>	Not appropriate because it was historically used in past policies and legislation to disempower and marginalise Aboriginal people.	“Aboriginal people”
<b>Aboriginal people and Australians</b>	Aboriginal people are Australian.	“Aboriginal Australians”
<b>Half-Caste, Quarter-Caste</b>	Inappropriate terms because they are part of language used to forcibly remove Aboriginal people from their families (Stolen Generation).	“Aboriginal”
<b>Blacks</b>	Is offensive if said by a non-Aboriginal person attempting to describe Aboriginal people.	“Aboriginal people”
<b>Blackfellas</b>	Is offensive if said by a non-Aboriginal person attempting to describe Aboriginal people.	“Aboriginal people”

# Aboriginal English and Cultural Expression



## Aboriginal English

Aboriginal English is a colourful form of English that is derived from a mix of Aboriginal language and English.

Aboriginal people use Aboriginal English to express their cultural identity within their community and are less likely to use it with non Aboriginal people.

It's best to avoid using Aboriginal English, unless you have significant experience in doing so.

A safer option is to use your normal speaking voice, tone and choice of words. If you are interacting with Aboriginal people in a community setting, the use of plain English is encouraged.

## Cultural Expression

Whenever you attend a public forum where Aboriginal people are also in attendance, you may encounter some community members who use their speaking time as an opportunity to release frustration that relates to their personal experience.

It is wise to allow Aboriginal community members to do this periodically as it can release pressure and foster a sense of trust between attendees.

Such communications should be sensitively handled with active listening and genuine, respectful feedback so that the person feels like they have been heard and understood.

From an Aboriginal cultural perspective, such contributions are not “topic off track” but are instead sincere examples of Aboriginal felt experience that help to harmonise the differences in the room, bringing people closer together.

“Strive to develop self-awareness and have a respectful and humble attitude toward diverse points of view, which are shaped by the individual histories of each community”

(Guiding Principles Workgroup 2012)

# Body Language and Relationship Building

## Eye Contact

Sometimes Aboriginal people may avoid looking at you directly. It is worth being sensitive to this and realising that it's likely to have nothing to do with you personally and more to do with the cultural preferences of that Aboriginal person.

When you are speaking to Aboriginal people it's best to look at them directly. Pay attention to any non-verbal cues you receive and adjust your delivery accordingly.

## Body Language

When interacting with Aboriginal people it's important to have respectful, open and sensitive body language.

## Relationships before Business

It is wise to invest time developing relationships with Aboriginal people by exploring common areas before you commence with business.

This can be done with a "round the table" exercise where you share interests and hobbies.

Understand that sometimes Aboriginal people may not be inclined to respond in a group situation. This does not mean they are not listening but rather would prefer not to draw unnecessary attention to themselves.

## Relationship Building during Breaks

Transport staff should use the breaks between Aboriginal engagement sessions as an opportunity to continue building the relationship with Aboriginal attendees.

In terms of conversation style, it's worth keeping in mind that Aboriginal people highly value humour that is funny without being cynical or unkind.

## Dress

There is a great diversity of Aboriginal views about dress. Many Aboriginal Elders today grew up with exposure to church teachings and so, this group may appreciate a more prudent, neat and smart style of dressing.

On the other hand, if you are planning to engage with Aboriginal people in a community setting, then wearing a suit and tie or formal dress may not always strike the right note. Instead, for men, an open-necked collared shirt and smart pants with shoes will usually suffice.

For women, pants and shoes are advised or if wearing a dress, it's recommended that the hem length extends to at least below the knee. If wearing a blouse or top with pants, it's best to avoid deep plunging necklines or backlines and also sheer or partially see-through fabrics.

# Aboriginal Flag

## The Australian Aboriginal Flag

The Australian Aboriginal Flag was designed by Aboriginal artist Harold Thomas and became the official flag of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, after it was first flown there in 1972.

Since then, it has become a widely recognised symbol of the unity and identity of Aboriginal people.

In July 1995 the Aboriginal flag was proclaimed a 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953.

The meanings of the colours in the flag as stated by Harold Thomas are:

Black – represents the Aboriginal people of Australia.

Yellow circle – represents the Sun, the giver of life and protector.

Red – represents the red earth, the red ochre used in ceremonies and Aboriginal peoples' spiritual relationship to the land.

## Display Protocol

The Aboriginal flag should be flown or displayed with the black at the top and the red at the bottom.



# Torres Strait Islander Flag

## Torres Strait Islander Flag

Adopted in 1992, the Torres Strait Islander flag was designed by the late Bernard Namok as a symbol of unity and identity for Torres Strait Islanders. In July 1995, the Australian Government recognised it as an official 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953.

The Torres Strait Islander flag has three horizontal panels, with green at the top and bottom and blue in between.

A white Dhari (traditional headdress) sits in the centre, with a five-pointed white star beneath it.

The meanings of the colours in the flag are:

Green - represents the land.

Black - represents the Indigenous peoples.

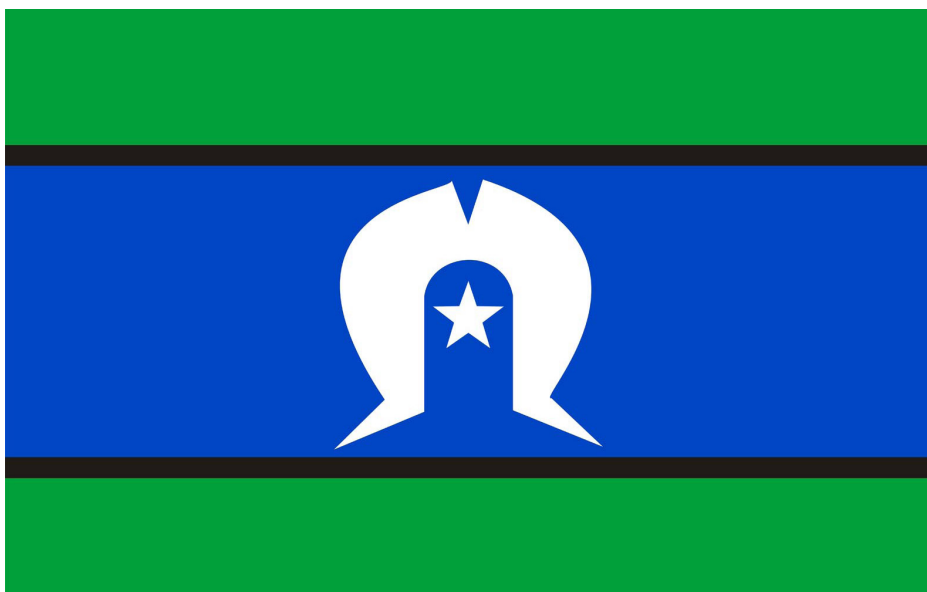
Blue - represents the sea.

White - represents peace.

The Dhari headdress represents Torres Strait Islander people and the five-pointed star represents the five island groups within the Torres Strait. The star is also a seafaring symbol used in navigation.

## Display Protocol

The Torres Strait Islander flag should be flown or displayed the correct way up, so that the 2 "feet" of the Dhari headdress are at the base of the blue area.



# Identifying Aboriginal Stakeholders

## Understanding Stakeholders

The Aboriginal system is matriarchal, meaning women are just as likely to hold senior roles in the community as men.

Each Aboriginal stakeholder at your event or meeting will bring a unique perspective. For this reason, every effort should be made to gather a diversity of viewpoints from Aboriginal people attending as individuals or as representatives from Aboriginal organisations, including Land Councils, Native Title Holders, Native Title Body Corporate, Elders, Aged Care, Heritage, Culture, Arts, Youth and others.

## Identifying Aboriginal Stakeholders

One of the most challenging parts of planning an Aboriginal engagement is identifying exactly who are the relevant Aboriginal stakeholders and how they should be approached?

Initially, Transport staff should reach out to the Aboriginal Engagement Team for advice.

Agencies should be mindful that engaging with Aboriginal community leaders does not mean that one has fully and exhaustively consulted with the Aboriginal community.

Rather, it is prudent to enlarge the circle of your Aboriginal stakeholder group to be inclusive of the range of families and people whom have a connection or interest to the area or project.



# Acknowledgement of Country

## Acknowledgement of Country

An Acknowledgment of Country (AOC) is an important protocol that allows people to show respect for Aboriginal culture, heritage and connection to land and waters. Acknowledgements of Country can be given by a non Aboriginal person or an Aboriginal person and do not require the person to be born in the local area. The AOC should be delivered in a way that is meaningful and spoken “from the heart”.

## Standard Wording

*I acknowledge (insert guest Traditional Custodian(s)) and peoples of the (insert Nation) and pay my respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we meet, especially Elders, past and present and acknowledge other Aboriginal people here and their respective cultures and nations.*

## Application

A senior leader should begin each meeting with an AOC, acknowledging that the meeting is taking place in the country of the Traditional Custodians.

If you are unable to obtain the Traditional Custodian information or if there is any doubt about who they are, then a safer option is to go with the following alternative wording.

## Alternative Wording

*I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and recognise & celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures & connections to the lands and waters of NSW.*

# Welcome to Country

## Welcome to Country

Protocols for welcoming visitors to country have been a part of Aboriginal cultures for thousands of years. Despite the absence of fences or visible borders, Aboriginal groups had clear boundaries separating their country from that of other groups.

Crossing into another group's country required a request for permission to enter. When permission was granted, the hosts would welcome the visitors and offer them safe passage and protection of their spiritual being during the journey. Visitors were obliged in turn to respect and observe the protocols and rules of their hosts' country.

Today, much has changed and the protocols have been adapted to contemporary circumstances. However, the essential elements of welcoming visitors and offering safe passage remain in place.

A Welcome to Country (WTC) occurs at the beginning of a formal event and can take many forms including singing, dancing, smoking ceremonies or a speech in traditional language or English. A Welcome to Country is delivered by Traditional Custodians or Aboriginal Elders who have been given permission to welcome visitors to their country.

If Transport staff would like to organise a Welcome to Country for an upcoming event or meeting, they are encouraged to complete the following web-based enquiry form, after which the Transport Aboriginal Engagement Team will be in touch to assist.

(add web enquiry form link here)

“A Welcome to Country ceremony is performed by an Aboriginal Elder, leader or person who is a descendant of the nation of the community in which you are meeting.”

(PMC 2019)



# Smoking Ceremonies and Dance Performances

## Smoking Ceremonies

For significant events, a smoking ceremony is sometimes requested by Aboriginal people to help spiritually cleanse participants and venues prior to the main activity. If an Aboriginal person requests a smoking ceremony and the format of your event allows for it, then it can be a unique way of placing Aboriginal customs and culture at the forefront of your engagement activity.

The smoke is generated by an Aboriginal performer who will burn young gum leaves in a small u-shaped wooden container or “coolamon” and carry it through the crowd. Sometimes, the smoking ceremony performer will invite those interested to walk by or through the energising smoke that is rich in eucalyptus oil.

## Aboriginal Dance Performances

Significant events often have Aboriginal dance performances. Performers may be identified via the Local Aboriginal Land Council or else through a Supply Nation search for “dance performance”. Aboriginal dance performers will need access to dressing rooms where they can change into their dance costumes and apply body-paint as required.

The dance costume and paint preparation process can easily take one hour. It is also good practice to check with the Aboriginal dance performers about the minimum area they require for the performance. Including any tables or chairs needed, audio visual requirements and whether they consent to photos being taken of the activity.

“Ideally, Aboriginal dance is done on sand covered surfaces. If you are running an outdoor event, temporary sand can be brought in to form a circular dance floor area that will create atmosphere and excitement.”



# Cultural Participation

## “Having a go” is preferable

Well-meaning people sometimes avoid engaging with Aboriginal people and culture, because they feel it’s a safer option compared to risking offence or being non compliant with a cultural protocol.

Unfortunately, such a position hinders the development of greater understanding between non Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people.

Non Aboriginal Transport staff may be interested to know that when most Aboriginal people are asked whether they would prefer people to “have a go” at sensitively observing cultural protocols, most will answer “yes”.

In other words, most Aboriginal community members prefer, and will show goodwill, to non Aboriginal people who make an honest attempt at observing a cultural protocol in preference to making no attempt at all.

## Good Practice example

An Aboriginal Dance group visits and performs at the opening of an important Transport event.

In a gesture of goodwill, the Aboriginal dancers move into the audience and invite staff to join them onstage and participate in the performance.

A number of Transport staff, out of the eighty people in attendance, volunteer to join the dance area and take a short lesson in Aboriginal dancing.

After their Aboriginal dance performance, a few Transport staff members are asked how they felt on the dance floor to which they replied

“It was fun, but I felt a little out of step”.

“I didn’t know what I was doing but the dancers made me feel comfortable”.

“It was deadly to have your staff members step forward and join us. We weren’t looking for anyone with Aboriginal dance experience, just people to have fun and ‘shake a leg’ with us”

Aboriginal Dance Performer



# Cultural Consent

## Consent

Depending on your Aboriginal engagement activity, you may need to obtain appropriate consent.

Consent forms should be clearly written and provided to Aboriginal attendees to review or complete if they are inclined to do so.

Consent forms should be worded in such a way that retains Aboriginal ownership of the information that is shared by Aboriginal attendees.

The consent form should also contain items that give Aboriginal people choices as to whether their name, image or any other personal characteristic appears in the document, resource or event that is being planned.

## Online Consent

If you are conducting an online engagement with Aboriginal people, then expecting them to sign a consent form, followed by scanning and sending it back may be unrealistic in some cases.

A simple webform with appropriate checkboxes and space for commentary that can be easily shared and completed via mobile phone is likely to score much higher levels of Aboriginal participation.



# Meeting Arrangements



## Venue Selection

When planning an Aboriginal engagement, consideration should be given as to whether the meeting could be held “on country” if possible, as Aboriginal people are likely to find it easier to attend. Also, if practical or possible, local Aboriginal organisation premises can prove a useful and worthwhile venue choice, some of which allow for meetings in outdoor settings as well as indoor. Aboriginal venues can also make the process of identifying an Aboriginal caterer easier, as many have pre-existing links to Aboriginal businesses.

## Meeting Agenda

When planning the meeting agenda for your Aboriginal engagement, attendees will appreciate you scheduling their items as early as possible to allow for timely consideration and discussion of Aboriginal business. If for some reason you are not able to do this and Aboriginal people are kept waiting, then it will be advantageous to think about how you will acknowledge the extra time they have invested into your meeting.

## Room Setup

Aboriginal people have a long history of engaging with other groups. This was often done seated on the ground with no barriers between people. We can acknowledge the wisdom of this “small groups” approach by arranging our audience’s chairs in a circle if space allows, and by removing tables between the facilitator and the audience.

## Catering

Providing food for your Aboriginal attendees is a sensible way to begin demonstrating reciprocity, encouraging goodwill and the formation of a relaxed conversational environment.

Moreover, Aboriginal people present at your activity or engagement are likely to respond positively if you contract an Aboriginal caterer to supply the event. Most Aboriginal caterers can provide Aboriginal food options as well as traditional choices. When making menu choices, consider asking your Aboriginal caterer for suggestions and best to avoid highly spiced foods. You can find an Aboriginal caterer by asking your local Aboriginal community contact person for suggestions.

## Transport

Depending on the location and relative ages of the Aboriginal people you are engaging with, it is worth enquiring whether any of your attendees require transport assistance to attend. Elderly Aboriginal people are likely to be greatly appreciative of such efforts that demonstrate the respect you are according them. Equally, young Aboriginal people can also be very responsive to offers of transport assistance.

## Timetabling

Your engagement or event timetable should provide ample time for discussion and interactive participation by Aboriginal community members. Having regular breaks between sessions can help progress decision-making as community members are provided with the opportunity to informally discuss meeting issues.

# Glossary of Frequently Used Terms



## **APIC**

Aboriginal Participation in Construction - a NSW government policy that mandates minimum spend requirements, ie 1.5%, for construction spending with Aboriginal businesses

## **APP**

Aboriginal Procurement Policy - a NSW Government policy that mandates minimum spend requirements, ie 3%, for goods and services spending with Aboriginal businesses

A process that celebrates the coming together of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people to achieve a new level of respect and ways of working together

## **Apology**

A national apology, given by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13th Feb 2008, to apologise for the past wrongs inflicted on Aboriginal people by past governments and policies

## **Auntie**

1. biological Auntie
2. a term of endearment given to an Aboriginal woman by community members

## **Closing the Gap**

A term used to describe an Australia-wide initiative to reduce the gap between Aboriginal people and non Aboriginal people with respect to life expectancy, health, welfare, education and a range of other social and economic indicators

## **Deadly**

Aboriginal English for “great” or “excellent”

## **Elders**

Senior Aboriginal community members who hold a considerable depth of life experience and cultural knowledge.

## **Goori**

Aboriginal English for an Aboriginal person born in the Far North Coast of NSW

## **Koori**

Aboriginal English for an Aboriginal person born in NSW or Victoria

## **Land Council**

An Aboriginal representative organisation that relates to a given area and group(s) of Aboriginal people

## **Lore**

Traditional Aboriginal knowledge typically passed from person to person by word of mouth

## **Mabo**

The surname of Torres Strait Islander “Eddie Mabo” who was instrumental in the legal recognition of Native Title and the rejection of “Terra Nullius”

## **Mob**

A group of people linked by common ancestors

## **Murri**

Aboriginal English for an Aboriginal person born in Western NSW or QLD

## **Native Title**

A Commonwealth law that protects the customary rights of Aboriginal people to use their lands in a traditional manner including a right to negotiate with people who seek to develop that land

## **Native Title Holder**

Aboriginal group(s) whom have

1. Successfully registered a Native Title claim and 2. Have been awarded Native Title over a given area of land in a determination by the Federal Court

## **Reconciliation**

A process that celebrates the coming together of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people to achieve a new level of respect and ways of working together

## **Smoking Ceremony**

An Aboriginal cultural ceremony that involves the creation and deliberate direction of smoke, to spiritually purify and cleanse the environment and participants

## **Songline**

Aboriginal cultural map lines expressed through traditional songs and music that link areas together over great distances

## **Sorry Business**

Cultural requirements for Aboriginal people to attend and participate in funerals

## **Stolen**

An expression given to those Aboriginal people who were forcibly removed from their families due past government policies

## **Uncle**

1. biological Uncle
2. a term of endearment given to an Aboriginal man by community members

# References

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UNM Center for Rural and Community Behavioral Health & Albuquerque Area Southwest Tribal Epidemiology Center