

Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country



Introduction

The process of 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Country' recognises the unique position of Aboriginal people in Australian culture and history. Aboriginal people are the original Custodians of the Land. It is important this unique position is recognised by Community Legal Centres (CLCs) and incorporated as part of official protocol and events to enable the wider community to share in Aboriginal culture and heritage, facilitating better relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.

It is important that CLCs embrace the spirit of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians and for CLCs to be inclusive of all groups. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to ensure that the correct protocols are used by all CLCs for 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Country' ceremonies.

Acknowledgments

CLCNSW would like to acknowledge our member Community Legal Centres (CLCs), Aboriginal Advisory Group, the National Association of CLCs (NACLIC) and the Aboriginal Legal Access Program Steering Committee for their assistance and resources in creating this Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country.

Parts of this document have been sourced from the TAFEWA Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership and Reconciliation Australia (www.tafe-wa.com).

CLCNSW acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respects to the elders both past, present and future for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal Australia. CLCNSW recognises the rich and diverse Aboriginal culture.

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What is a Welcome to Country?

A Welcome to Country is where a representative/s of the local Aboriginal Custodians welcome people to their land. Protocols for welcoming visitors to Country have been a part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes/clans had clear boundaries separating their Country from that of other tribes/clans. Permission would be requested to enter another tribe's/clan's Country. When permission was granted, they would hold a Welcome ceremony, offering them safe passage. Today, in contemporary society much has changed. However, welcoming visitors remains in place in the form of a Welcome to Country.

Welcome to Country occurs at the opening of an event and is usually the first item on the program. A Welcome to Country can be delivered in many forms. It may consist of a single speech or a performance. Performances may include a Traditional Welcoming Song, a Traditional Dance, a Didgeridoo performance or a combination of these.

It is important to ensure that the appropriate representative is invited to perform the Welcome To Country. Protocols in relation to the performing of a Welcome to Country Ceremony are well established in most Aboriginal communities. If there is uncertainty as to whether an Acknowledgement or a Welcome is appropriate, advice may be sought from either your local Aboriginal Land Council or local Aboriginal organisations. In most communities, there are performing artists who are regularly available for such occasions.

It is important for the organisers to ensure that traditional owners are aware of the type of event being organised, and are comfortable and aware of the arrangements. Organisers should also respectfully request that the Welcome, if provided in a local Aboriginal language, be translated into English so that the audience understands the welcoming message. In some Welcome to Country ceremonies, Elders use symbols and explain the significance of the symbols in language as well as English.

Response to Welcome to Country

It is necessary for the speaker who follows immediately after the Welcome to Country ceremony to provide a response. Part of the response should acknowledge the person who delivered the Welcome to Country. If the custodians of the land are not the traditional owners, it may be necessary to acknowledge both groups. If an Aboriginal person from a different region is speaking he or she may wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and deliver a welcome from his/her own country. It is inappropriate for every speaker to provide a response or acknowledge country.

The following text can be used in response to the traditional Welcome to Country:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of this land on which we are meeting, the <traditional name/s> people. It is a privilege to be standing on <traditional name/s> country.

The following text could be used if the custodians are different:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the <traditional name/s> people and the <custodian name/s> people who are the custodians.

What is an Acknowledgment of Country?

An Acknowledgement of Country is a way that the wider community can demonstrate respect for Aboriginal culture and heritage and the ongoing relationship the Traditional custodians have with their land. They can be informal or formal. Unlike a Welcome to Country they can be performed by any individual, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, participating in an occasion of any kind. It is a demonstration of respect dedicated to the traditional custodians of the land or sea where the gathering of participants is being conducted.

CLCs are encouraged to demonstrate appropriate acknowledgement to be used when in forums such as general meetings, formal gatherings, functions, ceremonies and events. Due recognition of the Traditional custodians assists in developing strong partnerships with Aboriginal communities across New South Wales.

There are no set protocols or wording for an Acknowledgement of Country. An example of an 'Acknowledgement of Country' is:

'I would like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri people who are the Traditional Custodians of the Land. I would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past and present of the Wiradjuri Nation and extend that respect to other Indigenous Australians who are present'.

Why are Acknowledgments and Welcomes Important?

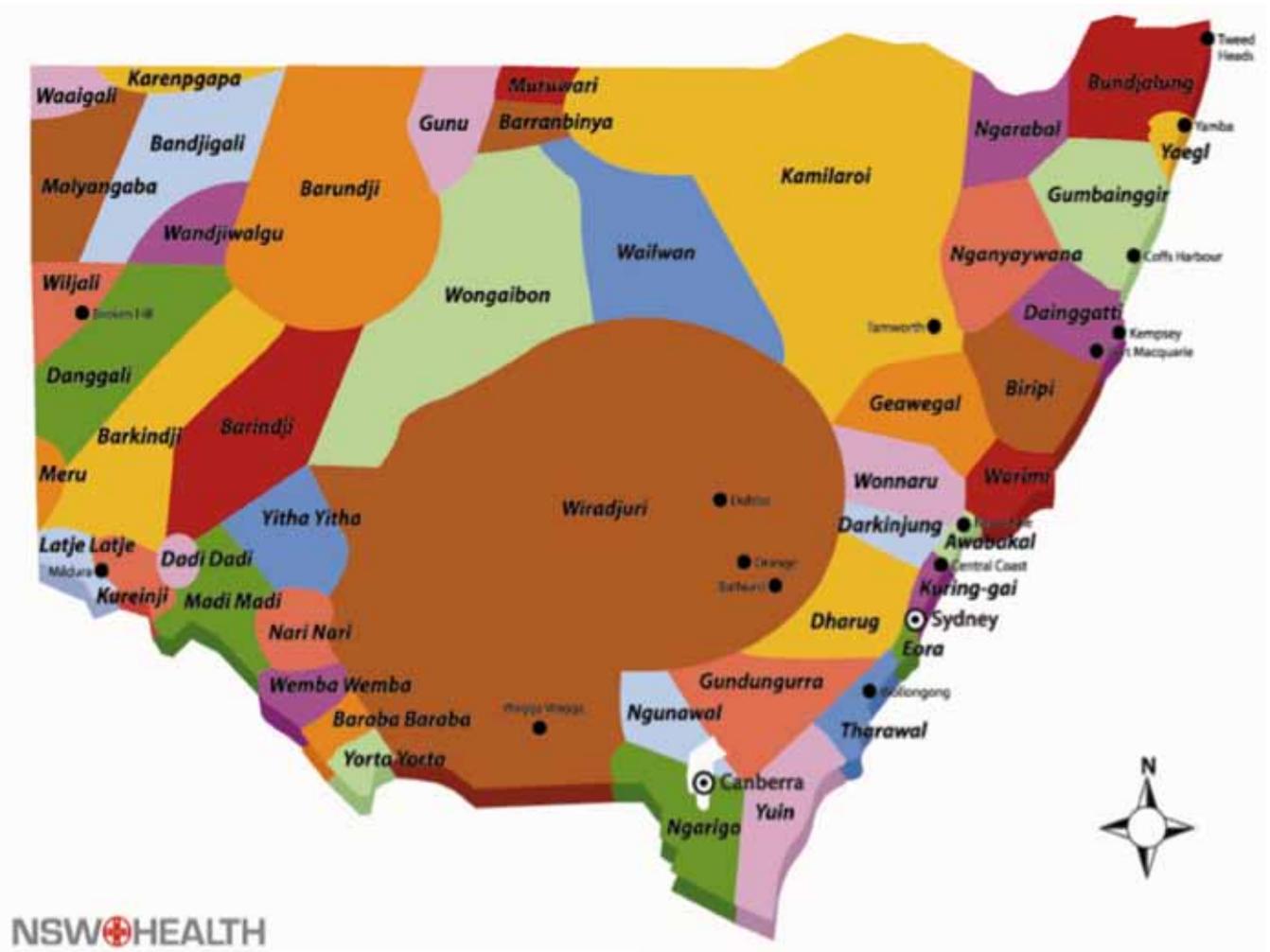
Incorporating a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgment of Country into official meetings and events recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and custodians of their land. Ceremonies and protocols are a fundamental part of Aboriginal culture. Valuing and respecting appropriate Aboriginal ceremony are pertinent to increasing the understanding and mutual respect for cultural practices by both Aboriginal Australians and the wider community. Appropriate cultural engagement seeks to observe protocols and the sharing of cultural practices. Improving relationships between the local Aboriginal community and the broader community through ceremony, protocols and the process of collaborative negotiation is essential.

Who To Ask

Event organisers need to ensure that the traditional owners are involved in the Welcome to Country ceremony. The Welcome to Country is a right of the local traditional owners and not a privilege; it is not about political correctness or tokenism.

Not all Aboriginal people can perform a Welcome to Country, as it must be given by an appropriate person such as a recognised Elder within the local community. In some parts of the State there are disputes about who the traditional custodians are. This should be recognised as an effect of dispossession where people have been dislocated from their land and have returned to an area where they may not be accepted by some as traditional custodians.

It is advisable to seek advice from more than one source when establishing the local traditional owners. Advice can be sought from groups that may include Local Aboriginal Land Councils, community members or Aboriginal organisations.



Cultural protocols and ceremonies

CLCNSW recognises and acknowledges that there are a significant number of Aboriginal ceremonies and/or protocols that necessitate respect. Some are sensitive and not discussed or shared with the broader community.

These can include:

- Knowledge that is specific to gender, commonly known as “Women’s Business” or “Men’s Business”.
- Not mentioning the name of a deceased Aboriginal person or showing photographic images of a deceased person unless agreed to by the relevant family.
- Initiation ceremonies.
- The period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal people referred to as “Sorry Business”.

These practices may apply in some areas but not in all parts of New South Wales. If you are unsure whether a group or individual may be sensitive about an issue or issues of protocol or ceremony you can check with your CLC Aboriginal staff, or contact the local Aboriginal Land Council or local Aboriginal organisations. In most cases people will acknowledge if you are being intrusive and/ or if they are not permitted to talk to you about the protocol or ceremony because of age, gender or Clan/Tribal group issues. If in any doubt about these types of issues always ask.

Aboriginal languages of NSW

Source: Tindale, Norman Barnett, *‘Aboriginal Tribes of Australia’ Catalog & Maps (1974)*. http://samuseum.sa.gov.au/index.php?option=com_content&Itemid=67&catid=82&id=327&view=article

FOR ADVICE or to find out your local Aboriginal Land Council, you can contact the NSW Aboriginal Land Council on:

T (02) 9689 4444

W www.alc.org.au

IF YOU WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION about the CLCNSW *Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country*, please contact:

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