



EVENTS • DESIGN • UNITY

# Indigenous Protocols at Events

The acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at public events is a sign of respect to the traditional custodians of this land. Indigenous cultural protocols at events are in no way about ticking a box; the ceremonies are an important symbol of recognition, connecting with our First Nations people, healing relationships, promoting awareness and acknowledging the history of our country's Indigenous culture.

The following protocols will assist in appropriately and respectfully recognising Indigenous custodianship of country at your Australian events.

## Why are Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country important?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced a long history of exclusion from Australian history books, the Australian flag, the national anthem, the education system, and for many years, Australian democracy. This history of dispossession and colonisation lies at the heart of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians today. Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in events is one step towards ending the exclusion and promotes an ongoing connection with Indigenous peoples.

1. Welcome to Country
2. Smoking Ceremonies
3. Acknowledgement of Country
4. Acknowledging local sites of Significance

## **1. WELCOME TO COUNTRY**

### **What is a Welcome to Country Ceremony?**

The modern-day Welcome to Country is a ceremony performed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born in the area on which the event is being held; usually by an Elder or someone an Elder has granted permission to deliver the Welcome. The ceremony welcomes visitors to the land or sea on which they stand, often providing historical and cultural information. It may involve dance, song, and/or comedy. Every Welcome to Country is unique depending on the person delivering it.

Historically, Welcome to Country was part of Aboriginal culture in Australia for tens of thousands of years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have clearly defined territories and boundaries separating their Country from that of other language groups. These areas are still observed by Indigenous groups today. Traditional protocols required visitors to seek permission to enter another language group's Country. When permission was provided, visitors were granted safe passage and were to respect and uphold the cultural protocols of that land.

Welcome to Country traditionally could take several hours or days and involve a range of ceremonies. While these protocols have been adapted to suit our contemporary context, the traditional practice of welcoming visitors to Country and offering safe passage remains in place today.

### **Who should the MC introduce first; the VIP guests or the Welcome to Country Elder?**

We've placed this question upfront as it's something that trips up many event planners. Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country should occur FIRST in the order of proceedings. It is important to acknowledge connection to the land and pay our respects. Following Acknowledgement or Welcome, it is advised the MC officially welcomes the VIP guests and proceeds with the event program.

### **When does it occur?**

A Welcome to Country Ceremony should be the first item on the program, performed at the opening of the event. This pays respect to the Elders and Traditional Owners of the land on which the event is taking place.

### **How long should it go for?**

Every Elder or representative will run a Welcome to Country differently, so it is important to discuss allocating a suitable timeframe with them. Whilst the time allocated for Welcome to Country should be reasonable in the context of the overall event, as the event organiser, it is important to adjust and be flexible if it runs shorter or longer.

## Who performs a Welcome to Country?

The Welcome to Country can only be performed by a traditional custodian of the land or waters where the event is taking place. As the event organiser, seek advice from multiple sources when identifying the local traditional custodians, including:

- Regional Aboriginal education teams
- Local Aboriginal community representatives
- Native Title representative bodies
- Local Aboriginal organisations

A Welcome to Country may vary from a single speech, to traditional dance and smoking ceremonies. Other performances may include or be a combination of a:

- Traditional Welcoming Song
- Traditional dance
- Didgeridoo performance
- Smoking Ceremony

The Elder may use symbols and explain the significance of these during the ceremony.

## How should you address an Indigenous representative?

Event organisers should always ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people how they wish to be addressed. Only use the terms 'aunty' or 'uncle' if you've been invited to do so. When in doubt, acknowledge them as Elders.

The speaker following the Welcome to Country is required to acknowledge the traditional custodians, including the person who delivered the Welcome to Country. The following is an example response that can be used:

*"Thank you [name of representative] for welcoming us today. I respectfully acknowledge Traditional Custodians of this land on which we are meeting, the [traditional name/s] people and pay my respects to Elders past and present."*

## Do I need to provide any information to the person performing the ceremony?

In addition to a run sheet or brief order of proceedings, the event planner should provide the traditional custodians with the background about the organisation, explain the event purpose and provide information about a theme as the Indigenous representative may draw upon this in the Welcome to Country.

Welcome to Country may be conducted in English or the group's traditional language. Ensure you request the ceremony to be translated into English, so the audience understands the message.

### Do I need to pay a fee for Welcome to Country?

Since a Welcome to Country is a cultural protocol based on the provision of intellectual property, a fee for the services applies. The fee will depend on the type of Welcome to Country provided (for example, a speech, song or dance), and is negotiated between the Aboriginal Custodians and the event organiser.

### Should the Indigenous representative be invited to stay for the duration of the event?

It's always appropriate to invite the Indigenous representative to take part in the rest of the event. Ensure you delegate a staff member to ensure they are looked after throughout the event. If it is a seated event, the Elder or representative should be seated alongside other dignitaries and speakers at the event. Be sure to clarify at the time of booking if they will be staying, or leaving right after they deliver the Welcome.

### Where do you display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags?

The event organiser should ensure that the presenter of the Welcome to Country can display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags where they deliver the speech, if they would like to. Make sure you abide by the Australian National Flag Protocols when displaying the flags at your event. In WA, the flags should be placed left to right from the perspective of the audience: The Australian flag, the Western Australian flag, the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag.

### How can I organise a Welcome to Country?

Contact your local Aboriginal Land Council or Native Title representative body to organise a Welcome to Country by a Traditional Owner or representative. Below, we have listed some to contact:

State;	Land Council/Representative Body
WA	South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council
ACT	United Elders Ngunnawal Council
NSW	Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council
NT	Central Land Council or Northern Land Council
QLD	Queensland South Native Title Services
TAS	Tasmanian Aboriginal Land and Sea Council
VIC	Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council

Ensure you contact and organise who will perform Welcome to Country in the early stages of planning the event.

## **2. SMOKING CEREMONIES**

### **What is a Smoking Ceremony?**

The Smoking Ceremony is recognition of starting 'afresh' and acknowledging past and future Elders and community members. It aims to spiritually cleanse the space in which the ceremony takes place, to allow peace and recognise the importance of meeting. Smoking ceremonies are usually performed on special occasions or at major events and places of spiritual significance.

The person performing the Smoking Ceremony will be introduced to provide a brief explanation of what the ceremony involves and how it will be done. It can be a small fire directly on the land with green eucalyptus leaves laid on top to create smoke. Alternatively, the Smoking Ceremony can be a fire in a metal pail, which is filled with various leaves to create the smoke. Attendees can be invited to walk through the smoke.

### **Who can perform the Smoking Ceremony?**

Indigenous Elders conduct the Smoking Ceremony at events.

### **When does it occur?**

The Smoking Ceremony is conducted alongside the Welcome to Country at the opening of an event.

## **3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

### **What is an Acknowledgement of Country?**

An Acknowledgement of Country is an alternative to a Welcome to Country, the main difference being it can be performed by an Indigenous or non-Indigenous person. It demonstrates respect for Aboriginal cultures and heritage by acknowledging the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Traditional Owners of the land.

### **Should we hold a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country?**

As a general rule, if people are travelling from areas outside the location of the event, you should have a Welcome to Country. It is particularly important if Indigenous people are in attendance, as the tradition for a Welcome is to provide safety while on someone else's country. If you are unable to book an Elder born in the region you are hosting the event, an Acknowledgement is an option.

### When does it occur?

Always at the beginning of the event.

### Who can perform the Acknowledgement of Country?

Anyone! You can be any person, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal to perform the Acknowledgement of Country.

### What do I say for The Acknowledgement of Country?

The first speaker should acknowledge all Elders, past and present. Whilst there is no set phrasing for an Acknowledgement of Country, below is an example of how you could word the Acknowledgement of Country:

*"I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, and pay respect to all Elders, past, present and future."*

There are over 500 Aboriginal language groups across Australia, and 90 within Western Australia alone. It is important to correctly address the Indigenous nation where the event is taking place. These are the Traditional Custodians in metropolitan areas in Australia:

- Perth: Wadjuk people of the Nyoongar Country
- Adelaide: Kurna peoples
- Brisbane: Turrbal peoples
- Canberra: Ngunnawal, Ngambri and the Ngarigu peoples
- Darwin: Larrakia peoples
- Hobart: Muwinina peoples
- Melbourne: Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation
- Sydney: Gadigal people of the Eora Nation

If you are unsure of the name of the Traditional Custodians in the area where you are speaking, contact your local Traditional Owners for more information. If you are unable to find this information, it is best to leave it out to prevent offending the Traditional Custodians. Example:

*"I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land we meet on today and pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging."*

## 4. ACKNOWLEDGING LOCAL SITES OF SIGNIFICANCE

### What is the Acknowledgement of Local Sites of Significance?

The first speaker at the event will recognise cultural or historical sites of significance in the vicinity of the meeting.

### When do I use it?

Acknowledging Local Sites of Significance only takes place when an event is held near a significant site. The speaker will perform this following the Acknowledgement of Country.

## ABOUT KNOWN ASSOCIATES AUSTRALIA



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100% Aboriginally owned, Known Associates Australia is a boutique Event Management company headed up by husband and wife team, Troy and Tamara Cook. Specialising in event and activation production, graphic design and digital marketing, Known Associates Australia prioritises working with other Indigenous businesses to strengthen inclusivity in the events and marketing industries. Learn more, [here](#).

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