



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols

**Respectful relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will involve an understanding and respect for protocols.**

Ceremonies and protocols are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

By incorporating them into official events we can recognise and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and heritage and demonstrate recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's unique position in Australian society.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols differ between communities and regions, and you should not rely on your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees to be responsible for ensuring protocols are met. For example, do not expect that your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees will perform an Acknowledgment of Country at every meeting or that they will have the authority to perform a Welcome to Country. If unsure whether you are following protocols it is recommended to check in with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person or organisation for advice.

## **Acknowledgment of Country and Elders**

An Acknowledgement of Country, also known as Acknowledgement of Traditional

Owners, can be done by anyone and is a way of showing awareness of, and respect for, the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners of the land on which a meeting or event is being held. For a non-Aboriginal person, non-Torres Strait Islander person or an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person who is not a descendant of that tribal land, acknowledging the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Owners is a mark of respect. It is also respectful to acknowledge Elders past and present.

Your Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners of the land implies:

- your appreciation of the importance of the land to local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- your commitment to work in partnership with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to protect the land and the physical traces of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture and history, such as sacred burial sites, art and ceremonial grounds
- your recognition of the unique position the land holds for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- your understanding of the struggle and pain that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have endured over centuries in being removed from their land.

Example of an Acknowledgement of Country:

"I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Land we are meeting on today; the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people here today."

## Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is not the same as an Acknowledgement of Country. It provides an opportunity for the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to welcome you to their country. At the opening of a new building or new program, you may want to welcome those attending. However, it is the right of local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to first welcome you to their land. The Welcome to Country values Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and recognises the ancestral spirits who created the boundaries and lands, which allow safe passage to visitors.

The Welcome to Country has been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways for thousands of years. It can only be performed by an Elder or respected person who is

from the local clan and been given permission to do so.

There are many ways that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person may perform a 'Welcome to Country'. It may consist of a single speech, or include a performance (a song, dance, didgeridoo solo etc.), a smoking or cleansing ceremony—or a combination of these. Ceremonies and practices reflect the vibrant nature of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture. By supporting their inclusion, you will be introducing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture to a group of people who otherwise may not have enjoyed such experiences.

## **Smoking Ceremonies**

A smoking ceremony is an ancient custom among some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander tribes that involves smouldering various native plants to produce smoke which has cleansing properties and the ability to ward off bad spirits, and are still performed today. They are also used in the context of healing, spiritual renewal and strengthening by some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander healing practitioners. This ceremony is a ritual of purification and unity and is undertaken by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person with specialised cultural knowledge. Given the significant nature of the ceremony, it is usually only performed at events regarded as appropriate by the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community.

## **Fees for Cultural Services**

In providing cultural services such as 'Welcome to Country,' artistic performances and ceremonies, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are using their own time and intellectual property. For this reason, it is appropriate that people are offered payment and appropriate remuneration for their services. Appropriate payment and remuneration should be negotiated, considering speaker fees, travel to and from the event as well as the public profile nature of the event.

## **Community Engagement and Partnerships**

A partnership with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community is much more than simply writing a memorandum of understanding or a protocol, calling something a partnership, or including self-determination as an organisational value. Engagement policies and protocols should respect the role of different Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community groups and outline the basis of the relationship. They may outline consultative processes or establish mechanisms for engagement such as an advisory committee to your organisation and should be developed in consultation with the

relevant Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community and where possible seek the guidance and advice of the Local Aboriginal Network (LAN).

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) is underpinned by self-determination and is driven by the following 11 self-determination guiding principles, which set the minimum standard for all work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians:

1. **Human rights:** Self-determination initiatives honour the norms set out in UNDRIP and Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.
2. **Cultural integrity:** As First Nations peoples, the rich, thriving cultures, knowledge and diverse experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, including where they fit with family, community and society, will be recognised, valued, heard and celebrated.
3. **Commitment:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination will be advanced and embedded through planned action that is endorsed by, and accountable to, all parties.
4. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise:** Government and agencies will seek out, value and embed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture, knowledge, expertise and diverse perspectives in policies and practice.
5. **Partnerships:** Partnerships will advance Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander autonomy through equitable participation, shared authority and decision-making, and will be underpinned by cultural integrity.
6. **Investment:** Investment to support self-determination will be sustainable, flexible and appropriate to strengthen Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations and participation, including around economic participation, economic independence and building wealth.
7. **Decision-making:** Decision-makers will respect the right to free, prior and informed consent and individual choice and will prioritise the transfer of decision-making power to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in areas that impact their communities.
8. **Empowerment:** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people will have autonomy and participation in the development, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of legislation, policies and programs that impact their communities.
9. **Cultural safety:** Programs and services accessed by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people will be inclusive, respectful, responsive and relevant, and informed by culturally safe practice frameworks.
10. **Equity:** Systemic and structural racism, discrimination and unconscious bias and other barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination will be actively identified and eliminated.
11. **Accountability:** All parties responsible for delivering outcomes involving Aboriginal

and/or Torres Strait Islander people will be held accountable and subject to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-led, independent and transparent oversight.<sup>2</sup>

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## Questions for managers and workplaces in following cultural protocols:

- Do you begin organisational meetings and community forums with an Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners?
- Do you ask Elders from the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community to conduct a Welcome to Country to begin any ceremony to mark the opening of premises, new programs or major events and do you provide payment for the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community to perform this ceremony for your organisation?
- If unsure about whether you are following the correct protocols do you ask for advice from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?
- Are you aware when working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities/organisations that creating relationships and partnerships takes time?
- Do you provide a fee-for-service when seeking cultural advice/support from Elders and Aboriginal community controlled organisations?

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## Useful links and other information



Further information on [Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Traditional Owners](#); steps to determine which is required; tips on what to say during an Acknowledgement; and tips on organising a Welcome to Country

[Map of Victorian Traditional Owners](#)

(1) [SNAICC – Cultural Protocols](#)

(2) [Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023](#)