



Government of Western Australia
Department of Health
Aboriginal Health

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country

Protocols for the
WA health system





Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to provide guidance for WA health system employees to observe when acknowledging Traditional Owners of Country.

This policy provides protocols for a range of contexts, including:

- Verbal Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country at meetings.
- Written Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country, such as within publications and email footers.
- Physical display acknowledging Traditional Owners of Country, such as building plaques.
- Arrangement of a Welcome to Country by Traditional Owners for a particular occasion.

Background

Cultural significance

The term “Country” is used by Aboriginal people to describe the lands, waterways, and seas to which they have cultural and ancestral connection.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia is made up of hundreds of distinct language groups or nations, each with their own cultural practices and profound connection to Country. The wealth of cultural knowledge held by Traditional Owners is tied to place - to Country.

Connection to Country is central to Aboriginal peoples’ cultural identity, spirituality, and social and emotional wellbeing. For millennia Aboriginal peoples have cared for Country, nurtured biodiversity, and maintained pristine natural environments, to the benefit of all Australians.

Protocols for observing Traditional Ownership of Country have been in practice well before colonisation. For thousands of years, these protocols have been used as a mechanism to enable different groups to travel respectfully, and therefore safely, through each other’s Country. This practice carries deep cultural significance to Aboriginal people and continues to be expressed in traditional and contemporary ways.

Acknowledging Traditional Owners of Country comes with a responsibility to respect the cultural significance of the protocol to Aboriginal people.

Indigenous human rights

When acknowledging Traditional Owners of Country, it is important to understand the unique position of Aboriginal people through a rights-based lens.

Following a pattern replicated by settler-colonies globally, the Australian state sought to erase Aboriginal peoples as distinct political collectives with inherent sovereign rights. Recognition of Indigenous land ownership prior to colonisation is the foundational truth that underpins the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country by government agencies has arisen from Aboriginal-led advocacy, in the pursuit of the Indigenous right to preserve sovereign cultural identity and traditional customs.

Adapting the intent of an Acknowledgement of Country, for broader purposes is not appropriate. For example, modification of an Acknowledgement of Country to recognise other groups, disregards traditional Aboriginal cultural protocols, minimises Indigenous human rights and waters down the pursuit of social justice and better health for Aboriginal people.



Whose Country am I on?

When acknowledging Traditional Owners of Country, it is important to know who the Traditional Owners are of the land upon which an event is taking place.

In some locations across Western Australia the Traditional Owners may be well-known, however for some locations further exploration and engagement may be required.

There are resources that can assist, such the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

For further information visit <http://aiatsis.gov.au/whose-country>.

[Map of Indigenous Australia | AIATSIS](#)

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country is a way that the wider community can demonstrate respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and can be delivered by any individual, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, participating in an occasion of any kind.

Acknowledging Traditional Owners of the land upon which an occasion occurs, or structure is built, illustrates appreciation for traditional Aboriginal custom and the deep connection to Country and place, forged over thousands of years.

The following examples of Acknowledgements can be used as reference points/examples to guide an Acknowledgement of Country delivery.

Verbal delivery

It is expected that workplace meetings, training, and other occasions where attendees are gathered in-person, begin with acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land upon which they are gathered. The following text may be used:

"I wish to acknowledge the [traditional name] people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I pay respect to the [traditional name] Elders both past and present. It is a privilege to be meeting on [traditional name] Country."

For virtual meetings, it is appropriate for attendees to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which they are tuning in from. The following text may be used:

"I would like to acknowledge the [traditional name] people as the Traditional Owners of the land which I work upon. I pay respect to the [traditional name] Elders both past and present. It is a privilege to be tuning in from [traditional name] Country. Extending my acknowledgement to those Traditional Owners whose land that you all may gather from."



Physical display

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country through the display of plaques and artwork, as part of the interior or exterior of WA health system buildings, is encouraged. Display of visible Acknowledgements contributes to creating culturally welcoming environments for Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal health consumers.

For physical Acknowledgements, it is protocol to acknowledge Traditional Owners of the land upon which the building sits. The following text may be used:

“[WA Health Entity] acknowledges the [traditional name] people as the Traditional Owners of the land which we work upon. We value the wisdom of [traditional name] Elders both past and present and pay respect to the [traditional name] community.”

Publications

An Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners of Country should appear on the inside cover or immediately after the contents page.

For local publications with specific relevance to a particular region or is designed for locally based employees or health consumers, it is respectful to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which the publication will be distributed. The following text may be used:

“[WA Health Entity] acknowledges the [traditional name] people as the Traditional Owners of the land we work on. We value the wisdom of [traditional name] Elders both past and present and pay respect to the [traditional name] community.”

For publications with WA health system-wide relevance and state-wide distribution, it is acceptable to acknowledge all Aboriginal groups across WA. The following standard text may be used:

“The WA health system acknowledges the Aboriginal people of the many traditional lands and language groups of Western Australia. It acknowledges the wisdom of Aboriginal Elders both past and present and pays respect to Aboriginal communities of today.”

Email footers

WA health system employees may wish to acknowledge Traditional Owners of Country as part of their email signature block. It is acceptable for employees to demonstrate respect for Traditional Owners of the lands on which they work in this way. The following text may be used:

“I would like to acknowledge the [traditional name] people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which I work. I value the wisdom of [traditional name] Elders both past and present and pay respect to the [traditional name] community.”



Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is a cultural practice whereby a Traditional Owner, usually an Elder, welcomes people to their ancestral lands, waterways, or coast – their Country.

Unlike an Acknowledgement of Country which can be delivered by anyone, a Welcome to Country can only be performed by a Traditional Owner, usually an Elder, with ancestral ties to the land upon which an event takes place.

When to arrange a Welcome to Country by Traditional Owners

Welcome to Country is required at all major official events. This includes circumstances whereby invitees external to the WA health system are present, such as members of the public, other government agencies, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Examples of WA health system events in this category could include, but are not limited to:

- conferences and forums
- commemorations
- openings of new hospital wards or other facilities
- major launches of health frameworks, policies, and programs
- events held to observe of Aboriginal dates of significance.

In addition to a Welcome, other ceremonies or practices may also be incorporated, such as smoking ceremonies, traditional dances, and performances. This may be negotiated.

Who to ask?

An appropriate person to provide a Welcome to Country, usually an Elder, must be locally recognised to have ancestral ties to the particular area the Welcome is planned to occur upon.

Organisers need to seek cultural lens advice at the outset of planning. In the first instance organisers should use existing contacts within their local Aboriginal community to identify appropriate people to perform the Welcome. If in doubt, the Communications team or Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit within your Health Service or the Department may provide advice.

Engaging Traditional Owners to deliver a Welcome involves allowing time for decision-making and discussion among Traditional Owners. This can take some time and should be factored into the Welcome planning process.

It is respectful to address Elders with their preferred title. Many Elders are referred to by their community as “Nan”, “Pop”, “Uncle” or “Aunty” preceding their name. As mentioned above, sometimes a Traditional Owner engaged to welcome attendees may not necessarily be an Elder and may wish to be addressed by a different title, or by no title at all. It is always best to ask what their preferred title is, and how they prefer to be addressed by the broader public.

Event organisers need to provide those delivering a Welcome with information on the theme and purpose of the event. Since Welcomes are usually performed by Elders, it is important to consider how best to engage and support them to prepare for the Welcome, travel to the venue, feel comfortable in attendance, and receive timely payment.

If the Traditional Owner engaged to perform a Welcome to Country does not have an Australian Business Number, a Statement of Supplier form can be completed to enable their payment.



Need further advice?

If you require further guidance on engaging an Elder or Traditional Owner to deliver a Welcome to Country, visit your Health Service information hub to find your local Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit contacts:

Child and Adolescent Health Service
Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit
[CAHS Aboriginal Health intranet page](#)

East Metropolitan Health Service
Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit
[EMHS Aboriginal Health intranet page](#)

North Metropolitan Health Service
Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit
[NMHS Aboriginal Health intranet page](#)

South Metropolitan Health Service
Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit
[SMHS Aboriginal Health intranet page](#)

WA Country Health Service
Aboriginal Health Strategy Unit
[WACHS Aboriginal Health intranet page](#)

Department of Health
Aboriginal Health Policy Directorate
[DoH Aboriginal Health intranet page](#)

Response to Welcome to Country

It is necessary for the speaker, who follows immediately after the Welcome, to provide a response. Part of the response must acknowledge the person who delivered the Welcome. The following text may be used in response to the traditional Welcome to Country:

“My sincere thanks to [title (Nan/Pop/Uncle/Aunty) name] for welcoming us to Country. I wish to acknowledge [traditional name] people as the Traditional Owners of this land on which we meet today and pay my respect to their Elders past and present. It is a privilege to be here on [traditional] Country.”



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in alternative formats on request for
a person with a disability.

