

Guiding principles for working alongside First Nations people

September 2024



Acknowledgement of Country

NCOSS respectfully acknowledges the sovereign Custodians of Gadigal Country and pay our respects to Elders, past and present. We acknowledge the rich cultures, customs and continued survival of First Nations peoples on Gadigal Country, and on the many diverse First Nations lands and waters across NSW.

We acknowledge the spirit of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and accept the invitation to walk with First Nations peoples in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

About the artist

Our Report design draws on elements of the work we commissioned for our Reflect Reconciliation Plan, launched in June 2022. The work, by Karlie Stewart, a talented Wandi Wandian woman from Yuin Country on the South Coast of NSW, is titled One Step of Many More. Karlie is also Program Manager, Aboriginal Healing with NCOSS member organisation, Weave, a Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Wollongong, and a member of NCOSS' First Nations Partners and Advisors Group, which is helping to guide the implementation of our RAP.

About NCOSS

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is the peak body for non-government organisations in the health and community services sector in NSW. NCOSS works to progress social justice and shape positive change toward a NSW free from inequality and disadvantage. We are an independent voice advocating for the wellbeing of NSW communities. At NCOSS, we believe that a diverse, well-resourced and knowledgeable social service sector is fundamental to reducing economic and social inequality.

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Purpose

NCOSS has developed mutually respectful relationships with First Nations individuals, organisations, and communities over many years, through entering into joint initiatives, supporting the advocacy and policy positions of First Nations bodies, and showing a deep respect within NCOSS for the unique and valuable contribution of First Nations peoples to Australia.

Consistent with the principle of self-determination, NCOSS is committed to listening to, learning from, and walking alongside First Nations peoples, working collaboratively with their leaders, key bodies and communities to help put a spotlight on the issues they have identified as impeding the advancement of better life outcomes for First Nations peoples in NSW.

NCOSS believes that it is critical that culture is understood, acknowledged and appropriately embedded in our work to show respect for and build on these strong, equal partnerships.

The aim of these guiding principles is to:

- help improve the understanding of culture by NCOSS staff
- assist NCOSS staff to understand how they should appropriately embed culture in their work, and
- to inform how NCOSS communicates and engages with local First Nations communities.

These guiding principles are drawn from a number of published cultural protocols online.¹

NCOSS would like to thank the members of its Partners and Advisors Group who supported the development of this document. These principles were approved by this group in September 2024.



NCOSS staff at a NAIDOC Week event in 2024.

[1] Liverpool City Council First Nations Cultural Protocols accessed [here](#).
Oxfam Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols accessed [here](#).
St Vincent de Paul Society NSW Cultural Protocols accessed [here](#).
Arts North West Cultural protocols Yinaar Project accessed [here](#).
Macquarie University Aboriginal Cultural Protocols accessed [here](#).

Guiding Principles

Observing First Nations cultural protocols demonstrates respect for the culture, traditions, history and diversity of the First Nations peoples and communities living in NSW. All NCOSS staff must read this document and use it as a guide for their policy and community work, interactions and communication. NCOSS encourages reflection on these principles and hope that they will strengthen working relationships between the organisation and its First Nations partners.

Cultural protocols describe the historical and current customs, tradition and accepted codes of behaviour of a specific cultural group. Cultural practices, protocols and principles can change over time. Additionally, First Nations communities across NSW have unique identities, perspectives and traditions. Therefore, the protocols described in this document may also change and staff should take into account their local context when using them. NCOSS commits to continually reflect on these guiding principles and ensure that they are updated in a timely manner.



Members of the PAG at the launch of the NCOSS Reconciliation Action Plan in 2022.

Terminology

The term First Nations recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the sovereign people of this land.

It acknowledges the distinct culture and customs in the many diverse nations across NSW. NCOSS recognises the three 'working criteria' that are generally considered necessary for confirmation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage.

These are:

- are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- are accepted by the community in which they live.

While it is important to check which term is preferred by a particular community, and when it is appropriate to use each term, NCOSS recommends the use of the terms 'First Nations' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in its communications. When using the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', it should always be spelt out in full and not shortened to its acronym 'ATSI'. The letters 'A' for Aboriginal and capitals 'T', 'S' and 'I' for Torres Strait Islander should always be capitalised.

This map, created by Reconciliation NSW, represents the Aboriginal nations and languages in NSW. It is important to note that the information on which the map is based is contested and may not be agreed to by some traditional custodians.

Traditional Custodians

'Traditional Custodians' is the term used to describe the original First Nations people who inhabited an area. Traditional Custodians today are descendants of the original inhabitants and have ongoing spiritual and cultural ties to the land and waterways where their ancestors lived.

It is important to find out the name of the particular group/s of local First Nations people that are the Traditional Custodians of the land, particularly when an event is held on that land and a 'Welcome to Country' and/or 'Acknowledgement of Country' is planned.

Whether a Welcome or an Acknowledgement is given is determined by the significance of the event.

Sources of information about traditional owners include local First Nations organisations including tribal corporations, local Elders groups, and local Aboriginal Land Councils.

As the cultural authority for some areas is contested it is important to do some research before approaching any particular organisation for a Welcome to Country. It is also important to ensure that the person giving the Welcome is an Elder from the Country in question.

For the NCOSS head office, the Gadigal People are the Traditional Custodians of the land.

Welcome to Country

Welcome to Country is delivered by Traditional Owners to welcome visitors to their Country. Welcome to Country occurs at the beginning of a significant event and can take many forms including singing, dancing, smoking ceremonies, and/or a speech.

As noted above the cultural authority for some areas is contested and it is important to do some research before approaching any particular organisation for a Welcome to Country. It is important to ensure that the person giving the Welcome is an Elder from the Country the event is being held on.

Acknowledgement of Country

It is a sign of respect to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land at meetings, gatherings and events. It reminds us that every day we live, work, and dream on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands.

An Acknowledgement of Country can be said by any person and is given at the beginning of the proceedings. NCOSS staff are encouraged to learn about the Countries they work on and to write their own Acknowledgement of Country.

An Acknowledgement of Country should:

- identify the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters from which you are speaking

- note that sovereignty of the land has never been ceded
- pay respects to Elders past and present
- pay respects to First Nations people attending the event or meeting.

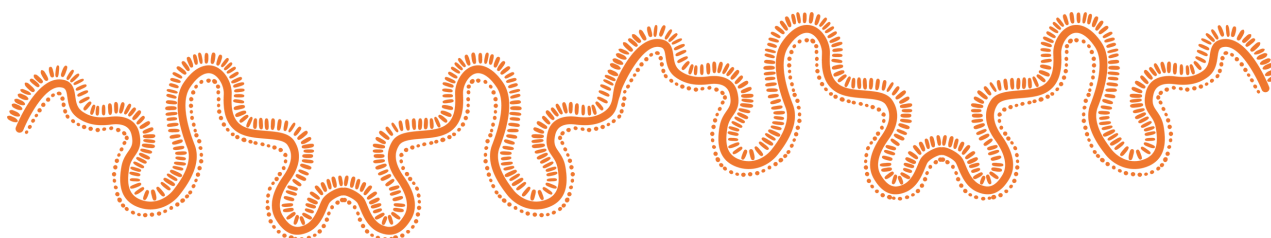
For example suggested wording for in person events could include:

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians, (insert name) of the unceded land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present, and pay my respects to First Nations people/colleagues here today.

Suggested wording for online events could include:

I acknowledge that I am hosting/recording this meeting/webinar from the unceded lands of the (insert Traditional Custodians name). I also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the various lands on which you all work today and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in this meeting/webinar.

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



Other important protocols to note

Elders

Elders are custodians of knowledge. They are chosen and accepted by their own communities and are highly respected. While many Elders use 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' before their names, you cannot assume they would like you to refer to them as that. It is best to ask them what they would like to be called.

Gender Protocols

First Nations communities still regard some information as specific and sacred to either men or women. They are referred to as men's and women's business and recorded in a way that only men or only women can access it. It is recommended that NCOSS staff seek advice from First Nations partners about when they are likely to arise and how to manage such issues.

Smoking Ceremonies

Smoking Ceremonies are undertaken in First Nations communities in order to cleanse a space. It is a purification ritual and is always undertaken by a First Nations person with specialised cultural knowledge. If you are planning to have a Smoking Ceremony conducted at your event you will need to plan ahead. Contact the appropriate cultural authority to organise the ceremony.

Representation of deceased people

In many First Nations communities, the reproduction of a deceased person's name and/ or image is offensive. For some nations, mentioning a deceased person can be seen to be disturbing them. NCOSS staff should ensure that the any stories or images used abide by this protocol. Should there be a circumstance where a name, story or image of a deceased person needs to be included in material, the following message must be displayed:

"First Nations people should be aware that this document/ website may contain images or names of people who have since passed away."



Ownership, representation, cultural and intellectual property

First Nations people should be recognised as the owners of their stories, language, songs, dance and, knowledge. Any access to and use of Aboriginal cultural information requires permission from relevant individuals or organisations.

Getting permission

Getting permission is essential before starting work on any project that has an impact directly on First Nations communities. It involves forming strong partnerships with First Nations organisations. They can advise of the correct protocol for gaining consent including if you should be asking Elders for permission. Permission may be refused if the project relates to issues that are sacred or taboo, related to a death custom, or are specifically women's or men's business.

When seeking permission from First Nations people, NCOSS staff should explicitly state the purpose of the work and how their stories will be shared.

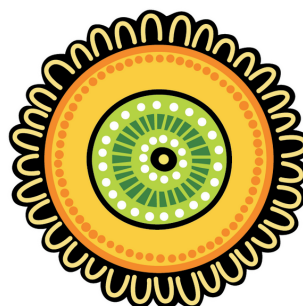
Collaboration with First Nations people

NCOSS is committed to listening to, learning from and walking alongside First Nations peoples, and working collaboratively with their leaders, key bodies and communities. Collaboration with First Nations communities is an important part of this journey.

Observing appropriate protocols when working with First Nations people and communities is critical to establishing positive and respectful relationships.

Projects involving First Nations people, individuals and communities should always directly involve them in both the design and delivery stages. For more detailed information see the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' [Code of Ethics](#).

NCOSS encourages its staff to include the perspectives of First Nations people on all issues that are important to First Nations communities. First Nations people should be given credit and acknowledgement of their contributions to NCOSS materials. Consultation should ensure that the material protects confidential, personal and/ or sensitive information and does not reinforce negative stereotypes. NCOSS staff should also have conversations about how material can be distributed.



Significant Dates

Invasion/ Survival Day (26 January)

For many First Nations people, 26 January is recognised as Invasion Day or Survival Day. For many First Nations people the day represented the invasion of country which came with massacres, land theft, stolen children and widespread oppression at the hands of white colonising forces. It is a day that many First Nations people and allies mourn this injustice and loss.

The celebration of January 26 can evoke strong responses and emotions, making it a critical time to demonstrate allyship by promoting truth-telling, understanding, respect, healing, and reconciliation.

National Close the Gap Day (Third Thursday of March)

This day is an opportunity for schools, business and communities around Australia to stand with First Nations people in demanding health equality for all. The Close the Gap campaign arose in response to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Social Justice Report (2005). The report examines existing commitments and processes for addressing the health inequality experienced by First Nations people, and sets out a human rights framework for achieving such equality within a generation.

While the dates below are significant for all First Nations communities, each community will have different priorities for action and it is important to ascertain these when marking the day's importance.

National Sorry Day (26 May)

National Sorry Day is an annual event to remember and acknowledge the mistreatment of the First Nations people who were forcibly removed from their families and communities, which is now known as 'The Stolen Generations'. The first National Sorry Day was held on 26 May 1998, one year after the Bringing Them Home report was tabled in Parliament. The Bringing Them Home report is a result of a Government Inquiry into the past policies which caused children to be removed from their families and communities.

Today, First Nations children in NSW are still more likely to be removed from their families. Sorry Day asks us to acknowledge the Stolen Generations, and in doing so, reminds us that historical injustice is still an ongoing source of intergenerational trauma for First Nations families, communities, and peoples.

National Reconciliation Week (26 May – 3 June)

National Reconciliation Week offers people across Australia the opportunity to focus on reconciliation, to hear about the culture and history of Australia's First Nations people, and to explore new and better ways of meeting challenges in First Nations communities. It is a time to renew commitment to reconciliation and to think about how to help turn around the continuing disadvantage experienced by First Nations Australians.

National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (4 August)

Fourth August was historically used to communally celebrate the birthdays of First Nations children who were taken from their families at a young age, without knowing their birthday. The day is now a major event for First Nations children, families and community organisations.

International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples (9 August)

This day is observed to raise awareness and protect the rights of the world's indigenous population. The day is used to highlight the achievements and contributions that indigenous people make to improve world issues such as environmental protection.

NAIDOC Week (July)

NAIDOC Week celebrations are held across Australia in the first week in July to celebrate and recognise the history, culture and achievements of First Nations people. It is an opportunity for all Australians to learn about First Nations cultures and histories and participate in celebrations of the oldest, continuous living cultures on earth.

Anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (13 September)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted on 13 September 2007 and is the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous peoples. It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples.