Cultural Protocol Advisory Note
Traditional Owner Engagement at Major Civic Events

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Context

This advisory note is provided to clarify Indigenous cultural protocol in the context of major civic events held on Country, particularly where a Welcome to Country has been delivered and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artists are engaged to perform.

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It is offered to support consistent, respectful practice and to assist event staff, councillors, and contractors to distinguish Indigenous cultural protocol from VIP, artist-management, or civic access arrangements.

1. Cultural Authority on Country

Identifying genuine Traditional Owners based on verified family bloodlines and community acceptances is the first step to building relational rapport with the right people.

Traditional Owners hold cultural authority on their Country. This authority operates according to Indigenous law, custom, and relational obligation and exists independently of institutional, civic, or contractual hierarchies.

A Welcome to Country is not a "standalone performance" or symbolic gesture. It establishes a living cultural relationship for the duration of the event and affirms the presence, authority, and responsibilities of Traditional Owners in that space.

2. Indigenous-to-Indigenous Protocol

Where Aboriginal artists are performing on Country, and Traditional Owners are present in a representative capacity, it is culturally appropriate, where circumstances allow, for Indigenous-to-Indigenous acknowledgment or greeting to occur.

This is not a matter of celebrity access, photography, or privilege. It reflects long-standing Indigenous protocol that recognises shared cultural responsibility, respect, and relationship between First Nations peoples of this continent.

3. Distinction from VIP or Artist Access

Indigenous cultural protocol should not be conflated with:

- VIP access arrangements
- Artist-management approval processes
- Backstage or security classifications designed for non-cultural purposes

Where necessary, event organisers should proactively engage with artist management to ensure Indigenous protocol can be accommodated respectfully and without disruption.

4. Consistency with Established Guidance

This position aligns with widely adopted guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts bodies, including:

Australia Council for the Arts

First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts

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Link: https://creative.gov.au/sites/creative-australia/files/documents/2025-04/protocols-for-using-first-nati-5f72716d09f01.pdf

What it supports:

- Recognition of **Traditional Owner authority on Country**
- Indigenous cultural protocol operating **outside institutional hierarchies**
- Importance of **Indigenous-to-Indigenous relationships** in arts and cultural contexts
- Obligation on organisations to respect cultural authority, not just contractual arrangements

Create NSW

Aboriginal Cultural Protocols and Guidelines

Link: https://www.nsw.gov.au/arts-and-culture/engage-nsw-arts-and-culture/resource-hub/aboriginal-arts-and-culture-protocols

What it supports:

- Cultural authority is held by **Traditional Owners**, not institutions
- Protocol applies **before, during, and after events**
- Aboriginal governance and cultural responsibility must be embedded in event planning
- Distinction between **civic process** and **cultural law**

This is particularly strong for NSW local government contexts and aligns squarely with your reference to Council practice.

Local Government NSW

Aboriginal Cultural Protocols for Councils

Link: https://lgnsw.org.au/Public/Public/Policy/Aboriginal-Affairs.aspx
(See especially LGNSW guidance on Welcome to Country and engagement)

What it supports:

- Welcome to Country establishes an **ongoing relationship**, not a ceremonial transaction
- Councils must recognise **Traditional Owners as cultural authorities**
- Protocol extends beyond the stage moment to **how interactions are managed**

Reconciliation Australia

Welcome to Country & Acknowledgement of Country Guidance

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Link: https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/

What it supports:

- Welcome to Country is a practice of **ongoing respect and relationship**
- It is not a performance but recognition of **sovereignty and custodianship**
- Cultural authority continues **after the Welcome is delivered**

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

Official UN link: https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html

What it supports:

he United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which is cited in the City of Parramatta's First Nations Strategy as an overarching accountability measure, supports the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain cultural practices, relationships, and customary law.

Key articles:

- **Article 5** – Right to maintain and strengthen distinct political, legal, social and cultural institutions
- **Article 11** – Right to practice and revitalise cultural traditions and customs
- **Article 18** – Right to participate in decision-making through Indigenous governance structures
- **Article 31** – Right to maintain, control and protect cultural heritage and cultural expressions

These frameworks consistently recognise that Indigenous cultural authority operates alongside, and is not subordinate to, civic or institutional systems.

5. Practical Guidance for Event Staff

To support best practice, it is recommended that staff:

- Prioritise Traditional Owners in cultural interactions on Country
- Recognise that a Welcome to Country establishes an ongoing relational obligation
- Distinguish Indigenous cultural protocol from VIP or contractual access rules
- Where possible, plan Indigenous-to-Indigenous engagement in advance with artist management

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6. Purpose of This Advisory

This note is provided to strengthen consistency, reduce the risk of cultural missteps, and ensure that stated commitments to First Nations respect are reflected in practice, particularly at large-scale public events.

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