BARAMADAGAL DARUG
TRIBAL GOVERNING COUNCIL

CULTURAL PROTOCOL ADVISORY NOTE
TRADITIONAL OWNER WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT PROTOCOL

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Context

This advisory note is provided to clarify Indigenous cultural protocol to assist staff of the local colonial authority (Local Government Council) and broader community members and organisations.

1. Cultural Authority on Country

Identifying genuine Traditional Owners / Custodians based on established family groups and verified bloodlines and community acceptances is the first step to building relational rapport with the right people. It is not the role of non-Aboriginal people to directly ask and question people on this, but if people purporting to be Aboriginal are in paid identified roles, and attempting to fulfil cultural responsibilities in a certain place, then information that can appropriately place them should be disclosed and readily available. Now days it may be appropriate for someone to identify themselves casually, or in unpaid spaces or spaces that do not require cultural knowing and responsibility in terms like: “I’m Darug” “I’m Wiradjuri” “my Mob is from Cairns” with no other verified family names attached to the claim, or known story. However, in spaces where Welcomes are being delivered it is appropriate for the person delivering the protocol to be known by their connection to their family group and traditional place.

Baramadagal / Burramattagal people of the Darug speaking nation are traditionally from the area now known as Parramatta through the Reid/Goldspink family group. Traditional Owners/Custodians hold cultural authority on our Country. This authority operates according to Indigenous law, custom, and relational obligation and exists independently of institutional, civic, or contractual hierarchies. Protocols are delivered not performed. Being performing or visual arts professionals does not in and of itself permit people to ‘perform’ our responsibilities on our lands.

2. Welcome to Country

WHAT IS IT?

A Welcome to Country is a formal cultural protocol delivered by a Traditional Owner / Custodian of the land on which an event or gathering is taking place. It affirms the ongoing presence, authority, and responsibilities of Traditional Owners / Custodians and establishes a living cultural relationship for the duration of the event.

A Welcome to Country will usually be delivered by an Elder or Community Knowledge Holder who hold relationships grounded in respect within their Community built through years of conduct that has benefited the Community. The oldest person known from the Community is not always the most appropriate person for every event or occasion, if culturally their lineage belongs to other clan land of the Nation / language group, or if they are older but have not built the cultural authority within their Community over time they may not be appropriate to carry these responsibilities.

A Welcome establishes relationship. That relationship carries expectations of respect, reciprocity, and attentiveness to Aboriginal cultural authority throughout the event and beyond.

WHEN IS IT DELIVERED?

A Welcome to Country **must be delivered at the opening of an event**, prior to any prayers, speeches, or formal addresses by mayors, councillors, elected officials, executives, or other speakers.

It may be spoken in Traditional language or English or a combination, it may be accompanied by other cultural practices such as a smoking ceremony. You should take guidance from Traditional Owners / Custodians on when smoking ceremonies are appropriate.

WELCOME AS A TRADITIONAL PROTOCOL

Importantly, a Welcome to Country is one protocol among many that serves to protect mob and extend that responsibility to people gathering on our lands, albeit one of the most widely recognised.

Engaging Aboriginal people only when it serves organisational interests, while disregarding their advice about other cultural protocols that may not cost money or deliver immediate institutional benefit, undermines the integrity of the Welcome itself. To be in relationship with Aboriginal people is to care about our interests too, not only those that align neatly with organisational agendas.

A Welcome can be delivered whenever Traditional Owners / Custodians agree it is appropriate. Decisions about whether a Welcome is appropriate should be made in consultation with Traditional Owners / Custodians, not unilaterally by institutions.

Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) are statutory bodies established under colonial legislation and do not, of themselves, operate in accordance with First Laws. In some regions, Traditional Owners/Custodians may also sit within, or work through, the local LALC structure, and the LALC can function as a practical interface for colonial procurement while remaining accountable to Traditional Owner governance. Across much of the Sydney Basin, however, LALCs are often governed by Aboriginal people who live locally but are not the Traditional Owners/Custodians for this specific Country, and Traditional Owners/Custodians have over the years consistently been excluded from meaningful participation in those bodies through internal governance practices and the use of statutory eligibility rules. Because a Welcome to Country is a cultural protocol that arises from place-based Traditional Owner authority, not from statutory status, institutions should not treat LALCs as the default pathway for Welcomes. Welcomes should be requested through the relevant Traditional Owner family governance group(s) for that Country, with culturally safe due diligence where there is uncertainty or dispute.

DO WE HAVE TO PAY FOR A WELCOME EACH TIME?

For the reasons set out in our Cultural Protocol Advisory Note: Economic Justice, Cultural Authority and Structural Benefit, reciprocity through remuneration should be the standard practice for government institutions and publicly funded bodies when requesting a Welcome to Country.

Prior to invasion, our peoples lived without a cost-of-living crisis. Our material, social, cultural, and spiritual needs were provided for through our relationship with land and waters. Colonisation deliberately dismantled those systems. Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are required to participate in a cash economy imposed upon us, while continuing to carry cultural, ceremonial, and custodial responsibilities to Country.

We therefore remain entitled to derive economic justice from our lands, including through the practice and sharing of culture. Cultural practice is not symbolic labour. It is skilled, intergenerational work grounded in law, authority, and responsibility.

When organisations approach Traditional Owners / Custodians for a Welcome to Country, it is important to recognise that many of you receive:

- regular income
- superannuation entitlements
- paid leave
- institutional stability

from colonial systems that continue to operate on our lands.

Traditional Owners typically do not share that structural security. What we do have is an inherent right to generate income from our cultural practice on Country. Requests for a Welcome should never be made with an attitude that ignores this reality.

We acknowledge that some events are grassroots, community-led, or genuinely unbudgeted. In these circumstances, full transparency must be provided at the time of the request, including clear disclosure of the lack of budget.

This disclosure is essential to avoid unintentional manipulation and to ensure that Traditional Owners / Custodians are able to make decisions with free prior and informed consent. Decisions about whether to offer a Welcome without remuneration rest solely with the relevant Traditional Owners / Custodians and should never be assumed or pressured.

“Appearance Fees” and Cultural Double Standards

Across contemporary public life, appearance fees for brand representatives, influencers, keynote speakers, and public figures are widely accepted and rarely questioned. These fees are often substantial and understood as recognition of visibility, labour, expertise, and value.

By contrast, when Traditional Owners/Custodians seek remuneration for delivering a Welcome to Country, questions are frequently raised about cost, necessity, or legitimacy.

This disparity reflects a deeper cultural bias. Before negotiating value with Traditional Owners/Custodians, organisations are asked to reflect on their privilege, influence, and structural position, and to consider why payment for pop-culture visibility is normalised, while payment for Indigenous cultural authority on Indigenous land is scrutinised.

Remuneration for a Welcome to Country is not a courtesy. It is an act of respect, recognition, and economic justice.

DOES AN ELDER OR KNOWLEDGE HOLDER EVER HAVE TO PROVIDE PUBLIC LIABILITY INSURANCE AS PART OF DELIVERING A WELCOME?

A Traditional Owners / Custodians delivering a Welcome to Country is primarily exercising cultural authority, not providing a contracted service as usual and as such is not to be asked to provide evidence of public liability insurance in order to deliver a Welcome.

A Welcome to Country is a cultural protocol**,** not a commercial activity even though economic justice may be derived from the activity itself. It is delivered at the invitation of the host organisation and forms part of the opening of the event itself. Responsibility for public safety, venue management and risk mitigation remains with the event organiser, and the delivery of a Welcome is appropriately covered by the host organisation's existing public liability insurance, in the same way invited speakers, dignitaries and ceremonial contributors are covered.

CULTURAL AND LEGAL JUSTIFICATION

Requiring a Traditional Owners / Custodians to obtain insurance in order to deliver a Welcome to Country creates an inappropriate commercial barrier to the exercise of culture and authority on Country. This approach is inconsistent with Australia's commitments under the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**, which Australia has endorsed.

Relevant UNDRIP provisions include:

- **Article 3 (Self-determination):** Indigenous peoples have the right to freely pursue their cultural development. A Welcome to Country is an expression of this right.
- **Article 11 (Cultural traditions and customs):** Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalise their cultural traditions. Conditioning practice on insurance requirements interferes with this right.
- **Article 31 (Cultural knowledge and expressions):** Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control and protect their cultural expressions. A Welcome to Country is a protected cultural expression, not a service for hire.
- **Article 32(2) (Free, Prior and Informed Consent):** States must consult and cooperate in good faith before approving activities affecting Indigenous lands and

cultural practices. Imposing insurance conditions without consent undermines this principle.

GOVERNANCE AND RISK CONSIDERATIONS

From a governance and risk perspective, requiring individual insurance from Traditional Owners / Custodians does not reduce liability. Instead, it creates inequitable risk transfer and exposes organisations to reputational, cultural and governance risk. The host organisation retains control over the event environment and is therefore the appropriate bearer of insurance responsibility.

Treating a Welcome to Country as primarily a commercial service rather than a cultural protocol, risks diminishing Indigenous authority, undermining trust, and contradicting best practice guidance from Aboriginal affairs bodies, reconciliation organisations and local government frameworks.

If an organisation is comfortable covering mayors, councillors, faith leaders or guest speakers under its insurance policy, it should be equally comfortable covering Elders and Traditional Owners / Custodians delivering a Welcome to Country.

HOW DO WELCOME PROTOCOLS INTERSECT WITH COLONIAL PROTOCOLS

Where representatives of colonial or civic authority are present, it is requested that their remarks be delivered at the beginning of the event, after the Welcome, so that all opening protocols may be appropriately observed and the space can be established with clarity, respect, and shared understanding.

Should a colonial or institutional representative choose not to deliver their address at the opening of the event, this **does not alter Aboriginal cultural protocol**. The Welcome to Country is required to open the space regardless, as it carries responsibility for acknowledging Country, setting intention, and affirming cultural authority for what is about to take place.

This is not a matter of courtesy or sequencing preference. It reflects the fact that Aboriginal cultural law precedes colonial governance on Country, and that a Welcome establishes the relational and ethical conditions under which the event occurs. Once the space is opened through Aboriginal protocol, other proceedings may follow.

2. What is an Acknowledgement and when can it be delivered

An Acknowledgement of Country is a protocol used in Australia to show respect for the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which an event, meeting or gathering takes place, and to recognise their continuing connection to Country. It is distinct from a Welcome to Country, which is a formal cultural ceremony delivered only by Traditional Owners or Custodians of the land.

An Acknowledgement of Country can be offered by any person, whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous. Although if there is a Traditional Owner / Custodian present

they should be given first option to Welcome or Acknowledge, if they are not present or decline then any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person present should be asked if they would like to Acknowledge Country to open the event / space. Please respect that some Aboriginal people would rather see non-Aboriginal people practice this protocol of respect and they have every right to decline the offer but the offer should always be extended in the first instance. If there are no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples present, there are no strict rules about who must deliver it, though it is usually given by the first speaker at an event, the meeting chair, or someone who has been asked to make the acknowledgement. Other people are not required to acknowledge Country once this has been done, though if it is offered organically and sincerely there is no difficulty in this respect being incorporated by other speakers.

Acknowledgements are made at the beginning of a meeting, speech or event as a way of situating the gathering in place and demonstrating respect before other proceedings begin. They can also be incorporated into written materials such as email signatures, websites, and official documents to acknowledge Country in digital and ongoing communications.

There is no prescribed wording, but a respectful acknowledgement should name the Traditional Owners / Custodians of the land and pay respects to Elders past and present. It is not appropriate to “acknowledge” broader community groups / events / occasion during this protocol, this should be done separately.

In contrast, a **Welcome to Country** must be delivered by a Traditional Owner or someone authorised by them, and is usually performed at the start of significant, formal, or large public events.

3. Indigenous-to-Indigenous Protocol

Where Aboriginal artists or staff are performing or working on Country at events, and Traditional Owners / Custodians are present in a representative capacity, it is culturally appropriate, and supported by cultural arts protocols and guidelines, for Indigenous-to-Indigenous acknowledgment or greeting to occur.

This reflects long-standing Indigenous protocol that recognises shared cultural responsibility, respect, and relationship between First Nations peoples of this continent.

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

Our position is supported by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which Australia became a signatory to in 2009:

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

What it supports:

The 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 12 -** Welcome to Country is often spiritual, ceremonial, and relational. It establishes intention, responsibility, and care for the space. This article protects the right to deliver Welcome as part of spiritual and ceremonial practice.
- **Article 13** - Many Welcomes are delivered partly or wholly in language. This article protects the right to speak language on Country, particularly in formal and public settings.
- **Article 18** - Right to participate in decision-making through Indigenous governance structures. Events held on Country affect Indigenous cultural rights. Determining whether a Welcome is required, who delivers it, and how it is positioned in the program is a decision that Indigenous peoples have the right to be involved in.
- **Article 19** - Holding an event on Country without engaging Traditional Owners about protocol, including Welcome to Country, risks breaching FPIC principles. A Welcome is one mechanism through which consent, relationship, and responsibility are acknowledged.
- **Article 25** - Welcome to Country explicitly affirms the ongoing spiritual relationship between people and Country. This article recognises that relationship as a right, not a courtesy.
- **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

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD: A PRACTICAL CHECKLIST FOR STAFF

When planning events or activities on Country, staff should:

- Engage with Traditional Owners / Custodians early, before programs, budgets, or run sheets are finalised.
- Ask what cultural protocols are appropriate and be prepared to listen to the answer.
- Treat cultural guidance as governance input, not optional feedback.
- Respect Traditional Owner / Custodian authority on Country even where it requires changes to internal processes.
- Understand that relationship continues after the Welcome is delivered.
- Share cultural learning internally so responsibility does not sit solely with us, or with one individual.
- Reflect on whether Traditional Owner / Custodian knowledges were genuinely integrated, not merely included.

GOVERNANCE AND LEGAL RISK NOTE

Tokenistic use of Welcome to Country exposes organisations to reputational and governance risk. Where our cultural protocols are engaged superficially, or where our advice is sought ceremonially but disregarded in practice, organisations risk allegations of bad faith engagement, cultural misrepresentation, and inconsistency between stated commitments and actual conduct.

For public institutions, these risks may intersect with statutory obligations, ethical frameworks, and policy commitments relating to cultural safety, participation, and respect for First Nations self-determination. Failure to meaningfully engage Traditional Owners / Custodians can undermine public trust, damage relationships with Aboriginal communities, and weaken institutional credibility.

Embedding Welcome to Country within genuine, ongoing cultural engagement is therefore not only respectful practice, but sound governance.

6. Purpose of This Advisory Note

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.

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