

COUNCIL POLICY



Policy name	Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country
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Abstract

The purpose of this policy is to set out guiding principles for Gunnedah Shire Council, to observe the appropriate protocols for the acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians at significant Council activities and events, and in Council publications.

Dates	Policy or amendment approved Policy or amendment takes effect Policy is due for review (up to 4 years)	20 March 2024 1 May 2024 20 March 2028
Endorsed by	Executive Leadership Team at its meeting held 28 November 2023	
Approved by	Gunnedah Shire Council at its Ordinary Meeting of Council held 20 March 2024 Resolution number 4.3/24	
Policy Custodian	Director Planning and Environmental Services	
Relevant to	Gunnedah Shire Councillors and Employees of Council	
Superseded Policies	Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country Dated 16.08.2017, CR: 20.08/17	
Related documents	Council Meeting Code of Practice	
Related legislation	NSW Local Government Act 1993 Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983	

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1. Purpose

1.1. Gunnedah Shire Council (“Council”) recognises the unique position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our culture and history. The purpose of this Policy is to set out guiding principles for Council to observe the appropriate protocols for the acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians at significant Council activities and events and in Council publications.

1.2. The Policy aims to:

- Assist Council in observing the appropriate protocols in recognising traditional custodians through an inclusive, collaborative and sensitive approach;
- Provide guiding principles and clarity in relation to an “Acknowledgement of Country” statement and “Welcome to Country”;
- Provide opportunities to witness and experience Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures first hand and to change perceptions by demonstrating that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures are ‘living’ and ‘enduring’; and
- Foster cultural practices and facilitate relationships in the broader community promoting respect and understanding.

2. Scope

This Policy applies to:

- The Mayor and elected representatives of Gunnedah Shire Council;
- Employees of Council;
- Community events and functions delivered by Council;
- Council’s website; and
- Official publications and strategic documents.

3. Definitions

Acknowledgement of Country Statement	This applies where people, who do not have recognised Indigenous ancestral links, acknowledge and show respect for the Traditional Custodians of the land on which an event is taking place.
Council Events	Meaning the first meeting of a new Council, Ordinary Council Meetings and other major events where the general public is present and there is an official ceremony or opening.
Country	Refers to the physical piece of earth or water that the event or meeting is taking place upon. For some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people 'Country' may also refer to the spirits, plants, animals, people and stories associated with that piece of land or water.
First Nations Peoples	Term that recognises that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are the first peoples of Australia, meaning they were here for thousands of years prior to European colonisation.
Host	Person/s holding or staging the event, meeting, ceremony.
Indigenous Australians	Broad term referring to peoples of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent, who identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and are accepted as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander by the community in which they live or have lived.
Major Events	Includes but is not limited to NAIDOC Week, AGQuip, citizenship ceremonies, conferences and expos, and festivals.
Organiser	Person planning, or organising or delivering an event, function or publication.
Presenter	Person either delivering a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country.
Publications	Includes official Council strategic and integrated planning publications including annual reports and strategic plans available to, or distributed to, the public.
Traditional Custodians	'Traditional Custodians' is the term used to describe the recognised Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples 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.

Welcome to Country	Where a traditional Custodian of the land on which the event or ceremony takes place welcomes people to their spiritual and ancestral land at the beginning of a meeting, event or ceremony.
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4. Policy statement

The purpose of *Welcome to Country* and *Acknowledgement of Country* is to facilitate better relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians by recognising their unique role of in Australian culture and history. Indigenous Australians are the original custodians of the land and it is important this is recognised and incorporated as part of an official events protocol to enable the wider community to share in and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage.

4.1 The difference between the two ceremonies

Acknowledgement of Country is compared to a knock on the door while *Welcome to Country* is the invitation to come in and communicates, "It is OK for you to be here" (Source Reconciliation NSW)

4.2 Welcome to Country

"Welcome to Country" is where a traditional Custodian group formally welcomes people on to Country. This is a significant recognition and formal process and enables traditional custodians to give their blessing for the event. Welcome to Country ceremonies can only be performed by the authorised "Elder/s" of the traditional Custodian group formally recognised as custodians of the Country that the event is being held upon. In some instances Elders will authorise younger persons 'on Country' to deliver the Welcome to Country.

The Gomeroi people of the Kamilaroi Nation are the traditional Custodians in the Gunnedah local government area. It is important that the appropriate person be personally contacted and where possible with a formal letter of invitation being sent as confirmation to the initial personal communication.

The use of Gamilaroi and Kamilaroi are accepted in the local community and can be used as interchangeable references. Both are correct.

Complex versions of the ceremony may establish mutual obligations of conduct and responsibility and traditionally this might be done through dance, singing and the ritual exchange of gifts. The "Welcome to Country" may consist of a single speech by the appropriate representative and may occur using the owner group's traditional language, or it may include a performance. A performance may be a traditional welcoming song, a traditional dance, a didgeridoo performance, or a combination of these.

4.3 Smoking Ceremonies

Smoking ceremonies may be undertaken in order to cleanse a space. The ceremony is a sacred purification ritual of tremendous significance and is always undertaken by an authorised Indigenous person with specialised cultural knowledge.

If there is any uncertainty regarding which group is the acknowledged traditional Custodian, or if a dispute arises between Indigenous individuals or groups at any stage, do not proceed with the Welcome to Country. It is much better to politely withdraw from the process and not conduct the Welcome than to proceed with the wrong people. The Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) in Gunnedah is the primary contact for arranging an Elder to perform a Welcome to Country within the Gunnedah Shire, and for input regarding who may be an appropriate Elder to approach. The LALC can also provide guidance on cultural protocols relevant to a specific civic event.

4.4 Remuneration for Welcome to Country

Council recognises the 'Welcome to Country' is a service and representatives should be offered an appropriate remuneration for their time and commitment. It is acknowledged that some representatives may not seek remuneration however, this should be respectfully negotiated and confirmed prior to the event.

4.5 An Acknowledgement of Country Statement

An Acknowledgement of Country Statement is delivered when it is not possible or necessary to deliver a *Welcome to Country*. The Statement is a means by which all people can raise awareness and show respect for Indigenous culture and heritage and the ongoing relationship that traditional custodians have with Country.

Council's Acknowledgement of Country Statement is ideally negotiated with the traditional Custodian group of the local government area however where consensus is difficult, a general Statement is encouraged.

A typical and culturally accepted *general* Acknowledgement of Country Statement as defined by Creative Spirits Australia and adapted as an example for the purpose of this Policy is as follows:

"I/we begin by acknowledging the Gomeroi peoples of the Kamilaroi Nation as the traditional Custodians of the Land on which we gather today. I/we pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all First Nations people present"

A second example as a guide when Councillors are speaking at an event is:

On behalf of Gunnedah Shire Council I acknowledge the Gomeroi peoples of the Kamilaroi Nation as the traditional Custodians of the Land on which we gather today. I/we pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all First Nations people present"

Examples of where an Acknowledgement of Country would be appropriate are outlined below:

- a) Civic events, relevant and appropriate commemorations and major festivals, special ceremonies and official openings;
- b) Council email signatory blocks;
- c) Strategic planning and corporate documents;
- d) Council website; and
- e) When an officer or representative of Council deems it appropriate or is requested to do so.

An Acknowledgement of Country is delivered by a Chair or Speaker, a senior official (such as the Mayor, a Councillor or Management), authorised staff member or appointed master of ceremonies. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the meeting, the event organiser or publications editor to ensure that the appropriate acknowledgement is undertaken or included.

An Acknowledgement of Country is required at the beginning of the proceedings. If, there are multiple speakers following each other (i.e. at conferences), there is no mandatory cultural requirement that every speaker provides an Acknowledgment of Country. Speakers can however elect to do so and may be guided by their own organisation’s policies and practices.

4.6 Use and application in Corporate Documents

An Acknowledgement of Country Statement is to be used in Council’s corporate and strategic planning documents including but not limited to: Annual Report, Operational Plan, Open Spaces Strategy, Local Housing Strategy, Community Participation Plan, Economic Development Strategy, Disability Inclusion Action Plan etc.

An accepted example of appropriate wording is as follows:

“In presenting this document to the community, Gunnedah Shire Council acknowledges the Kamilaroi Nation as the traditional Custodians of the Land on which we live and work. In doing so, Council pays its respect to all Elders both past and present as well as to the young Indigenous leaders of tomorrow.

Or

Gunnedah Shire Council acknowledges the Kamilaroi Nation as the traditional Custodians of the Land on which we live and work. In doing so, Council pays its respect to all Elders both past and present as well as to the young Indigenous leaders of tomorrow.

5. Accountability, roles and responsibilities

5.1 Policy Custodian

Director Planning and Environmental Services

5.2 Responsible Officer

Community and Social Planner

6. Acknowledgements

The following documents and information were used in the development of this Policy:

- <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/spirituality/welcome-to-country-acknowledgement-of-country>;
- <https://www.oncountry.com.au/>
- NSW Health Welcome to Country Policy;
- Australian Government Style Manual – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- A Resource Kit for Local Government – Collaborate NSW, Local government and Aboriginal communities working together; and
- Reconciliation Australia Factsheets.
- <https://www.indigenous.gov.au/>

7. Version control and change history

Date	Version	Approved by & resolution no.	Amendment
Apr 2017	1		Original Version
Aug 2017		20.08.17	
20 March 2024	2	Ordinary Council Resolution 4.3/24	Inclusion of meeting types policy applies to. Use within corporate documents. Application in situations where there are multiple speakers. Update of acknowledgement statements.