

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, its committees and staff, to observe the appropriate protocols for the acknowledgement of traditional custodians at Council activities and major events and in Council publications.

Dates	Policy or amendment approved 16 Aug 2017 Policy or amendment takes effect 16 Aug 2017 Policy is due for review (up to 4 years) 16 Aug 2021
Endorsed by	Council's Executive Management Team
Approved by	Gunnedah Shire Council, at its Ordinary Meeting of Council held 16 Aug 2017. Resolution number: 20.08/17
Policy Custodian	Director Planning and Environmental Services
Relevant to	Elected Members and Council staff
Superseded Policies	Nil
Related documents	Council Meeting Code of Practice Division of Local Government Engaging with Local Aboriginal communities - A Resource Kit for Local Government in New South Wales, 2007 Reconciliation Australia Factsheets.
Related legislation	NSW local Government Act 1993 Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983
File number	1126857

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1. Purpose

1.1 Gunnedah Shire Council (“Council”) recognises the unique position of Aboriginal people in our culture and history. The purpose of this Policy is to set out guiding principles for Council, its committees and staff, to observe the appropriate protocols for the acknowledgement of traditional custodians at Council activities and events and in Council publications.

1.2 The Policy aims to:

- Assist Council in observing the appropriate protocols in recognising the traditional custodians of the land 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 cultures first hand and to change perceptions by demonstrating that Aboriginal 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;
- Employees who organise and deliver community events;
- Civic functions; and
- Council’s official publications.

3. Definitions

Acknowledgement of Country Statement – is where other people acknowledge and show respect for the traditional custodians of the land on which an event is taking place. It is a sign of respect. Any person who does not have recognised Aboriginal ancestral links to the part of the country in question is considered a visitor.

Country - refers to the physical piece of earth or water that the event or meeting is taking place upon. For some Aboriginal people 'Country' may also refer to the spirits, plants, animals, people and stories associated with that piece of land or water.

Host – The person/s holding or staging the event/meeting/ceremony

Council Events – Includes First Council meeting of a new Council, Ordinary Council Meetings, Civic functions, Council Committees, special presentations, forums, speeches and other functions where the public is present and there is an official ceremony or opening.

Major Events – i.e. NAIDOC Week, AGQuip, Citizenship Ceremonies.

Organiser – Person planning or organising an event, function or publication.

Presenter – Person either delivering a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country.

Publications – Includes official Council strategic planning publications including annual reports available to, or distributed to, the public.

Traditional Custodians - 'Traditional Custodians' is the term used to describe the recognised Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander 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.

Welcome to Country - is where an Aboriginal custodian welcomes people to their land at the beginning of a meeting, event or ceremony.

4. Policy Statement

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

Both are applicable to Council related civic and business activities as outlined in this Policy.

The acknowledgement undertaken should be appropriate to the nature and size of each event and publication.

4.1 The difference between the two ceremonies

Acknowledgement of Country is like a knock on the door while *Welcome to Country* is an invitation to come in and basically communicates, "It is OK for you to be here".

4.1.1 Welcome to Country

A “Welcome to Country” is where an Aboriginal custodian welcomes people to their land. 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 delegated “Elder/s” of the traditional custodian group formally recognised as custodians of the country that the event is being held upon. The 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.

Complex versions of the ceremony may establish mutual obligations of conduct and responsibility. 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 groups 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.

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

If there is any uncertainty regarding which group is the acknowledged traditional custodian, or if a dispute arises between Aboriginal 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 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.

Payment for Welcome to Country

Council recognises the ‘Welcome to Country’ is a service and representatives should be appropriately remunerated for their time and commitment. It is acknowledged that some representatives may not seek a fee however, this should be negotiated and confirmed with the representative/s prior to the event.

4.1.2 Acknowledgement of Country Statement

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

An Acknowledgement of Country could be delivered at the opening of:

- a) Civic events, relevant and appropriate commemorations and major festivals, special ceremonies and official openings;
- b) When an officer or representative of Council deems it appropriate or is requested to do so.

An Acknowledgement of Country would be delivered by a Chair or Speaker, a senior official (such as the Mayor, a Councillor or Management) or otherwise delegated staff member or designated master of ceremonies.

An Acknowledgement of Country Statement could be negotiated with the traditional owner group of the local government area however a typical and culturally accepted Acknowledgement of Country Statement as defined by Creative Spirits Australia and adapted for the purpose of this Policy is as follows:

“I would like to acknowledge the Kamilaroi people as the traditional custodians of the Land on which we gather today. I would also like to pay respect to Elders both past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal Australians present.”

4.2 Council Meetings

The Acknowledgement of Country Statement will be read out after the Opening Welcome and Prayer, at all Ordinary and Extraordinary Council meetings.

An Acknowledgement of Country Statement should be delivered at the beginning of proceedings of a formal Council Committee/Working Group meeting.

4.3 Major Events

The “Welcome to Country” would occur as one of the first items in the opening ceremony of the event. All arrangements for the Welcome to Country should be mutually negotiated, involving the Aboriginal representatives. In the absence of a Welcome to Country, an Acknowledgement of Country Statement would be delivered.

It is acknowledged that some events and meetings may not require a Welcome to Country or an Acknowledgement of Country due to the nature and size of the event and/or meeting, and that this would be at the discretion of the event and/or meeting convenor/Council representative.

4.4 Publications

Further to including a “Welcome to Country” or “Acknowledgement of Country” at an event, an acknowledgement should also be considered and included where appropriate in official Council publications.

Publications appropriate for consideration of an acknowledgement are official Council publications available to or distributed to the public. Such publications may include but are not limited to:

- Community Strategic Plan
- Operational Plan
- Workforce Management Plan
- Delivery Plan
- Arts and Cultural Plan
- Crime Prevention Plan
- Disability Inclusion Action Plan
- Open Space Strategy
- Economic Development Strategy
- Destination Management Plan
- Other publications following consultation with Council’s Communications Department.

5. Accountability, roles and responsibilities

- 5.1 Policy Custodians – Director Planning and Environmental Services and Community and Social Planner.
- 5.2 Responsible Officers – 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.

6. Acknowledgement

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>;
- NSW Health Welcome to Country Policy;
- Maitland City Council Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country Policy;
- Tablelands Regional Council Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country Policy;
- Division of Local Government Engaging with local Aboriginal Communities - A Resource Kit for Local Government in New South Wales, 2007; and
- Reconciliation Australia Factsheets.

7. Version control and change history

Date	Version	Approved by & resolution no.	Amendment
10 Apr 2017	1		Original version
16 Aug 2017	2	20.08/17	