First Nations engagement

Background

This resource was prepared by the City of Sydney as part of the Creative Impact webinar series, July 2025. It provides artists, creative workers and organisations with a summary guide to good practice standards for the topic – a starting point on the creative leadership journey.

The following is a summary of key standards, protocols and good practice models for First Nations cultural awareness and protocols for artists and cultural organisations.

Drawn from City of Sydney's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols, the areas identified below are not an exhaustive list. We provide links to further learning, resources and training that is available for artists and organisations from other parts of the creative and cultural sector.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols

Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country or Traditional Welcome is where the traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander custodians welcome people to their land at the beginning of a meeting, event or ceremony.

This welcome must be conducted by an appropriate person such as a recognised Elder from the local area. Welcome to Country enables the Traditional Custodians to give their blessing to the event. It's an important mark of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's original inhabitants. To arrange a Welcome to Country at an event in the City of Sydney local area, bookings and payments are to be made through the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council.

Acknowledgement of Country

An Acknowledgement of Country is where other people acknowledge and show respect for the Traditional Custodians of the land where the event is taking place. This acknowledgement is a sign of respect and should be conducted at the beginning of a meeting, event or ceremony.

Acknowledging Country may also take place when traditional Elders are not available to provide an official Welcome to Country. It's important to note in the acknowledgement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to live in the City of Sydney area where they have continuing spiritual and cultural ties.

The following is considered appropriate wording for an Acknowledgement of Country:

> I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to the Elders both past and present.

Fee for services

It's important to acknowledge that Aboriginal people are using their intellectual property whenever they carry out a cultural ceremony or an artistic performance. It's appropriate that they receive payment for the service.

The payment should consider travel to the event, time and complexity of the service, and the profile of the event.

Creative Impact

Copyright, cultural ownership and intellectual property rights

When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it's imperative that Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights and copyright are observed and safeguarded in relation to the following:

- literary, performing and artistic works (including songs, music, dances, stories, ceremonies, symbols, languages and designs)
- languages
- scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge
- spiritual knowledge
- all items of moveable cultural heritage
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ancestral remains and human genetic material
- immovable cultural property (including sacred and historically significant sites and burial grounds)
- documentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' heritage in archives, film, photographs, videotape or audiotape and all forms of media.

Permission should be obtained from the traditional owners before using any material which relates to their cultural heritage. They should be consulted on how the community will be attributed and given the opportunity to approve the way in which the material is used.

For detailed information and advice on observing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage rights, Creative Australia has, in consultation with Dr Terri Janke, developed a set of protocols for using First Nations cultural and intellectual property in the arts.

Industry resources

- Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council
- Protocols for using First Nations cultural and intellectual property in the arts, Creative Australia
- Create NSW Aboriginal Arts & Culture Protocols

City of Sydney resources

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols