



**Downer** 

---

**Downer Group**  
Indigenous Cultural  
Protocols Guide





# Introduction

---

Downer has a long and proud history in Australia dating back over 150 years. We are committed to ensuring that we have a diverse and inclusive workforce that fulfils the expectations of our employees, customers, communities and shareholders, while building a sustainable future for our business. This includes playing a role in empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the first inhabitants of Australia and both cultures are rich in history, tradition and family and community connections. At Downer, we recognise these groups as the Traditional Custodians of the land and sea, and we strive to embrace, celebrate and support their cultures.

## Why do we need cultural protocols?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have historically been the subject of prejudice and misunderstanding. Cultural protocols are intended to teach non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people how to respectfully embrace and celebrate these cultures. These protocols aim to ensure our workplace is inclusive and that we have an understanding of the communities and lands in which we operate.

## Why are cultural protocols important to Downer?

With more than 50,000 employees and over 300 sites around Australia, Downer's operations are deeply embedded in local communities. With a diverse workforce and our close relationships with community groups, it is imperative that we are respectful and considerate of the histories in Australia.

In Australia, Downer is committed to working with Reconciliation Australia and adopting its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) framework, which provides a structure for organisations to realise its vision for reconciliation.

This guide is intended to support Downer's RAP journey and focus on increasing cultural awareness through employee engagement initiatives and building sustainable relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.



# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols

1A:	Terminology
1B:	A-Z of cultural protocols
1C:	Event management
1D:	Written material
1E:	Important dates
1F:	Further reading

## 1A: Terminology

**Clan:** A clan is a local group that is formed around family links through a common ancestry. A clan is a subset of a nation and, before British colonisation in 1788, there were thought to be more than 500 clans in Australia.

**Community:** Due to the removal of people from their ancestral lands, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definition of community is not always based on geographical location. The term community can refer to country, family, experiences and belonging.

**Country:** A defined area of land associated with a group of people or nation.

**Cultural awareness:** Cultural awareness is understanding and having an appreciation for what constitutes a group's culture, their rituals, beliefs, customs, behaviours, laws and practices. It is important to understand that within different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations, clans and communities, their cultures will be unique.

**Cultural competence:** Having the ability to interact across different cultural groups to establish and maintain relationships. To be culturally competent is to have the experience, understanding and appreciation of cultural complexities to enable someone to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

**Cultural respect:** The recognition, protection and investment in the rights, rituals and traditions of various cultural groups.

**Elder:** Elders are the custodians of traditional cultural knowledge, skills and customs and are responsible for teaching and providing guidance to the community on cultural matters and cultural protocols. The term "Elder" is used to describe people who have knowledge, wisdom and the respect of their local community. Elders are not necessarily older people but must have the trust and respect of their community and be recognised as cultural knowledge keepers.

**Lore:** Refers to the customs and stories that Aboriginal peoples learned from their ancestors and the Dreamtime. Aboriginal lore has been passed on through the generations via songs, stories and dance, and it governs all aspects of traditional life. Some people in community may be referred to as a "Lore Man" or someone who practices lore. This generally means they are a primary source of custodial knowledge for a particular group or region.

**Mob:** A term used to identify a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or country. This term is generally used by Aboriginal people to describe other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and should not be used by non-Aboriginal people.

**Nation:** A group associated with a culturally defined area of land or country. Each nation has boundaries that cannot be changed and language that is tied to each nation and country. It is important to understand that for some nations there is still dispute today over these traditional boundaries.

**Sorry Business:** Sorry Business is an important period of mourning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that involves responsibilities and obligations to attend funerals and participate in other cultural events, activities or ceremonies. In some cases, the extent of obligations is dictated by the status of the deceased person and a person's relationship to them.

**Stolen Generation:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their communities and families by Australian Federal and State Government agencies are often referred to as the Stolen Generations. This occurred from 1910 to the 1970s. These children were then sent away to be placed in homes, missions and foster families where they were often forbidden from speaking their native language or expressing any part of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island culture. They were also not allowed to return to their traditional lands.

**Traditional Owner/Custodian:** An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or persons directly descended from the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of a culturally defined area of land or country, who has a cultural association with the country that derives from traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original inhabitants.



### 1B: A-Z of Traditional Protocols

**Acknowledgment of Country:** Conducting an Acknowledgement of Country ceremony is a way of showing respect to the Traditional Owners of the land on which you stand, honouring the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country. It can be given by both non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. An Acknowledgement of Country is offered at the beginning of a meeting, speech or formal occasion. Traditionally, it was about asking for permission to enter another Nation and Community and upon it being granted, it guaranteed protection and safe passage while on that land.

An Acknowledgment of Country statement can read in one of two ways:

**General:** “I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past, present and future (or emerging) and acknowledge their importance in maintaining culture and connection to the land.” OR

“Downer acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians across Australia. We pay respect to the Elders of the past, present and future (or emerging) in maintaining the culture, country and their spiritual connection to the land.”

**Specific:** “I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, the (people) of the (nation) and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future (or emerging).”

**Note:** To find out who the traditional land owners are in your area, please contact the local Aboriginal Land Council. Alternatively, use the general statement above

**Gender protocols:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society still considers some information and protocols as specific and sacred to either men or women. Individuals need to be aware of the sensitivities around this and seek advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they are likely to arise. This is referred to as “Women’s business” and “Men’s business” and is gender-specific knowledge and practices relation to health, wellbeing and religious matters.

**Naming the deceased:** In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities it is offensive to refer to a deceased person by name or show photographic images of the person during the mourning period. Mourning periods differ between communities; sometimes the person’s name or image cannot be used for a week or a year, sometimes it is for an indefinite period. Before using the name of a deceased person or publishing their image, it is essential to obtain the family’s permission and it is important to include a warning before showing photos, images or videos that may contain a person or persons who are deceased.

**Procurement:** Consider how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses or peoples can be included in the procurement of services as part of our supply chain. If you are interested in purchasing a product or service from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, contact Group Procurement. Downer is a member of Supply Nation, which is Australia’s largest national directory of verified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses. The use of the term “verified” stipulates that it is a legitimate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business committed to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

**Secret or sacred material:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to keep secret any sacred or ritual knowledge.

**Sites of significance:** The first speaker at an event should recognise cultural or historical sites if the event is held on or near one. Elders should be consulted on how to approach this acknowledgement.

**Smoking ceremonies:** Smoking ceremonies are undertaken in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to cleanse the space in which the ceremony is taking place. The smoking ceremony is a ritual of purification and unity and is always undertaken by a Traditional Owner or Elder with specialised cultural knowledge. This is a very significant ceremony and is performed only at events deemed appropriate by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.



**Welcome to Country:** Welcoming visitors to country has been a part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years. Despite the absence of fences or visible borders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups had clear boundaries separating their country from that of other cultural groups. Crossing into another group's country required a request for permission to enter. When permission was granted, the hosting group would welcome the visitors, offering them safe passage and protection of their physical and spiritual being during the journey. Where visitors were provided with safe passage, they had to respect the protocols and rules of the Traditional Owners while on their country.

Today, a Welcome to Country occurs at the beginning of a formal event and can take different forms, including singing, dancing, smoking ceremonies or a speech in traditional language or English. A Welcome to Country is delivered by Traditional Owners, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been given permission from Traditional Owners to welcome visitors to their country.

## 1C: Event Management

At all Downer Group events, organisers should consider the following elements.

- 1. Welcome to Country:** Where the traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodians welcome people to their land. This is the preferred option to open a ceremony and should be conducted by a recognised Traditional Owner or Elder from the area.
- 2. Acknowledgement of Country:** Where an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person acknowledges and shows respect for the Traditional Owners of the land. Consider researching the cultural heritage of the land the event is held on and address this in the Acknowledgement.
- 3. Acknowledgement of Elders:** Acknowledging Elders is an important demonstration of respect when conducting an event. This should be included in the Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country and can read as follows: "I would like to pay respect to the Elders past, present and future and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today."
- 4. Smoking Ceremonies:** Smoking ceremonies are undertaken in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to cleanse the space in which the ceremony is taking place. The smoking ceremony is a ritual of purification and unity and is always undertaken by a Traditional Owner or Elder with specialised cultural knowledge. This is a significant ceremony and is performed only at events deemed appropriate by the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.



### 1D: Written material

#### 1. Terminology and things to consider.

**‘Aboriginal peoples’ (plural):** This is a preferred term used by some, to refer to the many Aboriginal groups within Australia.

**‘Aboriginal Australians’:** This is another term used to describe the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Acceptance of this term varies.

**‘Aborigine’ (capitalised) or ‘aborigine’ (lower case):** These terms have been widely used in Australia’s recent history and is still sometimes used by older Aboriginal persons who grew up in that era. Use of this term is not recommended.

This is due to the negative references associated with this term. For example, the damaging connotations around the ‘Aborigines Protection Act 1909’ and the 1915 amendments to the Act that gave the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board the power to remove any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child at any time and for any reason.

**‘aboriginal’ (as an adjective, lower case):** This term can describe any people living in a country at the earliest period and is usually accepted but not preferred when referring to the Aboriginal peoples or topics today. Be aware there are many other groups around the world who refer to themselves as ‘aboriginal’ or ‘Aboriginal’, such as original inhabitants of Canada and Taiwan.

**Capitalisation:** When using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descriptors they must be capitalised if preceded by the name Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Entry permits:** When accessing an Aboriginal community and/or reserve, authorisation may be required. This can include just passing through when travelling. It is important to ensure authorisation has been granted and that you have the necessary permits. To receive authorisation, contact the traditional owners of the area.

**‘Part-Aboriginal’ or ‘half-Aboriginal’ or ‘half caste’ or ‘quarter caste’:** These terms are objectionable and considered offensive to an Aboriginal person. Do not use these words in any written or verbal communication as they are highly offensive.

**‘Torres Strait Islander’ (as an adjective, capitalised):** This term is extensively used throughout Australia when referring to Torres Strait Islander peoples and topics.

**Note:** Torres Strait Islander peoples are of Melanesian origin and are the Indigenous peoples of the Torres Strait Islands, which is located between Australia and Papua New Guinea. There are five traditional island clusters in the Torres Strait. More than half of the Torres Strait Islander peoples live on the Australian mainland, with large populations residing in Far North Queensland towns such as Cairns and Townsville.

If you are specifically referring to Torres Strait Islander peoples, your communications should reflect this. For example, “The Torres Strait Islander dancers performed today”, refers to a performance of a Torres Strait Islander dance. It would be incorrect to state, “The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers performed today”, when there is no Aboriginal dance included in the performance.

**‘TSI’:** This should not be used to describe Torres Strait Islander peoples and topics.

**‘ATSI’:** This should never be used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and topics.

**‘Islander(s)’:** This should not be used when referring to Torres Strait Islanders. This is a generic term and does not adequately describe Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Indigenous:** The term ‘Indigenous Australian’ can also be used to encompass both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. However, it is important to be aware many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not like to be referred to as ‘Indigenous’ as the term is considered too generic, as well as having some negative historical connotations.

**‘First Australians’, ‘Australia’s First Peoples’ and ‘First Nations Australia’ (capitalised):** These terms are growing in acceptance and are generally acceptable to use.

**‘First Nations’ or ‘First Peoples’ (capitalised):** This can refer to the peoples or nations of people who were there from the beginning, prior to the settlement of other peoples or nations. These terms have some general acceptance but can also be perceived as generic or not adequately describing the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. The term ‘First Nations’ is also used in Canada when referring to descendants of the original inhabitants of Canada such as the Mohawk and Cree.

Acronyms or abbreviations. It is only acceptable to use abbreviations in your communications when they form part of a web address or an organisation (e.g. AIATSIS, NAIDOC, [www.atsi.org.au](http://www.atsi.org.au)).

However, using an acronym or abbreviation to describe a race of people can be offensive and inappropriate. Abbreviations such as 'ATSI', 'AbI' or 'TSI' in communications such as tables, charts or surveys is not acceptable simply because you have limited space to insert the correct description which would be any of the following; 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' or 'Indigenous'.

**Indigenous Elder:** Always ensure these words are capitalised in communication material.

**Consultation and consent:** It is important to consult with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodians of traditional knowledge to understand the risks and benefits of wider dissemination of cultural material, as certain information or images may be inappropriate for wider circulation.

**Recognition:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be recognised for their achievements, contributions and roles in the development of communication material.

When story-gathering and interviewing, it is important to select Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for comment rather than relying solely on non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spokespeople. Ask the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives how they wish to be identified, as some people may want to be known by their place of origin and/or occupation.

## 2. Visual and audio

Ensure that photographers and videographers are briefed on Downer's cultural protocols and are respectful to the participants. They must seek permission from the Traditional Owners, Elders and/or community before taking photos or videos. Ensure a photography and videography consent form has been completed.

## 3. Approval process

Ensure that both a Downer Indigenous Specialist Officer and Communication Manager has approved the material before it is released. To find out who the Indigenous Specialist Officer and Communication Manager is in your Division, ask your local HR representative. Alternatively, you can contact Corporate Affairs at [communication@downergroup.com](mailto:communication@downergroup.com)

# 1E: Important Dates or Events of Significance

## 26 May — National Sorry Day

This day marks the anniversary of the 1997 tabling of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Bringing Them Home (April 1997).

## 27 May to 3 June — National Reconciliation Week

The week begins on 27 May, being the 1967 Referendum, and ends on 3 June with Mabo Day, commemorating the High Court Mabo Decision.

## 27 May — The 1967 Referendum

On 27 May 1967, the Australian Government held a referendum which was a momentous turning point in Australian history that altered our Constitution. More than 90 per cent of Australian voters chose 'Yes' to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the census and give the Australian Government the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## 3 June — Mabo Day

This day commemorates the anniversary of the 1992 High Court decision in the case brought by Eddie Mabo and others, which recognised the existence in Australia of Native title rights.

## First full week of July — NAIDOC Week

The first Sunday of July sees the beginning of a week dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples to celebrate NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Day Observance Committee) Week. It is a celebration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Island peoples of their survival. It is also a time for all Australians to celebrate the unique contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions and cultures.

## 4 August — National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day

This day was first observed in 1988 and each year it has a special theme. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care produce a poster to celebrate the day.

### 1F: Further reading

[Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies](#)

[City of Sydney - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols](#)

[Indigenous Culture and History](#)

[Indigenous People - Our People](#)

[NAIDOC](#)

[National Reconciliation Week](#)

[Oxfam Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Protocols](#)

[Sorry Business](#)





