

A guide to meeting the **cultural needs** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

VOLUNTEERS



in collaboration with **Burbirra Group**

July
2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. We acknowledge and respect their vital ongoing contribution to the Canberra region. We are committed to reconciliation and will continue to walk alongside First Nations Peoples and embrace the traditions, stories and wisdoms of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

This document was created on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country.

VolunteeringACT thanks Burbirra Group and its CEO Dr Karen Demmery for their partnership to develop this Guide. Burbirra Group specialises in training and development, cultural services, business development and management consulting. Dr Karen Demmery, CEO of Burbirra Group, is a Wiradjuri woman from Dubbo in NSW. A passionate and enthusiastic leader, Karen is the inspiration behind the creation of Burbirra Group. Karen has over a decade of experience in the training, facilitation, coaching and counselling space. She also has post graduate qualifications in Trauma and Recovery, Health and healing, Masters in Indigenous Health and completed her Phd at the University of Canberra at the end of 2022. Karen has been working with VolunteeringACT since 2022 as a First Nations Consultant.

VolunteeringACT thanks Richard Allan Jr, the artist that created the beautiful hexagon designs throughout this document. Richard is a Ngunnawal, Kamilaroi, and Bundjalung artist. Richard Allan Jr started Cultural work through his father's business until he began his own business journey with the creation of Traditional Core.

Richard has explained his design: "Volunteers, just like bees, are all hard workers, and all of them need to do their specific job to make the team run smoothly. The bee has been around for around 140 million years. Just as the world needs bees to thrive, so does Canberra need volunteers. They are both essential and make the world a more beautiful place".

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Australian Government
Department of Social Services



WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT

and why do we need it?

This document is a guide to provide you and your staff with information that may be helpful when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers.

Its purpose is to enhance engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities by supplying organisations with pertinent information and knowledge.

By utilising this resource, organisations will be better equipped to understand and meet the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers.



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INTRODUCTION



The land of Australia is comprised of many First Nations peoples, in a similar way that Europe and Africa embraces the different nations that make up their continents.

Many First Nations peoples have come to the ACT to work, be with other family members, or simply because this is where they want to live.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples carry with them diverse life experiences; culturally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. Their experiences, and the experiences of their ancestors, live within them and reflect their outlook on life.



Always be respectful that these experiences are highly likely to be different from your own. Listen when you can, let silences exist, and don't assume you know their life or tell them how they should live.



This information aims to provide an overview to help non-Indigenous people understand the context of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is to inspire respectful interactions and further learning through that interaction.

There are many caveats around the information presented, for example it will not represent the experiences and circumstances of all First Nations peoples.

But it is offered to provide a general, first step in how to facilitate a relationship based on sound understanding and respectful intent.

It is impossible to be comprehensive within a single document, but the expectation is that further research will be undertaken through online education and other reading materials which will help you become better informed about the histories, cultures and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We have provided references to materials that already exist and are useful to any organisation that wishes to engage respectfully with First Nations peoples, particularly here in the ACT and surrounding region. These materials should be used in conjunction with this document to help build respectful cultural understandings.



HISTORY

The well-documented massacres, brutality, land dispossession, forced removal to missions, forced servitude and labour, forced removal of babies and children, along with other discriminatory acts imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, were all part of the British colonisation process. The impact pervades the lives of many First Nations peoples to this day and explains the distrust that is felt towards existing institutions and systems.

To illustrate this point, let's look at just one impact of colonisation: the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Although difficult to determine, statistics released in 2021 by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) found that an estimated 27,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 50 years and over in 2018-2019, were survivors of the Stolen Generations (AIHW, 2021).

This represents about one in five Australian First Nations peoples.



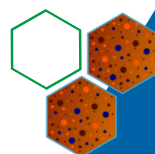
And the impacts can be profound. Separated people were more likely to suffer psychological distress in adulthood, with depression accounting for the majority of diagnoses (Bringing them Home 1997, p. 170).

The use of alcohol and other drugs is reported as being used to combat the impact of depression, as a means to reduce feelings of “hopelessness, helplessness, marginalisation, discrimination and dispossession, leading to breakdown in relationships, domestic violence and abuse” (Commonwealth of Australia 1997, p. 171).

Poor physical health is a result of chronic depression. Victims of traumatic separation are less likely to adhere to a treatment regime, choosing instead to self-medicate with alcohol. The effects of forcible separation of children are also felt among the parents and relatives left behind, as well as the entire community (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997).

Because of this background and a continued history of colonisation, many First Nations peoples can feel a level of distrust towards others with whom they do not have a strong relationship.

It is important for all Australians to gain understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories in order to build empathy and respect. It is particularly important to develop understandings that relate to the place in which you live.



The reference list provides a list of resources that will help build an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is something we all do. Usually we communicate without really thinking about how we are interacting. It is just something we do every day through our words, our actions and our deeds. Yet how we communicate reflects our experiences, our history and our culture. We must be mindful that not all people share the same experiences and background.

This does not mean that one way of communicating is considered more appropriate than another. It is the diversity that needs to be recognised, respected and responded to.

How we communicate effectively and respectfully, in a way that creates understanding and knowledge, is important to us all. And we communicate better with empathy and understanding. Please keep this uppermost in your mind when communicating with First Nations peoples.

The exchanges must fundamentally involve two-way authentic sharing that builds relationships and connections. It should be a way of knowing, being and doing, incorporating and acknowledging histories, cultures, languages, and identities. Don't expect First Nations peoples to give of themselves if you are not willing to do so also.

The following principles are offered to help focus on communicating with First Nations peoples to build empathy and respect, and as a way forward to create greater understanding. If communication processes are undertaken with these principles in mind, then the communication space should provide cultural protection and a safe environment in which to share.



1 Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a mutually respectful process that is underpinned by a shared power relationship. It includes respect for each individual as well as respect for the knowledge shared and the information provided.

2 Responsibility

The communication process must be underpinned by respectful and ethical acceptance of knowledge and information provided.

3 Relationship

The communication context should support authentic relationship-building that is equitable and based on power sharing.

4 Dignity

Dignity must be fundamental to communication for all involved, with respect and honour central to this. Each contributor should be accepted for who they are and respected for what they can contribute.

5 Equality

Equality of rights and responsibilities is essential to communication processes. This is regardless of age, gender, ability and experience.

6 Integrity

Honesty and fairness underpins communication, with trust essential to the sharing and handling of knowledge.

7 Self-determination

First Nations peoples must be able to self-determine whether they wish to participate, communicate and interact, or when or how they wish to end their involvement.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

& interactions

Interactions should encourage communication that is comfortable for everyone involved. Further to the principles listed above, the following practical considerations should help achieve an environment that is welcoming and considerate of First Nations peoples.

1. Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country



Respect for the people and Country upon which interactions take place should be recognised through either a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country. Welcome to Country is performed by a local, significant First Nations person, usually an Elder. It is to acknowledge and give permission for activities or interactions to take place on their traditional land. It is a mark of respect. Welcome to Country can only be done by a Traditional Custodian of that land.

Acknowledgement of Country is a way to demonstrate awareness of and respect for the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which an interaction or event is to take place. It recognises the continuing connection of First Nations peoples to Country. It can be delivered by First Nations peoples or non-Indigenous people and is often used at the beginnings of meetings or small gatherings. The wording used in an Acknowledgement of Country is more about intent over content. Speaking from the heart about the Country you live and work on is more important than a scripted paragraph that has no meaning.



2. Control of interactions must be with First Nations contributors

Control over the amount of involvement and the direction of communication should be with First Nations contributors wherever possible to ensure that communication is appropriate. Be inclusive. Don't just engage with some people and organisations and not others. You might have to engage people in smaller groups or individually to make certain that as many as possible are involved but it is important that all people who should be included are given the opportunity to contribute.

3. Don't push people to contribute



First Nations contributors need to be given the freedom to determine what they want to share and how they choose to share their knowledge. Don't push people to contribute when they do not want to. Encourage involvement politely. Conversations and interactions should provide for inclusiveness with each contribution accepted in its entirety. They must be listened to both actively and intently.



4. The physical space must be culturally suitable and safe

The physical space in which interactions are to take place should be constructed with input from First Nations peoples so that it is a culturally suitable space. This can include visual representation or asking the question of 'how safe and inclusive is this space?' First Nations peoples will not return to a place that feels unwelcoming and not safe.

5. Sharing knowledge is a gift



The sharing of First Nations knowledges with others is a gift and the knowledge shared must be accepted, valued and treated in an ethical way. Please make certain that all contributions to interactions are acknowledged and responded to by words and/or gestures.



6. Communication protocols



Personal characteristics, such as age, and gender are important to consider within the context of the interaction, particularly as shared experiences and stories may remain exclusive to certain groups (such as women only or men only), or remain exclusive to those engaged in the interaction.



7. Avoid conflicting times for events. Communicate first!

Before organising events or interactions that involve First Nations peoples, check that the dates or times proposed do not clash with dates of importance to potential First Nations contributors. There are a number of websites that will help with this (Commonground, Creative Spirits, Community Services ACT and ACTCOSS's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Resources) but the best source would be local First Nations peoples. This is because there could be family events or interactions that are not known more broadly but involve many in the local community.

8. Build appropriate contact with people over time



Build relationships where relationships are appropriate and possible. Personal contact is best although this is not always possible as people are busy, so telephone, email or texts can be used to keep contact and communication open. In general, it is best if men speak with men and women with women, especially when you are not known to the person or the community.



9. Be inclusive and maintain contact

Be inclusive of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Keep them up to date and with initiatives and events.

10. Build knowledge and understanding within your organisation



Make certain that your organisation's staff members spend time building an understanding of local First Nations peoples' protocols, histories and organisations. The ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS) provides a very comprehensive list of resources that will help you build this understanding. Of specific interest is the ACTCOSS publication Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Cultural Resource for Community Sector Workers (ACT & Region) (2015).



11. Know your region's Traditional Custodians

Remember that the ACT has many First Nations peoples living here who are from other places. The Ngannawal and Ngambri peoples are the Traditional Custodians of the ACT and its surrounds, with the Gundungurra people neighbouring to the north and the Ngarigo to the south. Yuin Country is coastal from the ACT and Wiradjuri Country is predominant within inland NSW. There are many relationships and histories that exist between and among First Nations peoples in the ACT and surrounding area. Be mindful to not interfere with these relationships. Build your knowledge.

12. Communication methods



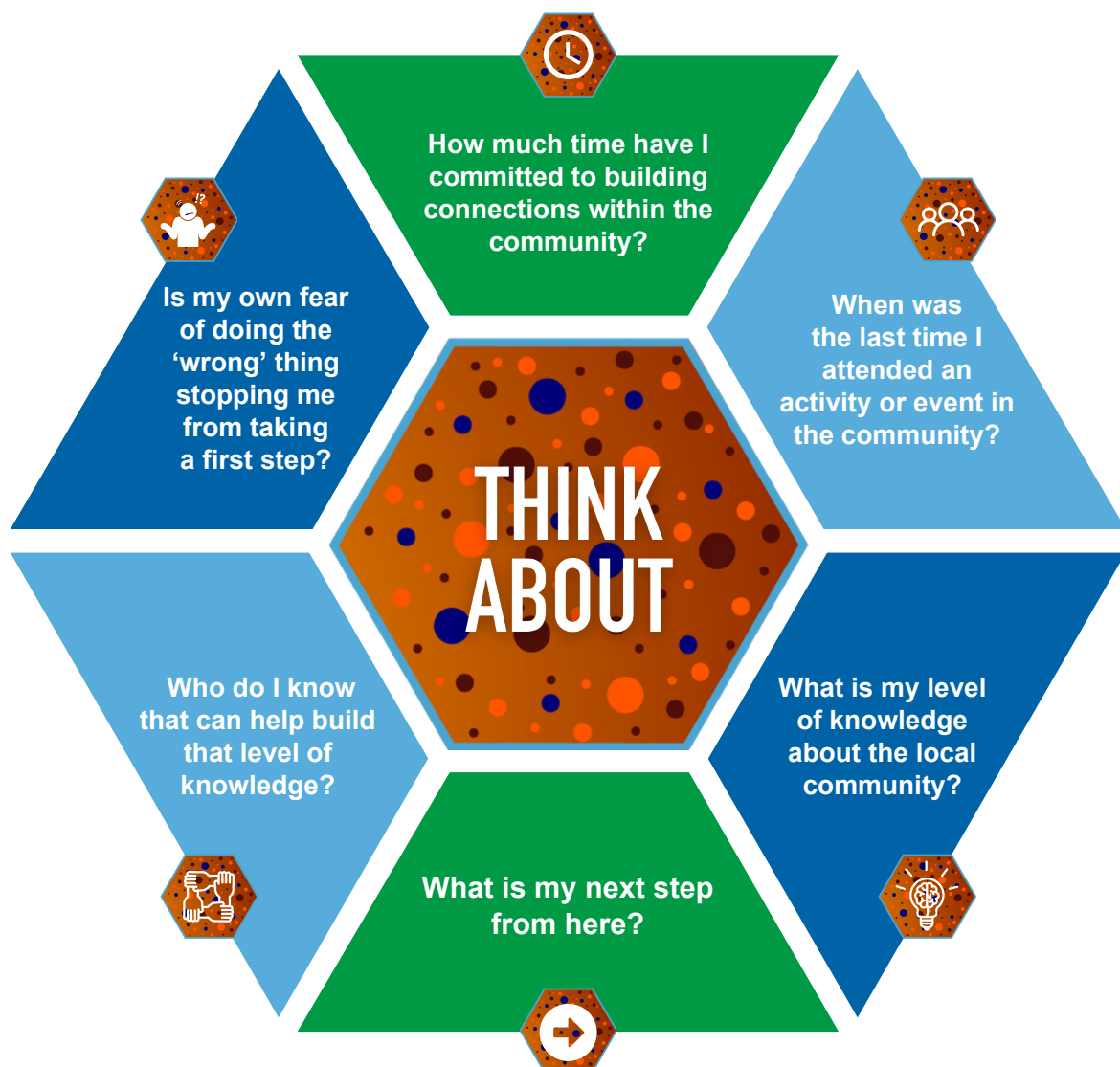
When organising events, activities and other interactions, ask those who you wish to engage how they would best like to communicate; emails, social media, text messages or telephone. And when developing any material for marketing or reports about events or activities, involve First Nations peoples to make certain that the sharing of information is appropriate.



NEXT STEPS

Building relationships is an important next step. Think about what community activities you and your organisation can get involved in.

Be willing to put in the effort to establish a relationship that will foster meaningful interactions and connections with the community. Cultural competence should be weaved throughout the organisation and not simply added in as an afterthought as many organisations have attempted in the past.



APPENDIX 1

Self-Assessment Tool

This tool has been created to assist you in evaluating and contemplating your own understanding and methods relating to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, both in a personal and professional capacity. It is not an examination and there are no correct or incorrect responses.

The information can be used by you personally or your organisation to identify trends, strengths and opportunities to develop the skills and capacity of staff to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have equitable access. Please review the questions/ statements and respond by circling around the number which you feel best describes your level of knowledge, experience and comfort.

1. No knowledge or experience
2. Some knowledge and/ or experience
3. General knowledge and/ or experience
4. Strong knowledge and/ or experience
5. Highly developed knowledge and very experienced

How would you describe your knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history?

1 2 3 4 5

How would you describe your knowledge of the factors which have led to the gap in life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia?

1 2 3 4 5

How would you rate your knowledge of the demographic information of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the area you work in? (e.g. do you know how many volunteers are involved in your organisation who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?)

1 2 3 4 5


How much information do you know about the Traditional Custodians of the area that you work in?


1 2 3 4 5


What is your knowledge of and/or relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations that operate in the area that you work?


1 2 3 4 5



 How would you describe your awareness of the barriers that might affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples accessing your organisation?
 1 2 3 4 5

 How would you describe the capacity of your organisation to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers?
 1 2 3 4 5

 How frequently do you modify the way you deliver your services to improve someone’s ability to access it?
 1 2 3 4 5

 How would you describe your personal comfort level when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
 1 2 3 4 5

Comments:

Reflect on your experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers and other stakeholders, changes you have made to be more inclusive in the past and what opportunities you can see to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to volunteering.

Assessment:

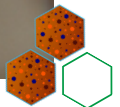
Total possible is 45, your Result: _____

Result range rating:

9 or less	No knowledge or experience – requires development
10-16	Some knowledge and / or experience – requires development
17-27	General knowledge and / or experience - capable
28-37	Strong knowledge and experience – comfortable
38 +	Highly developed knowledge and very experienced - confident

APPENDIX 2

Behaviours to be mindful of when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers



Remember that these behaviours do not apply to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but rather reflect common behaviours. Like with all Australians, different upbringing, age, and whether the person is from a remote, regional or urban location will influence their behaviours. Use good judgement if you are unsure.

Looking behaviours

- Direct eye contact may have social implications for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- In some areas of Australia, direct eye contact may be considered offensive.
- When talking to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – try not to stare.
- Sitting next to a person, rather than across from them, and occasionally looking at them is good practice.

Listening behaviours

- Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples listen without looking.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not usually look at the person talking to them.
- Try not to assume that a person who is not responding verbally has failed to understand.
- If you are not sure the person has understood, you can look for non-verbal signs of comprehension, such as a nod of the head, or if they have an advocate or support person, check with them.
- Give room for silence before firing off multiple questions in succession.
- Be careful not to raise your voice if you think the person is not listening. A quiet approach can work better.

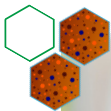


Speaking behaviours

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are both verbal and non-verbal.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples perceive that requests do not require a response, but questions do, therefore they tend to respond better to questions. For example, “tell me about your situation at the moment” (request), versus, “what is happening for you at the moment (question)?”
- Don’t assume that ‘yes’ indicates agreement. It may just be a polite response.
- If unsure, lead with more questions, for example, “Would you like to consult with someone in your family or community to help make the decision?” Place a timeframe on the questions and ask them to respond to you by an agreed timeframe.

Values

- Work to build a relationship rather than a transaction.
- Avoid imposing your own values.
- Honesty is respected and valued.
- Don’t promise anything that cannot be delivered.
- Be careful not to place your own interpretation on what is said. If you are in doubt, rephrase or seek clarification by asking questions rather than leading with statements.
- Don’t demand immediate answers. Your KPI’s are not the highest priority.
- Build rapport – don’t go straight into business. Try to find common ground with the person. Finding commonality and building rapport is effective in building a genuine relationship, rather than just a transactional relationship.
- Forms and paperwork may result in a barrier being put up. Take time for discussion.
- Do not put people in a situation where they may feel shamed.



RESOURCES

ACTCOSS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Resources.

<https://actcoss.org.au/gulanga-program/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-support-and-resources/>

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