

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT & WELCOME TO COUNTRY PROTOCOL REVIEW REPORT

City of Adelaide

Acknowledgement of Country

This report acknowledges the Kurna People of the Adelaide Plains as the Traditional Custodians of the land. We acknowledge and honour the spiritual and cultural stewardship of this Country and recognise their deep and enduring relationship with its lands, waters, the sky, and all living things. We pay our respects to Kurna Elders past and present and recognise the important role of emerging leaders in sustaining and strengthening culture.



A note on terminology

In this report, we use the terms 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people' (with the 'and/or' acknowledging that some individuals identify as both) interchangeably with 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. We acknowledge, however, that this usage can be contentious. These umbrella terms do not capture the full diversity of Indigenous Australian identities, and many individuals prefer to be identified by their specific Nation, language group, or clan. Some also favour the term 'First Nations' over other labels. Additionally, we understand that some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are uncomfortable with the term 'Indigenous', as it is often perceived as a generic term predominantly used by government.

Wherever possible, we have referred to 'Aboriginal peoples'. In some contexts, however, we have used 'Indigenous' or 'First Nations' for readability or alignment with commonly used terminology. We use 'community' or 'communities' to refer collectively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We sincerely apologise if any terminology used causes offence — that is not our intention.

".....Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land". Professor Mick Dodson

This report derives its conception of the Country from Professor Mick Dodson views. "Country" encompasses both lands, inland waterways and seas, reflecting the deep spiritual connection Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples have with the environment, where Country serves as both a teacher and a source of life.



1. Introduction

The delivery of an Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country holds profound cultural, spiritual, and historical significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is not merely a “tick-box” exercise followed by a ceremonial formality but an important expression that recognises the relationship and enduring connection between Aboriginal peoples and their lands, waters, plants, animals, the skies, and communities. These practices (Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country) embody respect, responsibility, and relationship-building, providing an opportunity for all Australians to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and their sovereignty¹. This report considers Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country practices from other Councils across Australia and, identifies gaps, inconsistencies/different approaches, and offers culturally informed recommendations to enhance their meaning and impact in contemporary settings.

In particular, this report draws upon insights from a personalised Acknowledgement of Country developed by the South Australian Government’s Department for Energy and Mining (DEM) (see Appendix A). This example incorporates key cultural elements often omitted in existing acknowledgements, such as spirituality, historical context, and the reciprocal relationship between custodians and visitors. The reflections of cultural custodians and community leaders have informed this comprehensive review, highlighting the importance of embedding deeper meaning and respect into these protocols.

2. Cultural significance of Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of Country is deeply embedded in Aboriginal cultural practices and protocols. As mentioned above, it is a formal recognition of the relationship and enduring connection that Aboriginal peoples maintain with their traditional lands and waters that has been shaped over tens of thousands of years. The Kaurna People of the Adelaide Plains, for example, articulate this connection through spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions that include the land itself, the sea, the sky, and all living beings.

Spirituality is a core component of this connection. The land is not simply physical terrain but a living entity with which Aboriginal peoples share mutual responsibility. DEM’s personalised Acknowledgement of Country highlights this spiritual dimension, recognising the land’s sacredness and the cultural and spiritual ties that predate colonisation (“since the first sunrise”). This acknowledgement underscores that country is inseparable from the spiritual wellbeing of its people.

Welcoming visitors to Country is also an act of sharing and responsibility. Traditional protocols required that visitors seek permission to enter, stating their purpose and duration, respecting the sovereignty and custodianship of the traditional owners. This is reflected in the intent that an Acknowledgement of Country is a response and a form of asking permission and showing respect to the custodians of the land you are standing on, and recognising the history and ongoing relationships forged over generations with that Country.

¹ In the context of Indigenous Australia, sovereignty refers to the inherent right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination and control over their affairs, including their lands, waters, and cultural practices. It is not a concept that was granted by the British Crown or any other external authority, but rather an inherent right held by First Nations' peoples.



Acknowledgement can also be about fostering relationships. It is an invitation to understand the land's history and cultural significance, to share knowledge, and to build a sustainable future together. As expressed in the example from DEM, visitors are encouraged to reflect on their impact and their role in respecting cultural connections and working in partnership with Aboriginal peoples. In conclusion, an effective Acknowledgement of Country should be deeply personal, reflecting on geographic boundaries as well as the relationship and connection that the Traditional Custodians have to their country.

3. Benchmarking and reflection on current practices

A detailed benchmark study comparing the City of Adelaide's (CoA) current Acknowledgement of Country with those of other Australian city councils revealed significant differences and gaps (see Table 1).

Language and terminology: Many councils, including Melbourne, Darwin, Hobart, Perth, and Sydney, use terms such as "custodian," "custodianship," and "traditional owners" with greater cultural and spiritual weight. The CoA's wording tends to omit references to custodianship, which is a stronger recognition of the ongoing responsibility and connection Aboriginal peoples have with their lands. This omission can weaken the cultural and emotional resonance of the acknowledgement.

Spirituality and relationship: While some councils explicitly acknowledge the spiritual relationship with Country and generational ties, CoA's current statement uses more formal and neutral language. It lacks explicit mention of spirituality, resilience, or colonisation narratives, which are crucial to understanding the historical context and present-day significance of the land and its custodians. This may result in an acknowledgement that feels less authentic and impactful to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Historical and cultural context: Several councils incorporate a deeper narrative about history, including colonisation and Aboriginal resilience. CoA's current acknowledgement lightly touches on cultural heritage but avoids these more difficult or complex histories. This omission risks disconnecting the acknowledgment from its origins and diminishes understanding of the reasons why such protocols exist.

Inclusive protocols: Some cities include references to neighbouring or associated nations, recognising the broader cultural landscape and inter-nation relationships, such as through marriage or shared resources. Adelaide's statement does not currently reflect this broader, inclusive approach, which can be important for acknowledging the interconnectedness of Aboriginal nations. In addition to these findings, feedback from the CoA Reconciliation Committee and Kurna Yerta Aboriginal Corporation (KYAC) Board has highlighted the importance of reimagining the physical Acknowledgement of Country documents themselves. It was suggested that future editions should move away from Westernised and corporate designs towards more organic, art-centred layouts that reflect Aboriginal cultural aesthetics. This visual and tactile transformation would better honour the cultural roots and living nature of these acknowledgements. Additionally, questions arose about how respect is paid when on lands outside the Kurna Nation, indicating an area for further cultural exploration and guidance.



Table 1: Benchmarking and reflection on current practices

Term	Implications	Who Uses It	Notes on Adelaide
Custodian	Spiritual/cultural stewardship	Most councils except Adelaide	Adelaide omits this term, which is unusual and may be seen as a softer recognition
Traditional Owner	Legal/sovereign rights; land return potential	Melbourne, Darwin, Hobart	Adelaide avoids this stronger legal language
Relationship/Connection	Relational, respectful; affirms living culture	Adelaide, Melbourne, Perth, Hobart	Adelaide uses "relationship", but not "spiritual"
Spiritual/Generational terms	Emotive and deeply respectful	Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne	Not present in Adelaide's wording, which may lessen emotional resonance
Custodian Identification	Naming specific Peoples strengthens cultural authority and place-based recognition	Melbourne, Hobart, Perth, Sydney, Brisbane	Adelaide identifies Kurna People, showing cultural specificity and local recognition
Tone	Tone sets the emotional and formal framing of the acknowledgement	Melbourne (inclusive), Hobart (emotive), Perth (celebratory)	Adelaide is respectful and neutral in tone; more formal than emotive
Historical/Cultural Depth	Highlights resilience, dispossession, survival and heritage	Hobart, Melbourne, Brisbane	Adelaide lightly touches on cultural heritage but avoids colonisation or resilience narratives
Spiritual/Political Emphasis	Reflects acceptance of sovereignty, Uluru Statement, or connection beyond culture alone	Melbourne, Brisbane (Dreaming), Hobart (resilience), Perth	Adelaide is culturally respectful but politically cautious; does not mention Uluru Statement or sovereignty
Broader Inclusion	Extending recognition beyond local group to all Aboriginal/First Nations peoples	Perth, Sydney, Hobart	Adelaide extends respect to "other Aboriginal Language Groups and other First Nations", showing inclusive intent



4. Historical protocols and their contemporary adaptation

Historically, Aboriginal protocols surrounding entering and welcoming onto country were detailed and prescriptive. Visitors were required to seek permission, state their purpose, negotiate access to resources such as water, food, and shelter, and abide by cultural laws and responsibilities during their time on the land.

These protocols included complex ceremonies — smoking, dance, song, and language — that demonstrated respect, hospitality, and the transfer of knowledge. Welcome ceremonies were not tokenistic events but vital cultural practices that ensured safety, spiritual protection, and mutual respect.

Modern Acknowledgements of Country should seek to retain and embed these essential elements while adapting respectfully to contemporary contexts. This involves acknowledging the history and purpose of the protocols, not reducing them to brief, perfunctory statements detached from their cultural meaning.

Embedding historical context into acknowledgements provides the audience with a richer understanding of the cultural significance of the land and the continuing custodianship role of Aboriginal peoples. It also challenges the perception of acknowledgements as mere formalities and invites people to engage thoughtfully with the narratives of sovereignty, survival, and reconciliation.

5. Custodianship vs Ownership: clarifying terminology

A vital theme that emerged from desktop review, consultations with CoA Reconciliation Committee and Kurna Yerta Aboriginal Corporation (KYAC) Board, and reflections is the distinction between *custodianship* and *ownership* of land. This is a critical consideration for respectful and culturally accurate acknowledgements.

Many Aboriginal people and custodians reject the Western legal concept of ownership, which implies possession and control. Instead, they embrace *custodianship*, which emphasises a deep, reciprocal relationship and responsibility for caring for the land while acknowledging that the land is not “owned” but cared for across generations.

Custodianship encompasses stewardship, respect, and the responsibility to protect country for future generations. This concept is rooted in Aboriginal law and culture and differs fundamentally from the transactional concept of ownership under Western property law.

In current practice, the terms “Traditional Owners” and “Custodians” are sometimes used interchangeably, which can cause confusion. The report recommends clarifying and consistently using *Custodianship* language to better reflect cultural perspectives and responsibilities. This would also enhance the emotional and spiritual resonance of Acknowledgement of Country statements.



6. Recommendations for future Acknowledgement of Country practices

Drawing on cultural reflections, community consultation, and historical context, the following recommendations aim to enhance Acknowledgement of Country practices across the CoA area and beyond. These practices should reflect Aboriginal worldviews, acknowledge past and ongoing custodianship, and engage communities in culturally safe and authentic ways.

6.1 Embed spirituality and cultural connection to Country

Future Acknowledgements should recognise that Country is a living, spiritual entity encompassing land, waters, skies, and all living things. Aboriginal peoples' spiritual and cultural connections to Country must be made explicit, reflecting the worldview that Country is both a place and a being, not simply a landscape.

- Use language that honours spiritual relationships to place.
- Acknowledge that cultural and spiritual responsibilities are ongoing, active, and deeply rooted in Country.
- Frame Acknowledgement as more than a protocol – as an act of respect for living culture.

6.2 Include historical context and protocols

Acknowledgement of Country should go beyond formulaic statements to include the rich history and traditional protocols that governed relationships to land and between groups:

- Educate about traditional laws of permission, responsibility, and conduct when entering another group's Country.
- Reinforce that Welcome to Country is a formal cultural protocol based on mutual respect and recognition.
- Include examples of traditional practices: requests for passage, sharing of resources, ceremonial welcomes, and protection of spiritual wellbeing.

This historical framing helps counter political backlash and misinterpretations by fostering informed understanding of the enduring depth and meaning of these practices.

6.3 Use custodianship language consistently

Shift language from “ownership” to “custodianship” to reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing and being:

- Custodianship implies care, responsibility, and interconnectedness, rather than possession.
- Provide simple explanations in public-facing documents to educate users about this distinction.
- Ensure the term is used consistently in all Acknowledgement materials and presentations.

6.4 Reflect local boundaries and relationships

Acknowledgements should meaningfully reference the specific traditional lands on which an event or activity is taking place:

- Clearly identify the Kurna Nation boundaries within CoA's jurisdiction, using input from Kurna Yerta Aboriginal Corporation (KYAC) and Kurna Nation Heritage Association.
- Acknowledge neighbouring nations where appropriate, especially during broader or cross-border gatherings.
- Provide guidance on how to conduct a respectful Acknowledgement of Country when outside Kurna Country, including interstate events.



This reinforces cultural geography and honours longstanding inter-tribal relationships.

6.5 Support personalisation of Acknowledgements

Generic or templated Acknowledgements risk disconnecting audiences from their purpose. CoA should:

- Encourage individuals to deliver Acknowledgements that reflect their own understanding of the relationship and connection of the Traditional Custodians with their Country.
- Offer cultural guidance and practical tools to help people personalise their delivery in a culturally safe way.
- Lead internal training and mentoring to shift from “going through the motions” to authentic acknowledgement and engagement.
- Personalised Acknowledgements can serve as a powerful expression of shared responsibility, and position CoA as a national leader in culturally meaningful practice.

6.6 Reimagine the physical presentation of Acknowledgement documents

Move away from conventional, Western-styled corporate designs:

- Create materials that reflect Aboriginal cultural aesthetics – incorporating art, storytelling, and natural forms.
- Use design to convey cultural values, not just information.
- Engage Aboriginal artists and designers in this process.

This can elevate the cultural resonance of Acknowledgement materials and symbolise respect through visual form.

6.7 Explore respectful protocols for lands outside Kurna Nation

Develop clear guidance for acknowledging Country when activities occur outside Kurna lands:

- Recognise the diversity and autonomy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the continent.
- Support staff and stakeholders in researching and properly acknowledging local Traditional Custodians elsewhere.
- Emphasise the importance of adapting Acknowledgement language depending on location.
- This reflects respect and broader understanding of Aboriginal sovereignty and cultural diversity.

6.8 Incorporate Kurna language

Integrating Kurna language into Acknowledgements strengthens cultural visibility and offers audiences an opportunity to engage with the local language:

- Include Kurna words and phrases as part of standard practice, with translation and pronunciation support.
- Encourage use of Kurna language in signage, publications, and public events.
- Collaborate with language custodians and organisations for accuracy and cultural safety.
- Language inclusion deepens cultural respect and contributes to language revitalisation efforts.

6.9 Ensure KYAC leadership and endorsement

The Kurna Yerta Aboriginal Corporation (KYAC) must lead or co-lead the development of Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country protocols relevant to Kurna land:

- KYAC’s endorsement is essential to confer cultural legitimacy and authority.



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- Decisions about terminology, boundaries, format, and content should be driven by KYAC and other appropriate Kurna representatives.
- CoA should formally recognise KYAC's cultural governance role in its public documentation that relates to Kurna Country.
- Where appropriate, KYAC may choose to share or withhold protocols from other councils. Respect for community control is paramount.

6.10 Make Acknowledgements personal and emotive

Acknowledgements should evoke genuine emotional and cultural reflection, not just fulfil a protocol:

- Use storytelling reflecting personal understanding to engage audiences on a deeper level.
- Support speakers in expressing what Country means to them personally.
- Create moments of pause and reflection, encouraging respect and learning.
- Emotive, heartfelt delivery can transform routine ceremony into meaningful cultural connection.

6.11 Collaborate with Aboriginal organisations

Ongoing collaboration with Traditional Custodians such as KYAC, the Kurna Nation Heritage Association, and others is essential:

- Involve Aboriginal-led organisations in developing, reviewing, and updating all Acknowledgement-related materials and protocols.
- Maintain culturally safe, co-governed processes that reflect community aspirations and authority.
- Build lasting partnerships grounded in mutual respect and community leadership.

6.12 Position Acknowledgement of Country as a living protocol

Acknowledgement of Country should not be treated as a static, one-off document:

- Create living documents that evolve with time, community input, and cultural context.
- Regularly review and update language, format, and guidance to reflect contemporary cultural practice.
- Foster innovation in presentation and practice, including non-linear formats, multimedia, and visual storytelling.
- Offer staff a 'licence' to personalise their delivery while maintaining cultural integrity and guidance.

7. Conclusion

Acknowledgement of Country is a vital cultural practice that holds deep spiritual, historical, and social meaning for Aboriginal peoples. This report highlights the importance of embedding this cultural depth into acknowledgements to ensure they are meaningful, respectful, and educational for all Australians. The personalised example from DEM offers a model that integrates spirituality, history, custodianship, and relationship-building in a way that enriches the practice. Benchmarking CoA's current protocols against other councils reveals opportunities to enhance language, cultural inclusion, and emotional resonance. Adopting the recommendations outlined in this report will enable future acknowledgements to better honour Aboriginal sovereignty, foster



genuine respect, and support reconciliation efforts across South Australia and beyond. It remains essential that acknowledgements are not seen as mere formalities but as ongoing commitments to respect, responsibility, and cultural partnership.

Reference

1. Government of South Australia, Department for Energy and Mining, Acknowledgement, <https://www.energymining.sa.gov.au/>
2. Reconciliation Australia, Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country, <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/>

Appendices

Appendix A: Department for Energy and Mining Acknowledgement

As guests on Aboriginal land, the Department for Energy and Mining (DEM) acknowledges everything this department does impacts on Aboriginal country, the sea, the sky, its people, and the spiritual and cultural connections which have existed since the first sunrise. Our responsibility is to share our collective knowledge, recognise a difficult history, respect the relationships made over time, and create a stronger future. We are ready to walk, learn and work together

Appendix B: Updated Acknowledgement of Country

The City of Adelaide acknowledges the Kaurna People of the Adelaide Plains as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today. We acknowledge and honour the spiritual and cultural stewardship of this Country, and recognise their deep and enduring relationship with its lands, waters, the sky, and all living things. We pay our respects to Kaurna Elders past and present, and recognise the important role of emerging leaders in sustaining and strengthening culture.

