



Caring for Country Aboriginal Relationships Framework

Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy for the Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan

December 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands, waters, and skies across the Cumberland Plain. We honour and pay our deepest respects to Elders past, present, and emerging, who hold and pass on the knowledge, traditions, and cultural practices that have sustained these lands for tens of thousands of years.

This Caring for Country Aboriginal Relationships Framework (the Framework) is developed with gratitude and recognition of the ongoing connection that Aboriginal peoples have to Country. We honour the wisdom and stewardship of Traditional Custodians and commit to walking alongside them in caring for Country, conserving biodiversity, and fostering cultural and environmental sustainability.

We also acknowledge the diverse Aboriginal communities across Western Sydney who contribute their knowledge, skills, and care for Country, including those who may not be Traditional Custodians but are connected to Country and continue to enrich the cultural fabric and resilience of this region.

In the spirit of respect and reconciliation, we commit to embedding Aboriginal voices, values, and leadership in all aspects of our work, ensuring that this Framework supports self-determination and strengthens the cultural and environmental legacy of the Cumberland Plain.



Acknowledgement of contributors

This Framework was developed over 9 months through respectful collaboration with many individuals and organisations who share a deep commitment to Caring for Country across the Cumberland Plain.

We gratefully acknowledge the Darug, Gundungurra, and Dharawal Traditional Custodians and other Aboriginal peoples with cultural responsibilities and connections to this Country. Their knowledge, leadership, and generosity in sharing perspectives have directly shaped the direction and content of this Framework. We also thank members of Local Aboriginal Land Councils on the Cumberland Plain and other Aboriginal community members and organisations who shared their time and ideas.

We recognise the important contributions of the Caring for Country Working Group and the Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (MER) Working Group, as well as our local government partners across the 9 councils of the Cumberland Plain, Local Land Services, and First Nations Economics. We thank staff from the Resilience and Sustainability Division and the Aboriginal Strategy, Policy and Engagement (ASPE) team at the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (the Department) for their expertise, energy, and ongoing commitment to this work.

This Framework and the companion Toolkit were prepared by Dharawal man Gregory Andrews of [Lyrebird Dreaming Pty Ltd](#), who led the consultation process and authored the materials in collaboration with the Department and its partners.



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The NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (the Department) is committed to applying Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property principles, which establish an ethical and standard approach to give effect to the rights of Aboriginal people's need to maintain, control, protect and develop their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property.

Drafting of the Caring for Country Aboriginal Relationships Framework and Toolkit has been in collaboration with numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and contributors who generously shared their knowledge, culture, and time. The Department has applied these principles in developing this document, guided by its Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Protocol.

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Please also refer to the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure's Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Protocol for further information about how the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure handles Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual.

Note on language and terminology

This document uses the term "relationships" in place of "engagement" wherever possible to reflect a shift from transactional consultation to meaningful and effective, long-term connection. This approach acknowledges that Traditional Custodians are not so-called 'stakeholders' to be consulted but Peoples with sovereign and deep historical and ancestral cultural responsibilities for Country. Some references to "engagement" are retained where required for consistency with policy, planning, or legislative terminology.

While we have worked hard to ensure this document is representative in recognising all who are connected to Country within the CPCP region, we are aware that terminology within this Framework may not be the preferred choice for some. For this Framework and the Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy, we use the name Aboriginal to recognise the Traditional Custodians of NSW and those with connection to Country within the CPCP region. We have used the spelling Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra to represent the Traditional Custodians of the CPCP region, however, we are aware that there are numerous accepted spellings of these names, as they have been passed on verbally for many generations and have been subject to different interpretations.



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Statement from the Executive Director

I am proud to introduce Resilience and Sustainability Division's Caring for Country Aboriginal Relationships Framework.

This Framework reflects our Department's commitment to building meaningful, respectful, and effective partnerships with Aboriginal communities. It acknowledges the deep connection that Traditional Custodians and Aboriginal peoples have to Country and their vital role in shaping healthy Country and sustainable land and water management practices across the Cumberland Plain and beyond.

The Framework is designed to ensure that our relations with Aboriginal communities are guided by respect, inclusivity, and cultural integrity. It is a practical tool that will help embed Aboriginal voices and perspectives into our planning and decision-making processes, delivering outcomes that honour cultural heritage, protect biodiversity, and promote self-determination.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra peoples, as well as the broader Aboriginal communities of Western Sydney, for their generosity in sharing their knowledge and vision. Their leadership and collaboration are at the heart of this Framework and the broader Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy 2024–2033.

I also acknowledge with gratitude the contributions from our cultural advisors, federal, state and local government partners, Caring for Country Working Group members, and staff from Resilience and Sustainability Division. Their guidance, connection to community, and on-the-ground expertise have been invaluable.

This is a living Framework, and as we implement it, we do so with a commitment to Reconciliation, cultural sustainability, and working together to care for Country for future generations.

Steve Hartley

Executive Director

Resilience and Sustainability



Executive summary

The Caring for Country Aboriginal Relationships Framework has been prepared for staff in the Resilience and Sustainability Division in the NSW Department of Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure (the Department) to deliver the goals of the [Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan](#) and the [Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy](#). It will also be shared with federal, state and local government partners and other relevant organisations. The Framework sets out expectations and provides principles, protocols, and practical tools for staff to guide meaningful relations with Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra Traditional Custodians and other Aboriginal communities across the Cumberland Plain region.

Purpose

The Framework aims to enable Resilience and Sustainability Division staff to foster partnerships grounded in cultural safety, respect, and self-determination. Staff should also remember that while the Framework focuses on relationships and co-development with Aboriginal peoples, not all solutions will be provided this way. Furthermore, staff should not assume or expect local Aboriginal people to have all the answers. While its principles may be adaptable, this Framework is designed for place-based engagement specific to the Cumberland Plain, rather than broad state-wide policy initiatives.

It is the responsibility of all staff involved in Caring for Country activities to proactively apply this Framework and ensure their relations uphold the principles of cultural safety, respect, and reciprocity.

Why 'relationships' not 'engagement'

In Western systems, engagement can be transactional - consulting to inform a decision that's already underway. But Aboriginal ways of working are relational. Relationships come first, and decisions follow. This Framework reflects that cultural truth. It recognises that respectful, lasting relationships are not just a means to better outcomes - they are an outcome. This is why we call it a Relations Framework and refer to "relationships" rather than "engagement" wherever possible.

This model also brings with it a set of ethical obligations that begin well before project design and continue beyond delivery – encompassing the ways outcomes are translated and sustained over time.



Core features

The Framework and its toolkit are designed to help staff gain a deeper and more effective appreciation of the need for meaningful, respectful, and culturally informed relationships to achieve the best outcomes for the Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan.

The Framework covers:

1. Relationship principles

Ethical, culturally competent, and inclusive practices that build trust and promote mutual understanding.

2. Relationship protocol

Guidance on navigating Aboriginal cultural practices, including reciprocity, kinship systems, and community conflict.

3. Relationship process

Think:

Understand the purpose of connecting and the cultural, social, and historical context.

Plan:

Develop clear objectives, identify participants, and design culturally appropriate activities.

Prepare:

Ensure logistical readiness and cultural safety, including preparation of materials and protocols.

Engage:

Facilitate meaningful interactions, ensuring effective and respectful communication and active listening.

Evaluate:

Reflect on outcomes, incorporate what we heard, and communicate results back to communities.

4. Relationship toolkit

Includes templates, checklists, yarning circle guidelines, and a relationship matrix to support staff in planning and delivering culturally safe and effective connections.

5. Youth relations

A practical and future-focused approach to involving Aboriginal youth as emerging leaders and knowledge holders in Caring for Country initiatives – through inclusion in existing activities, targeted outreach, and a longer-term vision for a dedicated Youth Forum when readiness and opportunity align.



Outcomes

This Framework aims to ensure that:



This living document reflects the Department's commitment to reconciliation, sustainability, and the shared care of the Cumberland Plain.



Introduction

This Framework provides a practical roadmap for staff in the Resilience and Sustainability Division and local and state government partners to engage effectively and respectfully with Aboriginal communities across the Cumberland Plain. Grounded in the goals of the [Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan](#) (CPCP) and the [Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy](#), this Framework aims to ensure that Aboriginal voices, knowledge, and leadership shape the future of Country, and that staff are equipped and accountable for building and maintaining respectful, consistent, and culturally informed relations.



Why it matters

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal peoples have cared for Country in the area that is now referred to as Western Sydney, guided by cultural, spiritual, and ecological knowledge. The Caring for Country Strategy recognises this deep connection and commits to meaningful partnerships with Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra Traditional Custodians, as well as the broader Aboriginal communities connected to the region.

Identifying and including Aboriginal voices - particularly the guidance of Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra Traditional Custodians - is essential to the integrity of caring for Country work on the Cumberland Plain. Furthermore, government agencies have ethical and legal obligations to establish and maintain respectful, effective relations with Aboriginal peoples. This Framework aligns with and complements existing efforts across government, including the [Recognise Country: Guidelines for Development in the Aerotropolis](#) and the [NSW Government Architect's Connecting with Country Framework](#), both of which affirm the central role of Aboriginal peoples, knowledge systems, and values in shaping policy, planning, and place-based decision-making.



Key components of the Framework



1. Relationship process:

Think: Define the purpose of connection and assess cultural and community contexts.

Plan: Establish clear objectives, identify participants, design and budget for activities.

Prepare: Ensure readiness, including logistical arrangements and cultural safety.

Connect: Facilitate meaningful and respectful interactions.

Evaluate: Reflect, document learnings, communicate outcomes and close the loop.



2. Relationship toolkit:

Includes practical resources such as templates, checklists, and yarning circle guidelines to support culturally safe and effective relationship building.



3. Cultural competence:

Insights into local Aboriginal cultural values, protocols, and histories to foster more effective, respectful, and informed relationships.

Working together

Relationships take time and effort, and not all communities will feel the same level of connection or trust at the outset. It is important to note that this Framework is not a declaration that relationships already exist, but a commitment to working towards them with humility, consistency, and care.

By following this Framework, staff can build trust and connections with Aboriginal communities, collaborating to ensure that conservation and planning efforts honour cultural values and strengthen community resilience. Together, we can care for Country and create a better future for the Cumberland Plain.

Note: This Framework and its accompanying Toolkit are intended as a guiding resource to support culturally respectful relationships and communication with Aboriginal communities under the Caring for Country Strategy. It does not override any legal obligations, project-specific engagement requirements, or statutory responsibilities under other NSW Government policies, plans or legislation. Users must also refer to relevant departmental protocols, including the Department's ICIP Protocol and project-specific engagement plans



Aboriginal Community and Culture

Understanding Country as a living system

For Aboriginal peoples, Country is more than a physical landscape or a place; it is a living system, deeply interconnected with the cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of Aboriginal peoples and all who call Australia home.

For Aboriginal peoples, Country embodies the spiritual and physical dimensions of life. It is a source of identity, a keeper of stories, and a provider of sustenance. It is not simply "land"; it is a complex system of relationships between people, plants, animals, waterways, and the sky, sustained through care, respect, and reciprocal responsibility.

From an environmental perspective, Country supports rich biodiversity and ecological processes. The Cumberland Plain is home to critically endangered woodlands, diverse waterways, and unique wildlife, such as koala and platypus populations along the Georges River. Traditional Aboriginal practices like cultural burning have been instrumental in maintaining these ecosystems, fostering resilience against threats like invasive species, drought, and bushfires.

Economically, Country has sustained Aboriginal peoples for tens of thousands of years, providing food, medicine, and materials for shelter and tools.

Aboriginal peoples have developed technologies and adapted to Country and its changes over time. Today, Aboriginal communities across Australia are reclaiming economic agency by leading conservation programs and engaging in cultural tourism. Caring for Country is not just about preserving cultural heritage - it also ensures economic sustainability and resilience for future generations.

Understanding Country as a living system requires recognising its cultural and spiritual depth, ecological intricacies, and economic potential. This holistic view is essential for fostering respectful and sustainable partnerships with Aboriginal peoples.





History of Western Sydney's Aboriginal Peoples

The Deep Time Story

The Darug, Dharawal and Gundungurra peoples have been custodians of the lands now known as Western Sydney for tens of thousands of years.

Archaeological evidence, such as stone tools and rock art, reveals continuous habitation dating back at least 50,000 years. But for Aboriginal peoples, connection to Country is not measured in numbers or dates -it is spiritual, cultural, and eternal. From an Aboriginal perspective, these lands have been cared for and lived with since the beginning of the Dreaming. And of course, that connection continues today.

Before the last ice age, the Sydney Basin was a vastly different environment, with coastlines extending out much further than they do today. As sea levels rose, landscapes transformed, and communities adapted, demonstrating profound resilience and ingenuity.

The [AIATSIS map of Aboriginal Australia](#) provides a guide to language groups, but it does not depict static borders. Before colonisation, boundaries between Darug, Dharawal, Gundungurra lands were dynamic and fluid, shaped by climatic changes, sea level rises and falls, trade, marriage, ceremony, and shared use of resources. These relationships fostered a sense of interconnectedness and mutual respect among neighbouring groups.

Country has always been central to Aboriginal peoples of the Greater Sydney Region. Before and for many decades after colonisation, the Cumberland Plain's waterways, such as the Nepean and Georges Rivers, were lifelines, providing food, transport, and sites for ceremony and storytelling. The critically endangered Cumberland Plain Woodland, once sprawling, was carefully managed for thousands of years using sustainable practices like cultural burning to promote biodiversity and resource availability.



The impact of colonisation

The arrival of Europeans in 1788 brought devastating consequences. Disease, displacement, and violence decimated populations and disrupted connections to Country. Sacred sites were destroyed, and traditional practices were banned or suppressed. The Cumberland Plain became one of the first regions in Australia to experience large-scale land clearing for agriculture, leading to significant environmental degradation. It is estimated that up to 90 per cent of Aboriginal people died or were displaced in the Sydney region during the first few decades of contact.

European settlement rapidly displaced Aboriginal peoples from their traditional lands. The Cumberland Plain, with its open grasslands and fertile soils, was one of the first areas targeted for large-scale agricultural clearing. Sacred sites and hunting grounds were destroyed, and access to essential resources was cut off. Violent conflicts over land ensued, with massacres such as those at Appin in 1816, where Dharawal people were killed and forcibly removed from their lands.

The ongoing expansion of settlement and infrastructure exacerbated displacement. Aboriginal peoples were pushed to the margins, often onto reserves and missions west of the Great Dividing Range under restrictive policies that sought to control and assimilate them. This displacement fragmented families and severed connections to Country, with profound impacts on cultural identity and Traditional Custodianship.





The Stolen Generations

One of the most devastating legacies of this era was the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, known as the Stolen Generations. These policies are a living history for many Aboriginal families in Western Sydney. Commencing in the 1930s, they aimed to erase Aboriginal cultures by assimilating children into white society. Many people lost their languages, cultural practices, and connections to family and Country, leaving lasting intergenerational trauma, confusion, and conflict. The Stolen Generations had a lasting impact on the identities and connection to Country of many Aboriginal people from Western Sydney. This has affected their capacity to identify and operate as Traditional Custodians. Today, Aboriginal children continue to be removed from families at disproportionately high rates.

A turning point

The 1990s marked the start of a growing recognition of the need for Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The 1997 release of the [Bringing Them Home](#) report shed light on the impact of the Stolen Generations and called for a National Apology. In 2000, over 250,000 Australians walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of Reconciliation, demonstrating widespread public commitment to healing past wrongs. Then in 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the [National Apology to the Stolen Generations](#), a historic moment that acknowledged the suffering caused by past policies. This act of recognition strengthened efforts to rebuild Aboriginal agency and promote respect for cultural heritage and self-determination.

Despite these strides, the failed 2023 referendum on a Voice to Parliament was a stark reminder of the divisions that remain in Australian society. For many Aboriginal people in Western Sydney, the rejection of this proposal represented a denial of their voice and agency in the nation's decision-making processes.

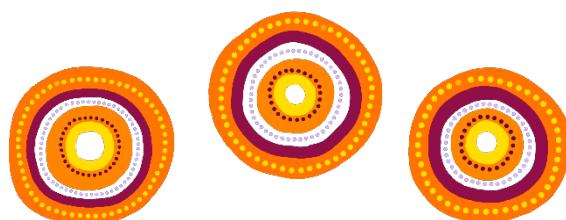


Revitalisation

Particularly since the National Apology, there has been a resurgence of Aboriginal culture and identity in Western Sydney. Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra communities are reclaiming language, restoring cultural practices, and reconnecting with Country. Traditional Custodians and other Aboriginal people with connections to Country are playing a leading role in caring for Country and conservation projects, such as cultural burning and biodiversity stewardship programs.

Initiatives like the Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan reflect growing respect for Aboriginal knowledge and leadership in caring for Country. Despite setbacks, the resilience of Aboriginal peoples in the Sydney region is evident in their continued advocacy for self-determination and the celebration of culture. Today, Aboriginal peoples in Sydney are not only restoring their agency but also contributing innovative approaches to environmental and cultural sustainability, bringing together traditional wisdom and contemporary science. And these efforts are not limited to conservation and land management. Aboriginal values and knowledges are also increasingly influencing contemporary planning disciplines such as arts-based design, urban planning, water management, place naming, and environmental connectivity. These practices reflect diverse and evolving ways that Aboriginal people continue to care for and shape Country in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

Understanding this history underscores the need for respectful relationships with Aboriginal peoples and inclusion of their voices in decision-making processes.





What do we mean by “relationships”?

What are effective relationships?

In this Framework, “relationships” refer to the ongoing, respectful, and reciprocal connections between DPHI and the Aboriginal peoples of the Cumberland Plain. Building effective relationships means taking the time to understand and honour cultural values, responsibilities, and connections to Country - working with, not doing to.

In Aboriginal cultures, relationships come first. You build trust, respect, and mutual understanding before making decisions or starting a project. This differs from mainstream culture, where business can proceed without a personal relationship. In contrast, Aboriginal ways of working emphasise connection before action. Decisions are not made in isolation or haste - they come after relationships are established, and the necessary conversations have taken place, often over

time and on-Country. Relationships are not linear transactions – they are cyclical and evolving, grounded in deep listening, reciprocity, and continuity.

Effective relationships are built through trust, honesty, cultural safety, and consistency. They involve active listening, two-way communication, and a commitment to following through on what’s been said and agreed. For the Department, this means working in ways that centre cultural protocols, empower self-determination, and support the long-standing responsibilities of Traditional Custodians in caring for Country.

Relationship-building is not a one-off event. It is an ongoing commitment to co-creation and shared responsibility. It goes beyond consultation to create space where Aboriginal peoples are active and respected participants in shaping outcomes for Country and community.





Why are relationships important

Strong relationships are the foundation for meaningful outcomes on Country. They build trust, promote transparency, and ensure that policies and programs are shaped with -not just for Aboriginal communities. For Traditional Custodians, respectful relationships affirm their rights, responsibilities, and leadership in caring for Country.

When relationships are prioritised, decisions are more likely to be culturally informed, sustainable, and supported by community. This makes them more effective and durable. It not only improves environmental and social outcomes, but also upholds the Department's legal, ethical, and cultural obligations. Investing in effective relationships also reduces conflict, supports knowledge sharing, and creates the conditions for long-term partnerships that benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

What's the difference between Caring for Country and land management?

Land management is a concept focused on technical or operational activities - such as weed control, fire prevention, or planning. Caring for Country is more than that.

Caring for Country is a deeply cultural and spiritual practice. It involves ongoing relationships between people, place, ancestors, and all living things. It's about listening to Country, respecting its stories, and fulfilling cultural obligations passed down through generations.

Caring for Country also means planning in a sustainable way - not just focusing on ownership, but on how Country is used and respected. It's about making responsible decisions that protect and honour the land.

While both are important, they are not the same. Caring for Country is holistic, relational, and embedded in identity. It cannot be reduced to tasks. For Aboriginal peoples, it is about belonging, responsibility, and sustaining life – for Country and community



Who is the Community?

Western Sydney is home to the largest population of Aboriginal people in Australia. More than 90,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people live in the Greater Sydney region and at least half of these live on or have regular connections to the Cumberland Plain. The Aboriginal community thus includes a diverse range of peoples and groups with diverse connections.

1. Traditional Custodians: Darug, Dharawal, and Gundungurra peoples, whose cultural practices and knowledge are integral to caring for Country.

2. Local Aboriginal peoples: Many Aboriginal peoples in Western Sydney may have direct or indirect connections to the region but are not necessarily recognised as Traditional Custodians. The Stolen Generations policies, for example, may have displaced them and effected their identities. But they may still contribute to caring for Country and have knowledge to share.

3. Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs): Organisations such as the Deerubbin, Gandangara, and Tharawal LALCs are statutory organisations that lead representation on Native Title and NSW Land Rights issues. They also play wider roles in advocating for and managing Aboriginal interests in land and culture. However, not all Traditional Custodians and local Aboriginal peoples are members or feel represented by LALCs.

4. Other Aboriginal organisations and groups: Community groups, organisations, and individuals who share an interest in protecting and enhancing the region's natural and cultural heritage. Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation, for example, delivers health and community services, focusing on the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples in South-western Sydney. Muru Mittigar focuses on cultural education, caring for Country, and social enterprise to promote Aboriginal cultural and environmental knowledge on Darug Country.



In addition to State-based legislation, the *Federal Native Title Act 1993* provides a framework for recognition of Traditional Custodians and their land rights. Native title has yet to be formally determined over most of the Cumberland Plain due to significant historical dispossession and urban development. Despite this, the Gundungurra Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) is registered under the Native Title Act and applies to parts of the Greater Blue Mountains region, including some areas along the western side of the Cumberland Plain. The agreement recognises and respects Traditional Custodians' ongoing cultural responsibilities and facilitates cooperative caring for Country between the Gundungurra people and different levels of government.

Recognising the diversity within and beyond Aboriginal communities is crucial for effective communication and relationships. Each group brings unique perspectives and strengths, contributing to a collective effort to care for Country.



Remember: Relationships grow in cycles, not straight lines. At each stage -thinking, planning, preparing, connecting, evaluating -**listen**. To people, to place, to Country.



Principles for effective relationships

Respectful and productive relationships between the Department and Aboriginal peoples require more than one-off and transactional consultation. They must be grounded in shared values, maintained through consistent practice, and supported by clear internal expectations.

This Framework is underpinned by a set of high-level principles for working in partnership with Darug, Dharawal and Gundungurra Traditional Custodians and other Aboriginal communities connected to the Cumberland Plain. These principles reflect insights gathered through direct engagement with community, and they align with the commitments made under the Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy.

The key principles are:	
Respect and Recognition	Acknowledge Country, culture, and sovereignty. Respect lived experience, identity, and local cultural protocols.
Trust and Transparency:	Build credibility through open, honest communication, clear expectations, and timely follow-up.
Reciprocity:	Relationships must be two-way. Recognise and value Aboriginal contributions, knowledge, and time.
Inclusivity and Equity:	Ensure diverse voices are heard and treated equally and avoid gatekeeping or tokenism.
Cultural Safety:	Create environments where Aboriginal people feel respected, safe, and able to speak freely.
Listening and Responsiveness:	Listen deeply and adapt processes where necessary, even when it requires flexibility or discomfort.

Practical guidance on how to apply these principles is provided in the [Caring for Country Relationships Toolkit](#), including protocols, examples, and checklists for culturally appropriate planning, delivery, and evaluation of engagement.

These principles are not static. They will evolve alongside relationships and through ongoing reflection and learning. At each stage of the relationship journey, listening - deep, active, and humble - is essential.

By embedding them into our work, we can strengthen trust, support self-determination, and contribute to outcomes that reflect the values and priorities of the NSW Government and Aboriginal communities and Country. These principles acknowledge the cultural, environmental, and historical contexts that shape our responsibilities as public servants working on Aboriginal land.



Protocols for culturally safe relationships

Working with Aboriginal communities means recognising and respecting cultural protocols that may differ from mainstream government and institutional norms. These protocols are often unwritten, place-based, and shaped by long histories, kinship systems, and community governance. They can vary between - and even within - communities.

Understanding and honouring these protocols is essential to building trust and maintaining respectful relationships. Cultural safety is not just about avoiding harm; it's about actively creating spaces where Aboriginal people feel respected, heard, and valued on their own terms.

This section outlines key considerations for culturally safe practices and offers practical guidance on how to work in ways that honour Aboriginal priorities, knowledge systems, and leadership.

Cultural sensitivity

Cultural practices in Aboriginal communities are deeply rooted in traditions, spirituality, and relationships with Country. Unlike mainstream engagement, Aboriginal cultural protocols may include seeking permission to access lands, seeking guidance from Elders before beginning projects, or observing specific ceremonial practices.

For example, starting important meetings with a Welcome to Country (delivered by a Traditional Custodian) or an Acknowledgment of Country (if a Traditional Custodian is unavailable) is not only respectful but essential. Failure to observe these protocols can harm relationships and signal a lack of respect for Aboriginal cultural norms.

Practical advice:

- Always seek guidance from cultural advisors or Elders on what practices are appropriate for the context.
- Be prepared to adapt plans to accommodate cultural ceremonies or requirements.
- Approach interactions with humility, recognising that you are a guest on Aboriginal land.





Cultural safety

Cultural safety means creating an environment where Aboriginal participants feel valued, respected, and able to fully participate without fear of judgment or harm. It differs from cultural awareness in that it focuses on the experiences of Aboriginal people, rather than the intentions of non-Aboriginal participants.

One key aspect is recognising and addressing power imbalances. For instance, mainstream Australian decision-making processes may be seen as top-down, whereas Aboriginal communities often value consensus and collective input. Ignoring these dynamics can lead to disengagement or conflict.

Practical advice:

- Be patient and provide ample time for discussions, allowing everyone who needs to speak to do so.
- Use inclusive language, avoid jargon, and ensure all participants understand the process and purpose of meeting and engaging.
- Listen actively and validate contributions, demonstrating genuine respect for Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives.
- Remember that Aboriginal decision-making processes often involve consultation within families, kinship groups, and wider groups. One person may not speak for all.





Do no harm

Aboriginal communities have faced systemic harm from colonisation, dispossession, and ongoing inequities. Communication processes must avoid causing further harm, whether by re-traumatising participants, perpetuating stereotypes, or imposing external priorities.

For example, rushed activities may leave communities feeling unheard, devalued, or disrespected. Similarly, asking individuals or groups to share cultural knowledge without warning or in an inappropriate setting could exacerbate community conflict.

Practical advice:

- Approach all relationships with care and sensitivity, ensuring that processes are not extractive (focused on obtaining a particular outcome) or tokenistic.
- Build in mechanisms to check for unintended impacts, such as seeking feedback on whether participants felt respected and valued.
- Avoid pressing for answers or decisions during initial activities; instead, allow time for reflection and consensus-building.

Kinship networks and Community leadership

Aboriginal communities are often structured around kinship systems, which determine roles, responsibilities, and leadership dynamics. These networks may not align with mainstream understandings of hierarchy or governance. For instance, Elders hold cultural authority, but decision-making may also involve broader family or community consultation.

Missteps in navigating these structures - such as consulting the wrong person or bypassing Elders - can lead to misunderstandings and erode trust.

Practical advice:

- Take time to understand local kinship structures and the roles of individuals within them.
- Work with trusted community contacts or cultural advisors to identify the right people to connect with.
- Be prepared for decision-making to take longer than in mainstream contexts, as it may require extensive consultation within the community.



Community conflict

Conflicts within or between Aboriginal communities can arise due to historical grievances, kinship dynamics, or differing perspectives on land use and cultural heritage. These conflicts often surface during connection with communities and, if mishandled, can derail processes or damage relationships.

For example, disputes over Traditional Custodianship or representation can complicate who should be consulted and how decisions are made.

Practical advice:

- Seek out any Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUAs) to confirm traditional custodianship recognised under the Native Title Act 1993.
- Remain neutral and respectful in conflict situations, avoiding taking sides or making assumptions.
- Allow communities to lead in resolving their own conflicts, providing support only when invited.
- Ensure that processes are inclusive and transparent, reducing the potential for misunderstandings or perceived favouritism.

Co-development

Co-development is a collaborative approach that places Aboriginal communities at the centre of decision-making, ensuring that their voices and priorities shape outcomes. It contrasts with top-down approaches, which can feel imposed or dismissive of community agency.

Co-development recognises that Aboriginal communities are not passive 'stakeholders' but active partners with valuable knowledge and insights. For example, involving communities in designing conservation programs ensures that cultural heritage and environmental priorities are integrated.

Practical advice:

- Involve communities from the outset, ensuring they have a meaningful role in planning, implementing, and evaluating initiatives.
- Provide resources, such as funding or capacity-building support, to enable full participation.
- Be transparent about decision-making processes, ensuring that communities understand how their input is used.



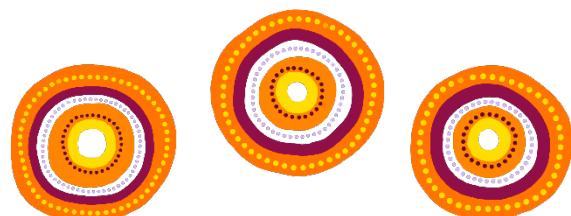
Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a core value in Aboriginal cultures, emphasising mutual exchange and the importance of giving back. Relationships should never be one-sided or extractive; it must honour the principle of balance, where communities feel valued, and their contributions are acknowledged and reciprocated. Reciprocity goes beyond material exchanges - it is about fostering respect, trust, and long-term relationships.

For example, asking for cultural knowledge or community participation without offering something meaningful in return - whether that's fair compensation, resources, or benefits for the community - can damage trust and relationships. Conversely, demonstrating genuine reciprocity can strengthen partnerships and build goodwill.

Practical advice:

- Acknowledge contributions by publicly recognising the time, knowledge, and effort shared by Aboriginal communities, whether through written acknowledgments, verbal thanks, or other forms of recognition.
- Provide fair compensation, ensuring community members are fairly compensated for their contributions.
- Build long term relationships and don't let these connections end with the project - follow up with communities and seek ways to continue supporting their aspirations.





The legal and policy context

For staff in the Department who are working on the Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan, building effective relationships with Aboriginal peoples is a requirement not a choice – from policy and legal perspectives.

The [Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan](#) acknowledges Aboriginal peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the Cumberland Plain and commits to engaging with them as partners in conservation, embedding their perspectives, values, and cultural practices into the management of biodiversity and heritage. Commitment 21 of the Plan focuses on partnering with Western Sydney's Aboriginal communities to integrate their perspectives into planning and decision-making processes, ensuring that cultural values are respected and preserved.

The [Caring for Country Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy](#), which is an important component of the Plan, requires meaningful relationships with Aboriginal communities on the Cumberland Plain. The Strategy focuses on 18 actions co-developed with Western Sydney's Aboriginal community to ensure that their cultural values and knowledge are integrated into conservation planning. Theme 1 of the Caring for Country Strategy, “Partner with Aboriginal Communities”, sets out practical actions for working together with Aboriginal peoples. These include building strong partnerships, supporting Aboriginal-led initiatives, and creating space for shared decision-making. Projects delivered under the Strategy, whether by government or other partners, are expected to follow the engagement protocols in the Strategy. These protocols are there to make sure relationships are built the right way – respectfully, transparently, and with communities at the centre.

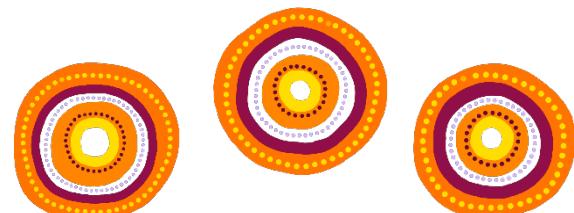
Note on legislative engagement requirements

This Relationship Framework is not intended to replace statutory obligations such as Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessments (ACHAR) or Aboriginal Heritage Impact Permits (AHIP) under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974. Instead, it complements these formal requirements by guiding how NSW DPHI staff and partners can build and maintain respectful, long-term relationships with Aboriginal communities beyond project-by-project compliance. For example, the Recognise Country Guidelines for the Aerotropolis encourage embedding Aboriginal knowledge and values into planning and design, in parallel with legal heritage protections. This Framework similarly supports ongoing, culturally safe collaboration across projects and policy areas.



In addition to these two over-arching policy requirements, a range of other NSW Government policies require effective and respectful relationships with Aboriginal peoples:

- Recognise Country: Guidelines for Development in the Aerotropolis (NSW Government): Provides guidance for embedding Aboriginal cultural values, stories, and Country-centred thinking in design and development of the Western Sydney Aerotropolis.
- Connecting with Country Framework (NSW Government Architect): This policy framework supports built environment professionals and government agencies to reframe planning, design, and development through Country-centred and relational approaches grounded in Aboriginal cultural knowledge and values.
- The Aboriginal Procurement Policy (APP) has minimum requirements for Aboriginal participation in projects and government goods and services spending.
- The [DPHI's Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Protocol \(ICIP\)](#) guides how the department's work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will ensure ICIP is protected. ICIP includes physical things like artwork and symbols, as well as knowledge and cultural practices, including storytelling, language and cultural expression. This heritage belongs to communities and is shaped by many generations. The communal nature of this ownership is often not recognised by current Australian legislation, demonstrating the need to articulate the department's commitment to protecting ICIP legally and morally via this protocol.
- The NSW Government ICIP Policy aims to ensure that Aboriginal knowledge and cultural expressions are protected and appropriately managed, and requires us to obtain free, prior, and informed consent before using Aboriginal cultural information.
- NSW Planning and Environment Stakeholder Engagement Framework outlines departmental expectations for engaging with people and organisations, including Aboriginal communities, to ensure that processes are inclusive, transparent, and respectful of cultural heritage.





What is Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)?

Free, Prior and Informed Consent is a foundational principle of international law, recognised in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), to which Australia is a signatory. It requires that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are given the opportunity to make decisions about matters affecting their lands, waters, cultures, and communities:

- Free means without coercion, pressure, or manipulation.
- Prior means consent is sought well in advance of any decisions or activities.
- Informed means all relevant information is shared in a culturally appropriate way.
- Consent means agreement can be given -or withheld -by the community after respectful discussion.

In the context of Caring for Country, FPIC reinforces the need for relationship-based approaches where Traditional Custodians are respected as decision-makers -not just stakeholders -on matters relating to their Country and culture.

A number of NSW and Commonwealth laws and regulations require Aboriginal people to be consulted before certain types of land-use activities are commenced. All the following Acts contain requirements for consultation and engagement of Aboriginal people.

- National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974
- Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979
- Heritage Act 1977
- Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983
- Native Title Act 1993 (CTH)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Heritage Protection Act 1984 (CTH)





Respecting ICIP – Acknowledging Terri Janke's work

The concepts and language of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) used in this Framework and Toolkit are informed by the pioneering work of Wuthathi/Meriam lawyer and scholar Terri Janke. Her framework, *Our Culture: Our Future*, outlines key principles for respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights over their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and expressions. We gratefully acknowledge Terri's contribution to shaping the national understanding of ICIP and recommend referring directly to her work for more detail and guidance.

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Lessons learned from this work

The development of the *Caring for Country Relationships Framework and Toolkit* took over 9 months and involved over 40 separate meetings and conversations with Traditional Custodians and other Aboriginal people. The process of developing the Framework and Toolkit highlighted some important lessons about how the Department can work internally and with consultants to build stronger, more culturally safe, and more effective relationships with Aboriginal communities across the Cumberland Plain:

- **Relationships take time.** Building trust requires long-term, consistent effort, including face-to-face engagement, follow-up, and ongoing dialogue.
- **One size does not fit all.** Engagement needs to be place-based and tailored to each community's context, governance structures, and preferences.
- **Listening is active.** Community members want to be heard, not consulted. They expect their input to be acknowledged, incorporated, and reflected back.
- **Respect is foundational.** Respecting cultural protocols, being transparent, and ensuring cultural and community safety are non-negotiable.
- **Systems need to adapt.** Mainstream government processes -especially around planning, timelines, and decision-making -need to be flexible enough to accommodate Aboriginal ways of working, including consensus-building and collective voice.
- **Representation is diverse.** No single individual or organisation speaks for all. Care must be taken to listen broadly and engage with Traditional Custodians, LALCs, community members, and Aboriginal organisations.
- **Practical support matters.** Payment for time, preparation, travel and cultural knowledge is essential. So is early notice, plain-English materials, and adequate timeframes.
- **Staff capability is key.** Many government staff lack the skills and cultural competency to work effectively with Aboriginal people. Ongoing training and internal leadership are essential.
- **Co-design is expected.** Aboriginal partners want to shape projects -not just be invited to comment on them.





