Indigenous Lead Centre

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Guide for Engaging respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

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This document has been screened by Indigenous Training Advisory Board (ITAB) for appropriateness of materials produced before publication.

The following documents were used in the development of these engagement guidelines:

Protocols for consultation and negotiation with Aboriginal people, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Queensland Government, December 1998

Mina mir lo ailan mum: proper communication with Torres Strait Islander people, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Queensland Government, December 1998

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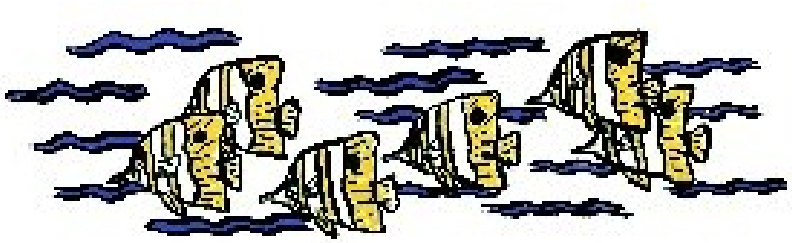
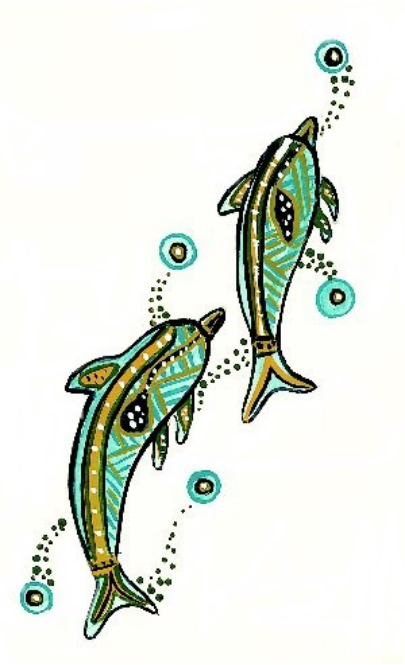


Purpose

This guide has been developed to:

- Provide an insight into the impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities from past Government and non-Indigenous agency engagement
- Provide guidelines for establishing effective working relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Build skills to ensure inclusive and sustained community engagement
- Provide information for developing and delivering programs and services that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities wants and needs
- Assist individuals to develop skills to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community protocols
- Highlight potential engagement issues and offer actions to consider



PLAN THOROUGHLY

Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in the planning stage will result in better services and program outcomes

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Consider the past

The many disadvantages that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face today are a result of past Government policies.

Learn about the continued struggle Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have endured since colonisation.

Past government policies towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to affect people and communities to this day.

Attend a cultural awareness program to understand the history and its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Provision of services in the past to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has, for the most part, been imposed by service providers rather than in partnership with communities.

Work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to establish what programs and services they require.

Look at partnership attempts that have already been tried or are ongoing to see what lessons can be learned from them.

Continued broken promises and failed services have eroded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's trust of service providers.

Don't promise things you can't deliver. Identify any issues/resources that may affect the community's ability to meet program obligations.

In the past and even now, assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have shaped the way non-Indigenous people have engaged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Examine the assumptions you and your organisation have about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

If it sounds like an assumption, find out the facts before moving forward.

Research the community

Non-Indigenous service providers use whatever knowledge they possess or assume about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures when planning services and programs.

Find out the sort of issues that affect a particular community before planning a visit.

Challenge your own assumptions. They could be wrong.

There are two distinct groups of Indigenous Australians; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Within each of these groups there is great diversity.

Find out the unique characteristics of the particular community you will be working with.

Ask community representatives if they have community profiles you can read.

Look up the community on the internet to see if there is a community profile and a community protocol document. Government Departments such as Communities and Education may also have community engagement and protocol documents.

Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may have alcohol restrictions. For some communities you may need a permit.

Call the Shire Council of the region you will be visiting to find out whether alcohol restrictions apply or permits are required.

There may be specific behaviour or dress protocols, such as modest attire, within a community. These might include not using direct eye contact or talking about someone who has passed away.

When asking permission to visit, find out if there are specific community customs that you should comply with.

Look on the internet to see if there is a community profile available.

Identify stakeholders and decision makers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community representatives expect decision makers from your organisation to be part of the planning process.

They may take offence if you send a junior representative from your organisation to meet with senior community members.

When planning services and programs with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, make sure a decision making person from your organisation is part of the negotiating team.

The initial person you make contact within a community may not be a key decision maker for that community.

Ask these questions:

- **Who do I need to speak to in this community?**
- **Is the person part of the Council or another group (for example Traditional Owner)?**
- **Do I need to talk to all the key groups in a community (e.g. Council, Church, Elders, Males, Females, Youth)**

If a community profile exists, use it as a guide to find out who are the right person/people/groups to speak to about the service/program. Be prepared to modify your plans as your work progresses.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there may be conflict between Traditional Owners, Historical Owners, Council and other groups within a community.

Do not align yourself with any one group.

You may need to meet people separately to ensure that you have included all relevant groups when planning services and programs.

Find out about the relationship between those you wish to consult with and others in the community.

Local community groups may have different priorities and concerns. For example, local council priorities may not be the same as for Elders or Traditional Owners.

Find out who can provide you with accurate information about the priorities, concerns and aspirations of the community.

Network with other agencies

Often services delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/communities are planned to suit the service provider rather than the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities concerned.

Outcomes should be people centred rather than service delivery driven.

To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, establishing meaningful relationships are as important as service outcomes.

Services delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not always been well coordinated.

Find out what other agencies are delivering similar services/programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Work with other agencies to formulate innovative integrated approaches to service delivery.

Duplication of programs and services may result in a lack of interest in participating in the service or program.

Minimise non-Indigenous intrusion into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives and communities; otherwise you risk a situation where no support is given to that program.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to spend time going about their daily community life without the intrusion of others.

Realise that overburdening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with meetings/planning sessions/discussions places stress upon community members.

Delivery structures that work for non-Indigenous clients and groups may not be the preferred delivery model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Develop models that reflect community preferred options. Partner with other service providers to deliver cluster services. Always consult with the community about partnership arrangements before implementing them.

Request permission

In some remote communities a permit system operates for visitors to that country.

Check if you require a permit to visit a particular community.

Remember, access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's land is a privilege.

Always ask permission well in advance to visit a community.

In a community it may not be appropriate for all members to gather at certain places.

Check the suitability of the venue with community representatives before going ahead with a meeting.

Permission granted for entry once doesn't necessarily give continued open access.

Establish ongoing and future permission procedures when planning service delivery.

Taking photos without permission may cause offence and distress.

Do not take photos of people or places without permission.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a right to privacy in their own communities.

Do not visit the private homes until you know a family member or you have permission to visit.

Areas of country surrounding a community may be restricted or off limits to the either gender.

Understand that there may be men's country and women's country or places that may be seen as dangerous.

It is culturally insensitive to go wandering around the surrounding areas of a community until you have been told what areas are available for you to access.

Confirm arrangements

Part of successful planning involves confirming arrangements with a community representative before visiting the community.

A confirmation letter should outline:

- **Who will visit**
- **Dates of proposed visit**
- **Purpose of the visit**
- **Length of the proposed meeting**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may have other more important issues that may occur between setting a proposed meeting time and the meeting actually occurring. For example a death in the community may mean the community is dealing with 'Sorry Business'.

Always ring a few days before a proposed visit to ensure that it is still okay to visit at the time arranged.

Important community business may curtail or restrict the delivery of services and programs at times. For example you may be advised that you can visit but keep a low profile because of a funeral.

Follow any guidelines provided and accept what can be achieved during times of restricted service delivery.

Part of confirming arrangements includes checking the most suitable times for visiting. For example, payday may mean community members are visiting nearby towns for shopping. Also school holidays may impact on participation.

Find out what times and days are least suitable for planning sessions, program and service delivery.

It is important to know what is possible and not possible in any given visit.

You may need to adjust your anticipated outcomes after confirming arrangements.

Identify resources

The logistics of visiting a remote community need to be considered.

Ask questions about road access, accommodation, food availability, ATM, fuel access, internet connection, mobile phone coverage, flights, air charters, ferry access and so forth.

In remote communities wet season/dry season weather will impact on service delivery.

Be flexible and have a contingency plan if wet weather prevents access by road or air.

Think about alternative models for delivery other than face to face. (e.g. video conference)

Air transport to remote communities may not always be reliable.

Reschedule rather than cancel the service delivery. Financially plan for contingencies and unexpected events.

Remote communities face many shortages of essential items.

Enquire if there is anything you could bring. This will build relationships.

There may be facilities within a community to purchase essential items.

It is a good idea to support local community businesses. Work with someone in the community on advice about providing light refreshments (e.g. healthy choices).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community negotiations require time to finalise. The community may want to discuss proposed programs or services further and to make decisions without you being present.

Make sure you take multiple copies of key documents to leave for the community to consider.

COMMUNICATE RESPECTFULLY

Communicating in a way that values and respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will help you create meaningful relationships

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Be guided and be flexible

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities may have complex communication protocols. These are often related to kinship obligations and adherence.

Don't pry about kinship adherence. Wait to be informed.

Kinship protocols may impact on who makes decisions and what decisions can be made. Each service or program may require permissions and decisions from different community members.

Seek advice from community representatives for each project or service you want to deliver. Be prepared to hold several meetings with different groups to accommodate community protocol requirements.

It may take some time to work around kinship obligations and relationships during discussions.

Be flexible and patient. You will achieve a more effective outcome.

Negotiation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities is a process that requires ongoing commitment. Non-Indigenous ideas about completion of negotiations may not match Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ideas.

Allow negotiations to ebb and flow.

Scheduled discussions, meetings and service delivery may be postponed while other community priorities are dealt with. These may include Sorry Business, sporting carnivals, NAIDOC celebrations, tombstone openings or other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural ceremonies or community business.

Wait for community representatives to contact you with a more suitable time to visit. After a while if contact has not been re-established be proactive and telephone.

It takes time to build meaningful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is more important than a quick negotiated service delivery outcome.

Spend time with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so they get to know you rather than just the job that you are doing. Don't fly in and out in the one day.

Respect community context

Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is unique. What occurs in one may not occur in another.

It may offend if you assume a 'one size fits all' attitude about services and programs.

On arrival it may be considered rude to sightsee around a community.

Wait to be invited to look around the community and facilities.

Sharing of food can be an important part of working together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

When attending a community event it is a great idea to bring some food to share or organise light refreshments from providers within the community.

If spending non core business time with Aboriginal and Torres Islander people it may not be appropriate to spend time with members of the opposite sex.

Share non core business time with same sex groups or mixed groups.

There may be times when activities or events are occurring in communities that make visiting inappropriate.

Ask community contacts if there are upcoming dates when it would be inadvisable to visit.

Taking souvenir nature elements such as fruit, stones, rocks, plants from the land on which you are a visitor will result in mistrust from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Only ever take from the land or sea gifts you have been given by community representatives.

Silence and other forms of non-verbal communication play an important role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communication.

Be aware of non verbal cues and be comfortable and patient with silence.

Men's business and women's business may occur separately.

Organise people to work with each of these groups separately if necessary. Each community is different so you may need to use multiple engagement strategies.

Ideas and knowledge belong to the person presenting the idea. To reject it is to reject the person presenting it.

Do not disregard ideas presented. Accept all ideas as points to consider. If there are limitations, explain the limitations.

Some communities may observe religious practices such as saying grace before meals and opening and closing meetings with prayers or hymns.

Wait and follow the practices of the community for opening meetings and beginning meals.

Follow meeting protocols

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have an ongoing custodial relationship with specific places.

Demonstrate an understanding of this historical and ongoing relationship with the land by acknowledging traditional custodians when opening discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may, if it is necessary/appropriate, hold a Welcome to Country. Usually this is for a significant community meeting or event.

Ask community representatives for advice on the format of a 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners' so you will know your expected role in the protocol.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people follow greeting protocols when meeting each other for the first time.

If you accompany an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander colleague, allow time for the Indigenous members of the meeting to introduce themselves.

In meetings where language barriers or status protocols are present an intermediary may be used.

You need to use open body language in your communication and reiterate your understanding of the negotiations.

Jargon words and complex verbal statements may offend and cause misunderstanding with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Don't expect an immediate response. Listen.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have varying literacy levels in Standard Australian English.

Complex written materials should be rewritten in plain English. Explain the context of written materials that are handed out. Use visuals to help explain written concepts (e.g. Powerpoint presentations).

In public meetings there may be a broad range of responses. Public meetings are not venues for making final decisions on issues.

Don't expect immediate decisions or too many questions. Decisions are very rarely made on the spot.

Meetings with service providers may not be regarded as a priority by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Do not get frustrated if meetings do not begin on time or run to the schedule you expect.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it may cause offence or loss of face to ask an individual to repeat something they have just told you or to single them out as an individual in a meeting situation.

If you have not heard what someone has said, apologise and ask if they would mind repeating their point.

Avoid disagreeing with an individual's ideas in a meeting as criticism of their idea may be interpreted as a criticism of them as a person.

Value meaningful relationships

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people value meaningful relationships with those they do business with. Rushing in and out of business only meetings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people does not provide opportunities for building trust.

Always allow time for non core business.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may require proof of commitment and genuine respect for cultural differences to be demonstrated.

Be open and prepared to have your preconceived ideas challenged when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

People are interested in who you are, not just what you do in your job.

Be yourself rather than your job role. Laugh at yourself. Share a joke.

Openly admit when you don't know something. Be confident so people have confidence in you. Avoid boasting about yourself.

It takes time to build trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Be prepared to visit many times before trust and confidence in you and the service/program is established.

There are many influences which affect the success of service provision and programs.

It's not always your fault. It often has nothing to do with your efforts.

Meaningful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be difficult to establish if you continually interrupt, talk over the top of them and disagree with them.

Avoid excessive talking and disagreements.

Spend more time listening and less time waiting for your turn to speak.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities value different things to non-Indigenous people.

Be open and prepared to have your preconceived ideas challenged when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ESTABLISH COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Programs and services are more likely to be supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when a sense of community ownership is established

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Share information

There may be a lack of support for services or programs if the information provision establishes a one-way relationship.

Make sure information is relevant, appealing and easy to understand. This will encourage an information exchange with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Many services and programs contain financial, funding and delivery constraints.

Be up front about delivery strengths and limitations.

Effective partnerships are built on shared responsibility and active participation.

Impart the skills and knowledge needed to responsibly manage delivery of services and programs.

Ongoing information about a service or program ought to be easily accessible.

Establish a community contact to share information through.

Trust may be broken if you begin filtering what information a community has a right to know or access.

Be upfront with important information that could affect programs or services.

Non-Indigenous people have a history of taking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander information and using it for their own benefit.

Tell the community what the purpose of the investigation is and explain what potential benefits the community there may gain.

Learn about language

Standard Australian English is usually a second or third language for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Accept that Aboriginal English is not an incorrect or inferior language. It is a different English.

Aboriginal English plays a role in Aboriginal identity.

Respect the cultural difference and be prepared to learn about Aboriginal English.

Torres Strait Creole has a role in Torres Strait Islander Identity.

Respect the cultural difference and be prepared to learn about Torres Strait Creole.

Literacy levels vary greatly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Provide easy to understand and visually supported text when presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with information to read.

Explain the content of written hand outs.

The skill of reading is different than the skill of writing.

Don't assume that because a person can read written material that they can write.

Language differences can often result in misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Don't use jargon, technical or 'government speak' words when talking or corresponding with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Accept decision making differences

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups decisions tend to be made using consensus processes.

Allow time for everyone to talk through the issues and arrive at a decision that everyone agrees with.

Non verbal communication may play an important role in the decision making process.

If there is silence do not assume decisions are not being made. Don't jump in and continue to over explain.

There are many influences that affect service provision and program success.

Don't blame yourself if services/programs stall. It is not always your fault. Often it has nothing to do with your efforts.

Because of communication differences, it is important to avoid any misunderstanding about decisions that have been made.

Give feedback about what you have understood the decision to be.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander meetings and negotiations quick decisions are seldom made.

Although all the information may have been provided at a meeting, you may be asked to leave without a final decision having been made.

A stall during the decision making process does not necessarily mean an end to further discussions.

Allow yourself to be guided by the community and participants. After all it is their decision to make.

What your organisation wants and what a community decides may not always be compatible.

Accept the community decision and try to find alternative ways to meet their needs.

Demonstrate Commitment

Demonstrating a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a journey rather than a single action

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Follow up and provide feedback

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will judge you by what you say and do.

Deliver what you have promised.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to see by your actions that you are committed to delivering a quality program or service.

Decide how you will provide follow up information and to whom you will provide it.

Consultation and negotiation is not a 'once off' occurrence. It is an ongoing process.

Show patience and personal commitment to the process.

Following up and keeping in contact is an important part of establishing trust and building relationships.

Share something of your personal story. After all it is you and not your job that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will build the relationship with.

Every method available should be used to keep the community informed about a service or program. Not everyone reads material; some may listen to the radio more.

Use a variety of methods to provide feedback to the community on the progress of the service or program. For example, community notice boards, local newsletters, local radio.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities have a right to receive feedback on decisions that will affect their community.

Give feedback in verbal and written forms.

There are constant consultations and negotiations that occur in communities regarding services, programs and initiatives.

Provide prompt and timely feedback to community members. This will help in achieving a successful outcome.

Modify and improve engagement

Money provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and programs is not the measure of success.

Success is measured in improvements in housing, health, education and employment.

Devise ways to measure the success of programs/services.

Ask questions to evaluate the success of the program or service.

- **Was it planned properly?**
- **What worked well and how could these things be improved?**
- **What issues came up during consultation and were they resolved effectively?**
- **Were there constraints and in what way did they effect the outcome?**
- **Was enough time given for the planning process and the delivery timeframe?**
- **If there were delays, was there a contingency strategy to deal with this? If so, did it work and can it be improved?**

Success is not simply a matter of completing a program. Success is about community members gaining skills and benefits from their involvement in the program.

When you evaluate programs or services identify if skills development, confidence, personal growth, increased knowledge and employment opportunities were gained by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

Evaluation needs to reflect the view of all those involved even if they are negative.

Look at both positive and negative opinions. Sometimes the negative view provides great clues for continuously improving programs and services.

Being able to learn from your mistakes and being flexible and open to change direction demonstrates a respect for Aboriginal and Torres Islander people's feedback and views.

Demonstrate commitment by continuously improving the quality of services and programs offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.