

Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Respectful Language Guide

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this country and recognise their connection to land, wind, water and community.

We pay our respect to them, their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.

Reviewed & Updated December 2024

Queensland Government

Like all genuinely mutual and productive relationships, engagements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need to be based on respect.

Respect must be offered and earned.

Preface

One aspect of making every interaction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples more culturally capable, both in conversation and in writing, is using respectful language when describing or referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures and using words associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, cultures and peoples.

This Respectful Language Guide has been designed to assist staff to make respectful, conscious and insightful choices of words, terms and language.

This document was compiled to address the variation in the use and understanding of language in departmental documents and in conversation.

The information in this guide will strengthen and deepen individual understanding of the historical, contemporary, political and cultural contexts of particular terms, to assist staff to select the most respectful language.

To do this, the document provides the following information:

- preferred (and non-preferred) language, terms and ways of expressing;
- background, context, explanation and historical information to provide the rationale for each recommendation; and
- further reading and resources, actions, insights and quotes shared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members that provide a deeper and more personal level of understanding and insight.

What is seen as respectful may vary across cultures and the strength of this guide is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have shared with you what they consider to be respectful. This document does not provide rules, but offers suggestions, guidance and encourages a deeper understanding, because whether a word or term is respectful or not is influenced by the context of the communication and who is delivering the message.

> What's respectful is determined as much by who's delivering the message — man, woman, Elder or younger person, Traditional Owner, a white person — as it is by who's receiving it. It's not just the message, it's not just the way you deliver it, or the way you package it or the words used, and it's also about who delivers it and in what context.
>
> Uncle Chris

We encourage you to always check with and seek advice from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders you are partnering with, or from your department's Cultural leaders.

Please take the time to carefully read and consider all of the language discussed in this document. Many of the terms listed are not considered to be respectful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, however it is important to include these terms to create a full, truthful understanding of our history and the language used to describe and refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Respectful Language Guide is designed to be read in conjunction with all Cultural Capability documents and the department's Style Guidelines. This guide is for use within the department's communications, context and organisational culture and should not be used to judge or measure the respectfulness of other organisation's communications.

The Respectful Language Guide is solely about the words and expressions we use. It is designed to be one of a suite of documents developed to support the journey towards greater cultural capability in how the department communicates, interacts, engages, consults and negotiates with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families, communities and partners.

In the words of our staff

The former Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services developed the original version of this guide. In the development process we consulted widely with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. During this process it came through loud and clear that the use of language has had an impact on them. Some of the words of our staff will appear throughout the guide in maroon text. Some were happy to be identified, while others wished to remain anonymous.

A group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff that included senior staff members and Elders came together as a group to discuss their experiences, feelings and knowledge about the language recommended in the guide. The members of this group were Aunty Lesley Williams who grew up at Cherbourg, Uncle Adrian Padmore, a Yidinji man from the Atherton Tablelands, who grew up in Innisfail, Uncle Chris Hubbert, a Euahaly-i man who descends from Fanny White of Yeranbah station, Uncle Les Skelton, a Kooma man from Cunnamulla South West Queensland and Michelle McLinden, a Wiradjuri woman from Gundagai, near Wagga Wagga, who grew up in Canberra. We acknowledge their contributions and thank them for their input.

We also acknowledge the contributions of Dan Parsons and our colleagues in the former Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP).

Our respectful journey

This guide outlines the department's current recommended respectful language, however just as attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures are changing, language used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures are continually evolving.

The department will continue to seek feedback and guidance about the most respectful language choices from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners and communities.

> Stories change with the speaker and the listener. Our stories are lived on and reflect the experiences we go through. Our stories are living stories that continue from thousands of years ago through to the future.
>
> Uncle Les

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Two unique and diverse cultures

Australia's original inhabitants are two distinct peoples that are culturally very different—Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Each of these cultures have their own languages, kinship structures, cultural practices and ways of life. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of these peoples.

Aboriginal peoples comprises of diverse Aboriginal nations, each with their own language and traditions, and historically lived on mainland Australia, Tasmania and many of the continent's offshore islands. Torres Strait Islander peoples historically lived on the islands of the Torres Strait, between the tip of Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea.

Each culture has its own flag to symbolise and celebrates their separate and unique identities. In July 1995, both the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag were proclaimed as official flags in section 5 of the Flags Act 1953.

History of the Aboriginal flag

The Aboriginal flag is recognised as being designed in 1971 by artist Harold Thomas, a Luritja man from Central Australia. The flag was first flown on National Aboriginal Day in 1971 at Victoria Square in Adelaide.

In 1972 the flag was flown above the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra. After this event it was unofficially adopted nationally by the Aboriginal peoples.

Symbolic meaning:

- Black: represents the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.
- Red: represents the red earth, the red ochre and a spiritual relation to the land.
- Yellow: represents the sun, the giver of life and protector.



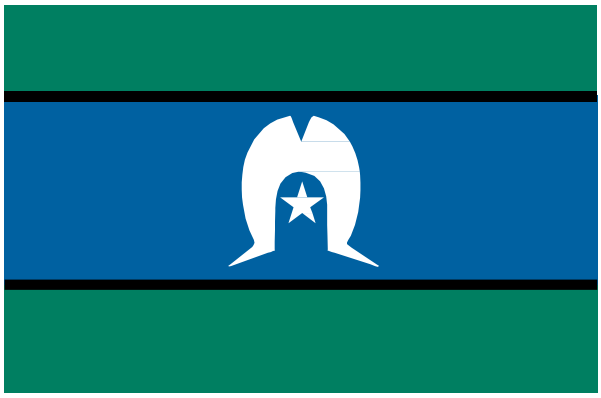
History of the Torres Strait Islander flag

The Torres Strait Islander flag was designed by the late Bernard Namok of Thursday Island. The flag symbolises the unity and identity of all Torres Strait Islanders.

The Torres Strait Islander flag was flown for the first time in 1992. It is now flown and recognised more widely as Torres Strait Islander issues gain more prominence in Australia.

Symbolic meaning:

- White: Dari (headdress) is a symbol of Torres Strait Islander peoples. The white five pointed star beneath the Dari represents peace, the five major island groups and the navigational importance of stars to these seafaring people.
- Green: represents the land.
- Black: represents the people.
- Blue: represents the sea.



Collective terms used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The plural use of the word 'peoples' acknowledges that within these **two distinct cultures** there are hundreds of unique and distinct communities, cultural and language groups, spiritual connections to land, environmental influences, families and kinship networks. Adding an 's' emphasises this diversity.

Further, the word 'peoples' recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a collective, rather than an individual, dimension to their lives. This is affirmed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' should be capitalised to convey respect, as you would when naming any other nationality, like French or Korean.

The lower-case word 'aboriginal' refers to an indigenous person from any part of the world and does not necessarily refer to an Aboriginal Australian.

Look at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies map of Indigenous Australia to see the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language Groups in your area.

Talk to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to learn more about their cultures, languages and history.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, security and well-being of Indigenous peoples worldwide and enshrines Indigenous peoples' right to be different.

The Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2007. This was the culmination of more than 20 years of negotiation between the Indigenous peoples and governments of the world. The Australian Government announced its support for the Declaration in 2009.

The Declaration is the most comprehensive tool we have available to advance the rights of Indigenous peoples. To find out more go to the Australian Human Rights Commission website.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as an adjective

Using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as an adjective is more person-centric, positive, and inclusive and empowering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Using the terms Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders is less respectful. Some alternatives are:

- Aboriginal peoples.
- Torres Strait Islander community representatives.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders.

"No one ever uses the word disabled anymore, we always refer respectfully to people with disabilities. It's exactly the same thing.



Abbreviating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

It is not respectful to abbreviate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to ATSI.

An abbreviation should ONLY be used in a table or graph if there is not enough room to 'spell out' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in full. If this is necessary, the more respectful abbreviation to use is **A&TSI**, as it provides a slightly better representation of the **two distinct cultures**.

It is acceptable to abbreviate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander when it forms part of an acronym such as an organisation's name, for example:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (ATSILS).
- Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP).

Refer to the department's Style Guidelines to provide full details on the correct use of acronyms in written documents.

> "Everyone knows that it's not OK to abbreviate other nationalities. We wouldn't call Japanese people 'Japs' but for some reason Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gets abbreviated because it's long and 'inconvenient'."

Use of pronouns

It is not respectful to replace the words 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' with pronouns such as 'the', 'they', 'them', 'their' and 'those'. The use of pronouns objectifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and creates a social distance between the writer and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, societies and histories.

The terms 'we' and 'us' need to be considered to ensure awareness of who is 'included and excluded'.

> "When documents says 'their' needs it seems obvious that it was written by a non-Indigenous person and it feels like we are not part of the process."

Aborigine(s)

Although it is grammatically correct, carefully consider using the term Aborigine(s) as it has negative connotations with many Aboriginal people because it can be linked back to the terminology used in the periods of colonisation and assimilation. **Aboriginal person or Aboriginal peoples** can be used as an alternative.

Some Aboriginal people self-identify as an Aborigine, but it should be treated as an 'in-group' term.



Australia's First Peoples, First Nations Peoples

These are collective terms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that emphasise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original inhabitants of Australia who lived here for many thousands of years before colonisation. First Nations Peoples is predominantly used in North America to refer to the original inhabitants of Canada.

These terms are becoming more widely used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and are respectful terms. However, the preferred is to use the person's cultural link (i.e., Yuggera person) or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

First Nations Peoples with capitalisation is acceptable when quoting an external source where the term is used, as part of an established program name, or where it is part of the name of an organisation or organisational unit, for example the First Nations Council (FNC).

To ensure clarity when using First Nations, be sure to include 'Australians' to be clear which First Nations people are included in the statement/document.

Indigenous

Indigenous is defined as a person originating from, or characterising, a particular region or country. In an international law context, the term acknowledges a particular relationship of aboriginal people (original inhabitants) to the territory from which they originate.

In many government documents, Indigenous is capitalised when specifically referring to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, however some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel the term diminishes identity and homogenises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and so it's not considered to be the most respectful term that could be used.

Indigenous with capitalisation is acceptable when quoting an external source where the term is used, as part of an established program name, or where it is part of the name of an organisation or organisational unit, for example the Indigenous Enabling Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship (IECAS).

To ensure clarity when using Indigenous, be sure to include 'Australians' to be clear which Indigenous people are included in the statement/document.

> Indigenous lumps us all in together as one and takes away our individual cultural identity.
>
> We celebrate the shared aspects of our history, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are so different.
>
> It's the same when people use First Nations, we are again lumped together as one group, which is not the case.



Murri, Goori, Koori, Palawa, Nunga, Yolngu, Anangu, Noongar

These terms are directly derived from Aboriginal languages and are the names used by Aboriginal peoples when referring to themselves. Many Aboriginal peoples from other areas of Australia live in Queensland and they will continue to refer to themselves using the term that best describes their original geographic identity, for example someone from New South Wales living in Queensland would still consider themselves to be a Koori.

Always check with the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community about using 'group' terms.

Self-identifying terms for Aboriginal peoples denoting geographic identity	
Name	**State**
Murri	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Queensland and north-west New South Wales
Goori	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from northern New South Wales coastal regions
Koori	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from parts of New South Wales and Victoria
Palawa	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Tasmania
Nunga	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from South Australia
Yolngu	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Northern Territory (north-east Arnhem Land)
Anangu	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Central Australia
Noongar	is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from south-west Western Australia

When you do not know which island a Torres Strait Islander person is from, you would say they are a Torres Strait Islander person. However, if the person has advised of the island group they belong to, this is the most respectful to use.

Terms to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals

Identifying an individual

Some individuals prefer to be identified by their clan, nation, language group or island group. However, some who have been displaced may not know their language or cultural group or there may be sensitivities.

These examples show some of the many different ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals may refer to themselves:

- Dan Parsons, a Euahaly-*i* and Kooma man, conducted an Acknowledgment of Country.
- Sally Smith, a proud Aboriginal woman from Brisbane, addressed the group.
- Ken Wanat, a Meriam man from the island of Mer (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait, addressed the group.
- Julie Sailor, a Torres Strait Islander woman from Cairns, attended the meeting.

The Koori Mail's hierarchy of preference

The Aboriginal-owned newspaper Koori Mail tries to be as specific as possible when writing about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. It recommends the following hierarchy in descending order of preference, which is a good guide, but most importantly pay attention to how someone refers to them-self:

- the person's language group, for example Kalkadoon;
- the area the person comes from, for example Murri;
- Aboriginal if they come from mainland Australia, Torres Strait Islander if they're from there; and
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Always be guided by the manner that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person identifies themselves, never make assumptions.

> If you don't know how to identify someone, just ask! And make sure you ask each time you identify that person, as each instance may be different.
>
> Respectful communication is always dependent upon the context. This is particularly important when seeking information on how to identify an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in written materials. You should ask, 'How do you want to be referred to and identified in **this particular** document or communication.'
>
> What you're talking about is identity and identity can change depending on the experiences and circumstances we've had.
>
> The closer that a negative interaction may have been the more likely I want to distance myself.
>
> Discussion between Uncle Adrian, Uncle Chris and Uncle Les

Skin colour (black, dark and fair-skinned, caste — half, quarter, one-eights etc.)

It is disrespectful and divisive to judge a person's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity based on their skin colour or appearance.

These terms were historically used to classify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples according to skin colour and parentage, with the assumption that any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person with any 'European' blood was more acceptable as a member of 'Australian society'.

However, in a contemporary context a reverse logic is often applied, whereby colour and lifestyle are used to quantify an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person's 'authenticity'.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, individually and collectively, define themselves by their culture and relationships, not by skin colour.

> 'Aboriginal people are like tea, you can add milk and sugar – it's still tea!'
>
> A quote from First Contact relayed by a staff member

There are particular sensitivities around this topic given Australia's history of the Stolen Generation, where there were particular practices of removing children of fairer skin away from their darker parents as it was believed these children would have better success at assimilation.

There are many stories of fair-skinned children being blackened with charcoal by the parents in the hope the government officers would not notice their colouring and thus not remove them.

To learn more about aspects of our nation's history, access the resources in the Cultural Capability section on the intranet.

Identity Intact

No matter how much you dilute
mix, match and try to pollute our
identity remains intact.
Something you can't change, that's a fact,
Our spirit is not measured by the
shade of our skin.

But by something stronger found
within.
A place you cannot touch or take away
It will remain shining out till our dying day
We all connect with it again
No matter how far we've been.

Deirdre Currie

Terms associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, cultures and peoples

Many of these terms are in-group terminology and there is a difference between respectful and appropriate language for those belonging to a group (in-group) and those who don't belong (out-group). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have reclaimed some once-derogatory terms and now use those terms to refer to themselves. The same term may offend when used by non-Indigenous people (out-group).

> By reclaiming it you take the power away from language. If you take a derogatory term and use it within your group it loses its power and it doesn't become as hurtful anymore. You've reclaimed it as yours.
>
> Uncle Chris

Appropriate language

It is important to recognise that language and the way it is used may be different in different communities, country and families. Where possible, it would be appropriate to identify what language groups exist in the community and/or on the country (location) you are visiting.

Respect for the language groups in the community and/or on the country you are visiting is essential for fostering respectful relationships.

There are some terms, words and names that are not respectful or appropriate to use unless given permission.

> Written material produced by outside groups that 'phoneticises' and uses Aboriginal English can appear to be racist, condescending or imply that our mob is uneducated.
>
> Uncle Chris

Don't assume Aboriginal peoples will be more open with you by attempting to speak Aboriginal English with them.

About Aboriginal languages

In Queensland, over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects were once spoken. Today around 50 of these remain spoken (in varying degrees), with less than 20 being used as first languages, predominantly in the north of the state.

Aunty and Uncle

'Aunty' and 'Uncle' are terms of respect within an extended family and may be applied to aunts, uncles, cousins and other blood relatives as well as those married into the family. The use of Aunty and Uncle in this way does not follow the traditional western use of the terms.

In addition, the terms Aunty and Uncle are used as terms of respect and of reverence for senior people who are not necessarily a family member. In this case it is acknowledging that a relationship exists — either through the work that the Aunty or Uncle has done for the broader community or as a result of the support given to the individual — demonstrating respect to the senior person.

> If you do not have an existing relationship with an older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, do not assume it is okay to call them Aunty or Uncle. In some instances when you call someone Aunty or Uncle, you are also saying I am your niece or nephew, which alludes to a sense of mutual obligation.

Seek guidance from the person introducing you to the Elder or ask the Elder what they prefer very directly. 'Is it alright if I call you Uncle Thomas?'

Blackfella

Blackfella is a derogatory term that has been reclaimed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is definitely an in-group term and is highly likely to offend if used by someone from outside that group.

Clan

In an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context 'clan' is a local descent group, larger than a family but based on family links through a common ancestry. A 'clan' is a subset of a nation.

For example, the Yidinji Nation in Far North Queensland has several clans within it such as Mandingalbay Yidinji and Dulabed Malanbarra Yidinji.

It is important to realise that while there are shared connections, each clan group may have separate aspirations and should be regarded as a discrete group.

Community

Community is about interrelatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of being. To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities can be formed around a geographical location, country, their mob, extended family ties and shared experiences.

It is most common to refer to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community within a geographical location, but it's also important to remember there will be great diversity of backgrounds, mobs, language groups and other differences within that community.

Country

Country is a term used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular, culturally distinct group of people or nation. The term country is often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia.

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples have diverse relationships with, connections to, and understandings of, the Australian environment. Some of these relationships are based on the traditional knowledge and practice passed down from generation to generation, while others have resulted from the various impacts of colonisation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' relationships to country are complex and interrelated.

We bond with the universe and the land and everything that exists on the land.

Everyone is bonded to everything.

Ownership for white people is something on a piece of paper. We have a different system. You can no more sell our land than sell the sky.

Our affinity with the land is like the bonding between a parent and a child. You have responsibilities and obligations to look after and care for a child. You can speak for a child. But you don't own a child.

Paul Behrendt

Cultures

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are many and varied so it is most respectful to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are always referred to in plural. It is important to understand that while there are consistent elements, there is no single lived experience of culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There was diversity even before colonisation and previous historical impacts may continue to impact on people's understanding of how they define culture.

It is critical we recognise that as humans we are all cultural beings. We learn to communicate and understand our world through the context of our beliefs and values which are transmitted by our family behaviours, traditions and ultimately our personal experiences.

Your culture matters as it reflects an individual's identity, creates a sense of belonging and influences the way one sees themself and what is seen as important in the world. Before a person can explore and understand someone else's culture it is important to understand you're their own culture and how it shapes their attitudes and behaviours. This is sometimes referred to as one's cultural lens and this cultural lens may hinder a person from understanding the values and behaviours of other cultural groups, as they unconsciously (unconscious bias) compare them to their own norms and ways of thinking.

Deadly

Deadly is used by many Aboriginal peoples to mean excellent, very good. It's similar to how the word wicked is used by many young English speakers.

Deadly, in this context, is certainly strongly 'owned' by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community but is not necessarily an in-group word. It is not disrespectful to express your appreciation for something by saying 'that's deadly!' or 'that's too deadly!'

It would be disrespectful for non-Indigenous people to use the word deadly in a title, for example in the name of a program or research project, in order to 'appeal' to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The decision to include deadly or any other 'in- group' words should be owned and led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

A way to work with both the diversity of experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and unconscious comparison (unconscious bias) to one's norms is through strength-based questioning.

This allows the person you are communicating with to identify what their culture is to them, for example:

- What role does culture play in your family?
- What strength does your culture give you?
- What support does culture bring to you when dealing with X?
- What would being strong in your culture look like for you?

Within our department a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff decided that being highly culturally capable should be called 'deadly' in the department's cultural capability continuum. These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff welcomed this language being embraced by the Director-General and the department.

Discrete Communities

A Discrete Community refers to a geographic location, bounded by physical or cadastral (legal) boundaries, and inhabited or intended to be inhabited by predominately Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, with housing or infrastructure that is either owned or managed on a community basis. Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples see these communities as their homes and communities. Using the term 'discrete' is an unnecessary label. It is most respectful to just refer to a Community, as you would with any other location.

Dreaming, Dreamtime

The term 'Dreaming' was coined by WEH Stanner in 1965 to represent the myriad individual names for traditional belief systems.

Use of the term 'Dreamtime' to refer to only the period of creation is inappropriate, and 'spirituality', or 'spiritual beliefs' is more appropriate. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples spirituality is a way of life, connectedness and belonging. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples prefer to use the term Dreaming, which is about the current lived experiences and how these intersect with their sense of connectedness and belonging.

Terms such as 'myth' or 'story' convey the impression that knowledge from the Dreaming is not true, is trivial or is not steeped in strong cultural lore.

> "You are now part of my Dreaming because I've shared my story of connecting to my culture with you."
>
> Uncle Les to a group undertaking Cultural Capability training

Elders

Recognised Elders are highly respected people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as such the use of the word Elder should be capitalised.

Elders are men and women in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who are respected for, and are custodians of, wisdom and knowledge of culture, law and lore.

Culturally, old age is always respected, but old age alone does not necessarily mean that one is a recognised Elder.

An individual does not determine if they are an Elder, rather the community makes this determination based on a person's earned respect.

> "An Elder is someone who everyone respects. You can be an Elder because of your traditional knowledge or because of what you've done for community. Not only in your own country but everywhere."
>
> Aunty Lesley

Mission

It is more respectful to use the word purpose, rather than mission in planning documents.

Missions were first set up in the 19th century by Christian missionaries. Aboriginal peoples were taken to missions against their will, resulting in the destruction of families and cultures.

On these missions, every aspect of Aboriginal people's lives was controlled. Life on these missions was incredibly harsh, with poor living conditions, and no respect for human rights, or the cultural needs and practices of Aboriginal peoples.

The term 'mission' has negative connotations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and can cause distress.

Mob

The meaning of mob for Aboriginal peoples is very different from the western understanding of the word, which is as an unruly and large crowd of people. For Aboriginal peoples mob refers to strong connections and cohesive ties within a group.

Mob is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal peoples associated with a particular place or country, a Nation, language group or an historical community. For example, the Waka Waka mob, the Cherbourg mob or the Inala mob.

It is a term that is extremely important to peoples because it is used to identify who they are, where they are from, who they are connected with and their group responsibilities and support. The individual is culturally less important than identifying with being part of and fulfilling responsibilities to the mob.

This term is not generally used by Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Nation, language group, tribe

Nation refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular, culturally defined area of land or country. Each Nation has boundaries that cannot be changed, and language is tied to that nation and its country.

Nations is generally the most respectful term however; language groups is also commonly used and may be the preferred term.

These terms are more respectful than 'tribes'. There are two main reasons for this – firstly tribe/s implies a sameness of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups. Secondly, tribe/s can imply something that is negative or simplistic, however, while departmental staff should avoid using the word tribe, there are Aboriginal peoples who use this word to describe themselves.

Mob is mostly an in-group term, used by Aboriginal peoples (not Torres Strait Islander peoples), but depending on the circumstances, it's acceptable and even appreciated when non-Indigenous people ask an Aboriginal person 'who is your mob?'

Spelling variations

Aboriginal languages have only relatively recently begun to be written down and have very different sounds and pronunciations to English, with more than half the sounds in some Aboriginal languages not found in English and vice versa. As such, there may be variations in the spelling of a Nation's name, so if you come across a different spelling, do not automatically think it's an error. An example is Kamilaroi, Gomeroi, Gamilaraay.

Natives, primitive, prehistoric, simple

These terms are offensive as they imply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are not as 'advanced' as European societies. Using terms that imply negative values is disrespectful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

The effectiveness and sophistication of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resource management, social organisation and science is becoming more widely recognised.

Sorry Business or Bad News

The period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples is commonly known as Sorry Business or Bad News.

Sorry Business is a term used during the time of mourning following the death of an Aboriginal and Bad News would be used during the time of mourning a Torres Strait Islander person. The term can also refer to the past practice of forcibly removing children from their families.

In many Aboriginal communities there is a prohibition on naming someone who is deceased, which may last for months or even years. When this occurs, a different name is used to refer to the person who has passed away. For a Torres Strait Islander person, it is culturally appropriate to be sensitive and respectful, when speaking of a family member who has passed. This is often referred to as 'good pasin'.

To understand the emotional impact of Sorry Business or Bad News you need to appreciate the collective sense of identity means the loss of an individual important to the group is felt deeply by all. There are protocols observed which are designed as mechanisms to deal with that deep sense of loss. It is an essential part of the healing process that those connected to the person who has passed have the opportunity to come together to process this loss.

Community Profiles

The Queensland Government web page has a range of information on Communities across the state and many other areas of cultural information, including protocols. Community histories can be discovered as well.

> When you talk about science, we understood genetics thousands of years before Mendel's* split pea experiments, that's what skin group and totem is all about!
>
> Uncle Les
> (*Gregor Mendel (1822-1884) is acknowledged as the founder of the modern science of genetics.)

Generally, the face of the person who has died should not be shown without warning, particularly to their own communities.

You should always check with the local Aboriginal community before displaying or broadcasting names or images of deceased people.

It is important to recognise that Sorry Business is experienced by all Aboriginal peoples and Bad News by all Torres Strait Islander peoples no matter whether they live in an urban centre or a remote community.

Torres Strait Creole

Torres Strait Creole (also known as Ailan Tok or Yumplatok) is spoken by most Torres Strait Islanders and is a mixture of Australian English and traditional languages. It developed from a Pidgin language as a result of contact with missionaries and others. Torres Strait Creole has its own distinctive sound, grammar, vocabulary, usage and meanings.

Where English is a second or third language, it may be appropriate to use Creole. But only with express community consent.

Tracking

It is more respectful to use the word monitoring, rather than tracking in operational documents.

Use of the word tracking is not appropriate as it can trigger memories of the regrettable period of history when under the control of European officers, Aboriginal people — as part of the various Native Police Forces — tracked and hunted down other Aboriginal people. Even for much of the 20th Century, when Aboriginal peoples left the designated places where they were allowed to live, they were often tracked down and forcibly returned or relocated to a more remote place that was harder to leave.

There are two languages indigenous to Torres Strait Islanders and an English- based Creole/Kriol.

Meriam Mir (also written as Miriam Mer) is the Language of the Eastern Islands of the Torres Strait.

Kala Lagaw Ya (also written as Kalaw Lagaw Ya) is the traditional language owned by the Western and Central islands of the Torres Strait and is linguistically connected to the Aboriginal languages of the Australian mainland. There are four distinct regional dialects derived from this language. They are Mabuyag, Kalaw Kawawa Ya, Kawrareg and Kulkalgau Ya.

Traditional Owners

A great deal of respect is afforded to Traditional Owners and as such, the words must be capitalised.

Traditional Owners (also referred to as Traditional Custodians) are a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples directly descended from the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of a culturally defined area of land or country.

The term Traditional Owners is often used when describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's connection to the land, but also in the native title process. It is important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not rely on the native title process to determine for them who the Traditional Owners are.

Who are the Traditional Owners

Who are the Traditional Owners in the place where you work? Talk to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or staff to discover who the Traditional Owners are.

Display an acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners in your work foyer or entrance



Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country protocols

A Welcome to Country is a protocol where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners welcome others to the land of their ancestors.

An Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners and Elders differs from a Welcome to Country in that it can be delivered by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

These are practices that have been in place since prior to colonisation. This practice demonstrates respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and recognises the importance of acknowledging Traditional Owners of the land and/or sea.

See the Welcome to Country Protocol on the Cultural Capability Portal for more information.

Vulnerability

We must be conscious of using any language that stigmatises or labels Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders who may never need to access the services of our department and so there should be some care taken to differentiate between all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are experiencing vulnerability.

Careful consideration should be given to respectfully referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may need the services of the department.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are experiencing vulnerability is the recommended option as this avoids any sense of 'labelling' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as having lifelong vulnerability.

> We are sometimes seen as resistant or as being uncooperative because we don't share. Sometimes it comes back to who we do and don't want to share with. It might be about women's and men's business, different roles and respect.
>
> Uncle Les

Women's business and Men's business

The terms Women's and Men's business are often used to describe the practice of women and men discussing specific issues separately. Although this is one aspect, it does not fully describe the true meaning or cultural significance of the practice of Women's and Men's business. For Aboriginal peoples these terms define gender based roles and responsibilities that are core to spiritual belief systems, laws and lore, and highly complex cultural values. Using these terms in a manner that trivialises them or does not recognise their full cultural significance can cause offence and as such, these are not necessarily terms that should be used by non-Indigenous staff.

While Torres Strait Islander cultures do have gender based cultural beliefs and considerations, the terms Women's and Men's business should not be used.

> Men put in an inappropriate process must leave - they have no choice - at the very least they leave by falling silent.
>
> Uncle Chris



In practice

It is important to be aware of this cultural value (and of the differences between cultures) as it can be a factor in ensuring more respectful communications with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Where there may be gender based issues being discussed, consider having staff of both genders available. It is acknowledged that this may present operational challenges, but it's an important consideration.

As different families may need different processes to make sure that both women and men are given a voice, it is best to always be respectful and check.

Strengths Base Language

Strengths based language is the standard within the department. It can be defined as an approach which identifies opportunities to highlight and promote the existing strengths and capabilities of an individual (or group) to face a problem or concern. This is in contrast to focusing on the problem or concern and how the individual (or group) is coping.

The underlying impetus is a belief in the possibility of change and an acknowledgment that people can be resourceful and a part of their own change. This does not mean the problem or concern is not considered. This is usually done through questioning strategies that attempt to identify 'what works' for the person and 'how it works' so we can focus on developing these further.

When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it is important to identify the collective strengths and capabilities of the network around the person as those strengths and capabilities are shared with the person with whom you are working.

An example question, 'Can you tell me about a time when X (the problem) could have happened but somehow you were able to do something else instead?'

> When you ask about our strengths you ignore those that are the strengths of the mob because you focus on individual responsibility and actions only'.
>
> Identified CSSO in a training workshop

A different lens

It is critical to understand that the person you are working with may describe what they see as their strengths through a lens different to yours. For example, identifying the idea of reciprocity or sharing of resources across the entire group (such as food or money) as a strength, which may not align with your values.

Terms to describe Queenslanders who are not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

> Respect goes both ways.
>
> Aunty Lesley

Non-Indigenous

There are times when it is necessary, in writing and in conversation, to refer to Queenslanders who are not Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Using the term non-Indigenous is a respectful option.

The broader Queensland community, other Queenslanders

Depending on the context of the communication, these options to collectively describe non-Indigenous peoples may also be appropriate and respectful:

- 'The organisation aims to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders to achieve health outcomes commensurate to that of the broader Queensland community'.
- 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples access this service at a higher rate than other Queenslanders'.

As we respectfully journey together, we will act in the spirit of reconciliation, learn from the past and positively engage in the present to build a trusting and respectful future.

Michael Hogan

Former Director-General

Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women



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