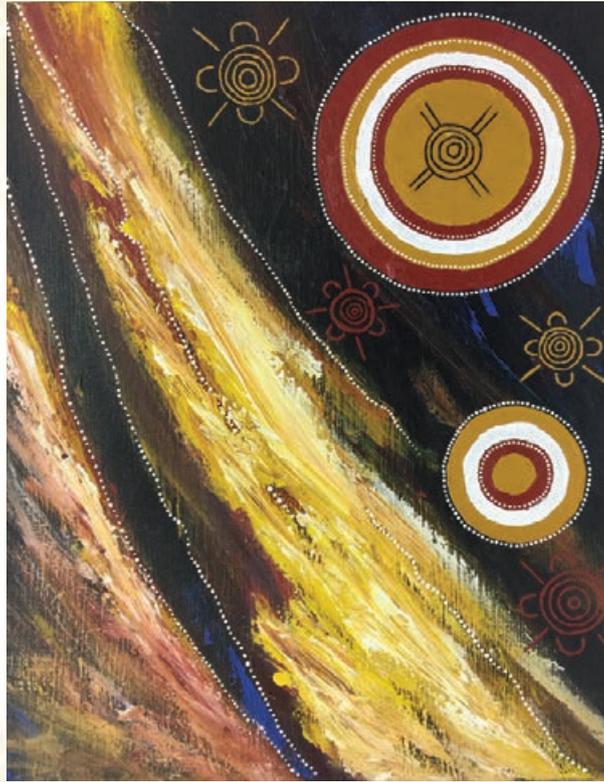


Connecting to Aboriginal Culture and Community

Each Community is different and unique. What applies to one will not automatically apply to another.



Cover: Artist Patricia Pickett

Local Noongar artist Patricia Pickett's painting illustrates Aboriginal people and local community gathering together and walking together in celebration of Aboriginal culture.

This Artwork represents 'Meeting Places' of the First People of Australia (Aboriginal People) who occupied and respected the land.

The dot work illustrates our people gathering and guiding our children towards the 'Sacred Grounds' to learn, respect and celebrate our culture.

Ochre colours were added to give the impression of distance travelled through certain communities for meetings and ceremonies.



“For Indigenous peoples to participate in Australian society as equals requires that we be able to live our lives free from assumptions by others about what is best for us. It requires recognition of our values, culture and traditions so that they can co-exist in mainstream society. It requires respecting our difference and celebrating it within the diversity of the nation”. Dr. William Jonas (Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission)¹.

Please note: The term ‘**Aboriginal**’ is used in preference to ‘**Indigenous**’ and refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Noongar is the spelling used in this document, however, it may also be written as **Nyungar, Noongah, Nyoongar, Nyungah**

Use of this document

Connecting to Aboriginal Culture and Community was written as a resource for the Swan Alliance and our *Communities for Children* Community Partners. It is our desire for this document to be used within our local community and we would appreciate acknowledgement of its use. For further information please contact us via email swanalliance@ngala.com.au.

First edition: March 2016.

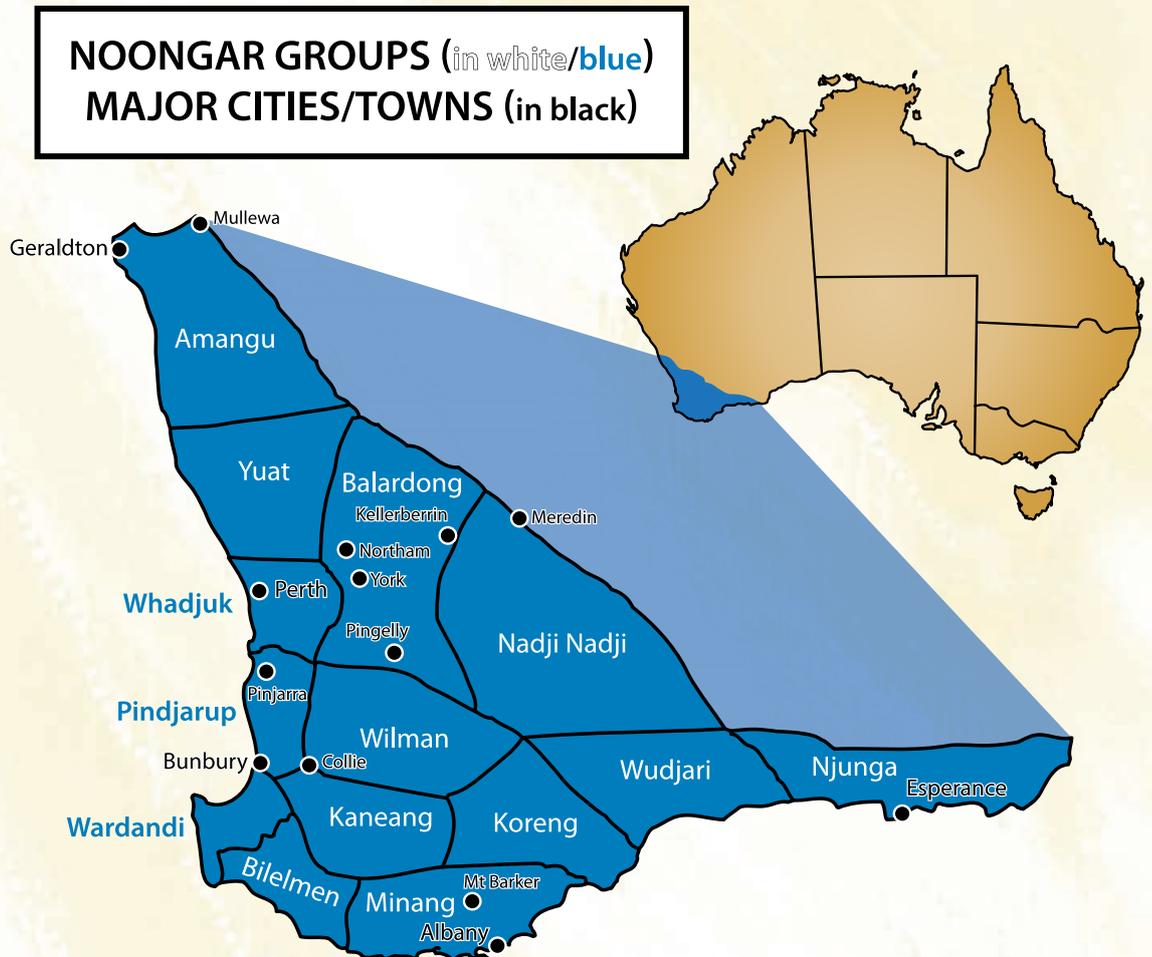
¹ <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/guides/information-sheet-social>

Introduction

The Swan Alliance Communities for Children initiative is funded by the Australian Department of Social Services under the Family Support Program. The initiative leads and funds innovative and integrated service delivery across 11 priority suburbs (Beechboro, Kiara, Caversham, Lockridge, Koongamia, Middle Swan, Midland, Midvale, Stratton, Ellenbrook and Bullsbrook) to implement prevention and early intervention strategies for vulnerable families with children up to 12 years of age, who are at risk of disadvantage. Communities for Children is managed by the Swan Alliance, as Facilitating Partner, an equal partnership between Ngala, Mission Australia and Anglicare WA.

Respect Culture, Recognise Traditions Reconcile Past and Present

The purpose of this document is to enable the Swan Alliance, our Community Partners and other local services to more effectively engage with and work alongside local Aboriginal people, primarily Noongar, living in Whadjuk Country. The establishment of strong community partnerships is based on mutual respect, trust and acknowledgement of cultural difference.



This is one example (Source: Wikimedia Commons) of the way Noongar Country has been represented as 14 different language groups. Noongar people from the Whadjuk language group are the Traditional Custodians of the land in Perth and surrounding areas. The map may contain inaccuracies including differences in the spelling of names, the representation of language groups and boundary locations. We recommend consideration be given to other available maps and ethnographic materials for a more comprehensive representation of Noongar country, language and social groups.

Engaging With and Working Alongside Aboriginal People and Local Community

The Swan Alliance is committed to working alongside the local Aboriginal community and developing positive partnerships and collaborations with community members and Aboriginal service providers.

The formation of Aboriginal Reference Groups is one strategy used to engage with representatives of various local services to ensure activities are culturally appropriate for local Aboriginal families.

The role of an Aboriginal Reference Group is to work in partnership to:

- Increase appreciation and awareness of Aboriginal people as Australia's First Peoples;
- Respect and value their contributions to the community i.e. cultural respect;
- Develop opportunities for collaboration and participation between the Swan Alliance and the local Aboriginal community in areas of:
 - family strengths
 - social and emotional well-being
 - early childhood outcomes in parenting
 - health and education, i.e. growing up kids to reach their full potential
 - child protection and safety for children and families;
- Increase understanding of issues affecting Aboriginal people in the local community and to provide guidance and support in responding to those issues;
- Assist the Swan Alliance and Community Partners to develop culturally appropriate ways to engage with local Aboriginal people to become more culturally inclusive and accessible in all areas of service delivery; and
- Become a model for other organisations for social and cultural change.

Membership includes local Aboriginal people who have a working knowledge of their local community, are aware of issues regarding Aboriginal children and families and can identify gaps in culturally appropriate services within that community.

People from the local Aboriginal community including recognised Elders, Aboriginal volunteers and Aboriginal staff from local services will be invited to become reference group members.

As the Department of Social Services does not allow for the payment of sitting fees to attend meetings, reimbursement will be offered to non-working community members to cover out of pocket expenses such as childcare and petrol/travel costs.



Take the Time to Learn About Your Community

It is important that any relationship with Aboriginal people is underpinned with respect, honesty, and acknowledgement of a person's cultural identity. As with most relationships, trust is built over time.

The following guide is offered to support successful engagement with Aboriginal people and community.

Plan Thoroughly and Get to Know Your Community

Involving Aboriginal people and communities in the planning stage will result in better outcomes:

- **Contact** local Aboriginal people who have knowledge of the community and Aboriginal people working in local agencies. Introduce yourself and your service;
- **Ask** for guidance on how you should approach people in their community and what particular protocols may apply. (Be aware that **Sorry Time** or some conflicts - family feuds - may also be happening in the community);
- **Find** out if there are particular places or community groups where Aboriginal people may meet;
- **Include** Elders in decision making and program development as this will establish and maintain trust in your service; and
- **Provide** morning tea or lunch when meeting with Elders, Aboriginal volunteers and service providers as this is a great way to initiate general conversations.

Communicate Respectfully

Communicating in a way that values and respects Aboriginal people will help create meaningful relationships:

- Be aware of non-verbal cues and be comfortable and patient with silence;
- Do not discard ideas presented; accept all ideas as points to consider;
- If there are limitations, explain the limitations; i.e. if your service is funded only for a brief time, be realistic, open and transparent from the beginning about timeframes and types of services offered;
- Be aware that using jargon and complex verbal statements may offend and cause misunderstandings;
- Don't expect immediate decisions or many questions. Decisions are very rarely made on the spot; and
- Be open and prepared to have your pre-conceived ideas challenged.

Establish Community Ownership

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

- Share information;

- Make sure information is relevant, appealing and easy to understand; this will encourage further sharing of information;
- Allow time for everyone to talk through the issues and arrive at a decision that everyone agrees upon;
- Be up-front with important information that could affect programs and services; and
- Allow yourself to be guided by the community and participants.

Demonstrate Commitment

Demonstrating a commitment to Aboriginal people is a journey rather than a single action:

- Follow-up and provide feedback;
- Decide how you will provide follow-up information and to whom;
- Consultation and negotiation is not a 'once off' occurrence, it is an ongoing two-way process;
- Follow-up on requests and keeping in contact is an important part of establishing trust and building relationships; and
- Aboriginal people need to see by your actions that you are committed to delivering a quality program or service.

Working with Local Aboriginal Families

An Aboriginal Workers' Perspective

- Contact the local school Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) – make home visits together to families whose children attend schools.
- Contact Aboriginal Community Health, Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service and Aboriginal staff in other local agencies to encourage information sharing.
- Attend network and early years group meetings within the local area.
- Get to know the families, significant family members and where they come from.
- Be aware of any changes within community as these can impact on how a family works with you.
- Is transport available? Provide transport if needed.
- Employ local Aboriginal people with connections to local community.
- First contact – approach being respectful, welcoming, friendly, show an interest, develop trust after continuing interactions and build positive relations. Trust is a two-way process.
- It is important to have knowledge of any conflicts, e.g. family feuds, and to maintain impartiality.
- Having Aboriginal workers can make a difference.

A Non-Aboriginal Workers' Perspective

- Meet with people where they are, don't call a meeting and expect people to come.
- Allow space for flexibility, give other options and choices.

- 
- Take cues from family, i.e. body language, tone of voice.
 - Family sets boundaries – observe and allow them to take the lead.
 - Be respectful, engaging, build up trust (this takes time and needs to be built into the whole process) and share experiences.
 - Common language lays foundation for working together.
 - Allow space for stories and connections; allow space and time; wait for responses.
 - Always follow-up on requests made; build relationships, be open and informing of actions.
 - Sometimes assumed agreement is not necessarily endorsement. It is important to follow-up and seek clarification of your understanding of what was agreed.
 - Be aware of the ‘shame’ factor – no eye contact does not mean people are not listening or taking notice of what you are saying.

Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country

The Swan Alliance Communities for Children recognises the importance of **Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country** as it assists in developing strong partnerships with Aboriginal people, is respectful and inclusive of all groups and embraces the spirit of Reconciliation.

It also demonstrates the commitment by the Swan Alliance Communities for Children to achieve a high standard of service delivery in a local area, particularly for Aboriginal children and families and local communities.

To work co-operatively and in partnership with Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people need to take into consideration Aboriginal history, traditions and culture.

‘Welcome to Country’ Ceremony

A formal ‘Welcome to Country’ ceremony is where an Elder who is a Traditional Custodian welcomes people to their country. Not all Aboriginal people can perform a ‘Welcome to Country’; it must be given by a recognised and accepted Elder within the local community. It is also appropriate for a younger family member to perform a ‘Welcome to Country’ **ONLY** if the Elder of that family has given permission.

A ‘Welcome to Country’ always occurs at the opening of a major or significant event and is the first item on the program and can be done through speech, song, ceremony or combination of these things.

Organising a ‘Welcome to Country’ Ceremony

When organising a ‘Welcome to Country’, event organisers need to allow enough time to discuss with the Elder what form of welcome should be undertaken at the event and if particular protocols or customs need to be observed by those in attendance.

Organisers must provide the Elder with information on the theme and purpose of the event and respectfully request that the Welcome in language be translated in English so that the audience understands the welcoming message.

Contacting an Elder

To request information for a 'Welcome to Country', it is culturally appropriate to contact Aboriginal people employed at the local level in schools, agencies and other Aboriginal networks as they may be able to provide names and contact details of local Elders. Once contact with the Elder has been made, consider the following:

- Introduction: Who you are (organisation and role);
- Type of event – is it a celebration, training or other major event?;
- Date, time and place;
- Who will meet/greet the Elder;
- Will others accompany the Elder; and
- Ask the Elder if any equipment is required (for example a microphone).

Fee for the Service

In providing cultural services such as 'Welcome to Country', artistic performances and ceremonies, Elders are using their intellectual property and should be appropriately remunerated. The fee for service is negotiated and agreed between the Elder and event organisers and is made subject to the size and significance of the occasion.

Always contact the Elder 3-5 days prior to the event to check if they are still available and finalise arrangements including details for payment.

Many Traditional Owners do not have an Australian Business Number (ABN). In this instance, payment should be paid directly into the Elder's bank account upon completion of the service and signing of the appropriate form in lieu of an invoice within 10 working days.

At the Event

- Ensure an appropriate staff member is available to take care of the Elder.
- Let the Elder know the order of proceedings (who will introduce them)
- Make sure the person who will be introducing the Elder has the correct title, name and background information.
- Include them in the event – ask them if they would like to stay or would they prefer to leave shortly after the Welcome.

The 'Welcome to Country' should be well prepared, thoughtful, and respectful to both Aboriginal people and the audience. At the conclusion of the Welcome, the audience should feel that they have been reminded of the cultural significance and connection Aboriginal people have with the land.



Response to the Welcome to Country Ceremony

It is respectful and culturally appropriate for the speaker following the 'Welcome to Country' ceremony to immediately respond and thank the Elder on behalf of the event organisers. For example:

"Thank you (Elders' name) for your Welcome. I respectfully acknowledge Traditional Owners, the Noongar People, Elders past and present and the Whadjuk People who are the Traditional Custodians of this land on which we are gathering/meeting today".

'Acknowledgement of Country'

For less formal occasions, it is respectful and appropriate to do an 'Acknowledgement of Country'.

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is a way the wider community can show respect for Aboriginal culture and the ongoing relationship that Traditional Owners/Custodians have with the land.

An Acknowledgement can be performed by any participant, including non-Aboriginal people, and should be the first item in opening a small event or meeting prior to welcomes, apologies and other items.

The chairperson or speaker begins by acknowledging that the meeting/gathering is taking place in the country of the Traditional Owners, i.e. *'the Noongar People'* and the Traditional Custodians, i.e. *'The Whadjuk People'* (Perth area).

Examples of Acknowledgement of Country

"I respectfully acknowledge Traditional Owners, the Noongar People, Traditional Custodians, the Whadjuk People and Elders past and present."

"I respectfully acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the Traditional lands of the Noongar People."

"I respectfully acknowledge that this meeting is being held on Aboriginal land and recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of Aboriginal people of this land."

Acknowledging Elders

It is respectful and important that all speakers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, acknowledge any Elders in attendance prior to the opening or presentation of an event.

Definitions and Information

Aboriginal: This refers to person who is of Aboriginal descent, who identifies as Aboriginal and is accepted by the Aboriginal community in which they live.

Aboriginal Community: This refers to all local families including local traditional family groups, extended family, Aboriginal people in cross-cultural marriages, local church and sport groups. An Aboriginal community can include many diverse urban, regional and remote communities and language groups.

Aboriginal Culture: All things Aboriginal including spirituality, languages, customs, lore, country (land), beliefs and lifestyles.

Elders: The Elders of a community are the custodians of the Traditional knowledge and lore and are recognised and respected as such within a given community or group as distinct from a leader. Elders can only speak for their language group or geographic area (country).

Family: This refers to the relationships between family members and consists of a bigger family unit and is extended through parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, other family members and close friends. Aboriginal families have a collective responsibility for caring/raising children. Home language is used when affectionately speaking to their children, grandchildren and other family members. For example, Mum or Dad will say to their child, "Come here Mum/Dad", Grandmother will say to her grandchild, "What are you doing Nanna?", an aunt might say to her niece, "Where you going, Daughter?" or an uncle might say to his nephew, "hello Uncle!".

Kinship: A structure used for social relations, personal family connections, responsibility and behaviour expectations.

Leaders: Respected people in the community such as grandparents or others as nominated by the Aboriginal community and not necessarily an Elder.

Noongar: This is the broad term that identifies Aboriginal people who come from the South West region of Western Australia. Noongar people living in the South West are the largest Aboriginal group in Australia.

Noongar Lore: The terms 'lore' and 'law' are sometimes used interchangeably, but 'law' refers to written European law. Lore for Noongar people is unwritten and refers to *kaartdijin* (knowledge), beliefs, rules or customs. Noongar lore is linked to kinship and mutual obligation, sharing and reciprocity. Our lore and customs relate to marriage and trade, access, usage and custodianship of land. Traditionally, it has governed our use of fire, hunting and gathering, and our behaviour regarding family and community. Noongar lore works with nature to protect animals and our environment. Noongar people do not eat animals that have totemic significance with our names. This contributes to assuring biodiversity is maintained and traditionally food supplies are always in abundance.

Kaartdijin and lore belongs to Noongar people only and is different from other Aboriginal groups. All of these lores have been handed down from the Elders, fathers and mothers to their sons and daughters through unknown generations, and are fixed in the minds of Noongar people as sacred and unalterable. Because many parts of Noongar lore are complex it is often misunderstood. Noongar lore is not transcribed from thousands of years of oral history into writing.²

2 Kaartdijin Noongar-Noongar Knowledge (Sharing Noongar Culture): South West



Sorry Time: The loss of a family member or attending funerals and personally paying respects to the family of the deceased person.

Stolen Generation: The Stolen Generations are the Noongar and other Aboriginal children who over one and a half centuries, were taken away from their families and placed in institutions and missions. Many adults from the Stolen Generation are still searching to maintain a close connection to their family and develop a sense of belonging; and, explore their identity and their culture.

Torres Strait Islander: A person who is of Torres Strait Islander descent, who identifies as a Torres Strait Islander and is accepted by the Torres Strait Islander community as such.

Traditional Custodians/Owners: This means those people with direct links to specific lands dating back before European contact, not necessarily those presently residing in a town.

Significant Events

National Reconciliation Week: 27 May – 3 June

The dates commemorate two significant milestones in the reconciliation journey — the successful 1967 referendum and the High Court Mabo decision. The week is a time for all Australians to learn about our shared histories, cultures and achievements and to explore how each of us can join the national reconciliation effort.

NAIDOC Week: First Week of July

NAIDOC stands for *National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee*. Its origins can be traced to the emergence of Aboriginal groups in the 1920s which sought to increase awareness of the status and treatment of Indigenous Australians in the wider community.

NAIDOC Week is held in the first full week of July. It is a time to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and achievements and is an opportunity to recognise the contributions that Indigenous Australians make to our country and our society.

All Australians are encouraged to participate in the celebrations and activities that take place across the nation during NAIDOC Week.

National Aboriginal Children's Day: 4 August

National Aboriginal Children's Day is the largest national day to celebrate our children. This day is celebrated across Australia each year on 4th August.

National Aboriginal Children's Day provides opportunities for all Australians to celebrate the strengths and culture of Aboriginal children across Australia.

National Sorry Day: 26 May

National Sorry Day is an annual event that has been held since 1998 to remember and commemorate the forced removal policies of the Australian Government during the 20th Century and the impact of these policies on Aboriginal children, their families and communities.

The Apology: 13 February

On 13th February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology, on behalf of the Australian Government, to Aboriginal people for “their profound grief, suffering and loss” caused by the impact of past laws and policies.

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The Swan Alliance Communities for Children is committed to these processes as an integral part of their role in the community, their connection with Aboriginal People and Aboriginal Culture.

This document was prepared by Carol Ryder, Community Development Officer for the Swan Alliance Communities for Children. Carol is a Noongar woman whose direct family links are with the Yued (Yuat) people from the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia.

This document has been endorsed by: Local Aboriginal Elders, Local Aboriginal Community Members and Service providers, The South West Land and Sea Council and the Swan Alliance.

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