

Working with Community: Guidelines for collaborative practice between libraries and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Published July 2013; reviewed March 2021

Introduction

The National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections guides progressive action across national, state and territory library institutions in their plans and approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library services and collections. This framework holds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their interests, needs and perspectives central to any development of policy or practice.

In line with the policy framework, NSLA libraries are committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to achieve informed and appropriate directions and agendas across the library and information sector.

The *'Working with Community'* guide has been created to assist the library profession in building mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and to assist library staff engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as they seek to extend and enhance their services and collections. Collaboration may be initiated by the library or the community, however, regardless of who initiates, all projects or programs should be mutually beneficial and involve a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity.

Consultation is an ongoing process that benefits all participants equally in helping to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' voices and views are considered and incorporated. Consultation involves establishing a respectful relationship and demonstrating a willingness to share, to learn and to negotiate. To ensure library programs and services are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there needs to be a level of community ownership and partnership.

The guidelines presented here are intended to guide library engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. They are not absolute and should be applied taking into account local situations. There is great diversity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and thoughtful preparation and research is the key to understanding these differences.

Community

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can be identified by any number of characteristics, and no two are identical. They exhibit a diverse range and complex combination of characteristics, ranging from urban to rural to remote, and from traditional to modern. Some of the characteristics that may be helpful to understanding a particular community are:

Locality: Communities may be urban, rural or remote.

Physicality: A community may be a physical geographic location – bounded by physical or legal boundaries. Or it may be implicit – a group of people linked by some commonality such as shared language, culture or history, and not bound by location.

Language: A community may share a single language or contain speakers of many languages.



Identity and kinship: A community may use a different stratum of relationships and kinship to establish identity. For example people may identify generally as Indigenous or more specifically as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. A community may contain kinship relationships from diverse clan and skin group systems, or a single clan and skin group system.

Cultural Practices: Communities range from traditional to modern in their beliefs and practices and individuals within a community will occupy a range of positions on a continuum of beliefs and practices.

Land association: A community may inhabit the land with which it has traditional association; land with which it has become associated through movement and generational occupation; land it has no traditional association with but regularly travels to; or may have lost all traditional association with the land it inhabits.

Governance: A community may have many layers of governance. In addition to commonwealth, state/territory or local government, there may be an Aboriginal council, board, and/or incorporated body. This council or board may be similar in many respects to local governments, and can enact by-laws to regulate entry into the community, as well as behaviour whilst on Country; or may act in parallel to local government.

There can be layers of Indigenous councils and boards, and reference groups and advisory committees may exist. Even within one jurisdiction these parallel layers of governance may be different from community to community and do not necessarily act in a single hierarchy. Traditional Owners play an important role in the governance of many communities and may also be recognised by Native Title as the legal owners of the land. Alongside formal governance structures may be traditional structures such as community Elders.

Origin: Communities originate in many ways, including for example:

- Communities in urban areas where the title to a parcel of land has been transferred to an Indigenous organisation, for example, communities on former mission sites or reserve land in New South Wales and Queensland;
- Well established communities and outstations in remote areas such as Noonkanbah or Jigalong in Western Australia;
- Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) communities and their outstations in Queensland as well as the two shires of Aurukun and Mornington Island; and
- Communities on Indigenous pastoral properties/leases.

Shared history: Community may also refer to a group of people with a shared history, such as those who lived on a Mission, a Reserve or in a children's home. These individuals may not have shared a single point of origin or a language group, and they may now be geographically dispersed, but through their shared experiences of an institution would be considered the 'community of interest' when discussing records and material related to that institution.

Services: Services may be provided by the governing bodies, NGOs, and Indigenous, community-run services and programs may also be in place (Aboriginal Medical or Legal Service, Indigenous tourism or media organisations, etc.).

Respecting Indigenous knowledge

NSLA recognises that legal mechanisms to protect Indigenous Knowledge have not yet been developed to deal with the intersection between customary laws and Western intellectual property regimes.¹

¹ T Janke Our Culture, Our Future: Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights Michael Frankel & Co Surrey Hills 1998; World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), Minding Culture: Case Studies on Intellectual Property and Traditional Cultural Expression prepared by Terri Janke for World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Geneva 2002 at <http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/studies/cultural/minding-culture/index.html>)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the custodians and owners of their knowledge and culture. They have significant contributions to make to the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections both within the library and the community.

Working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enables a two-way sharing of knowledge regarding Indigenous history and culture.

Identifying a process

Community consultation and collaboration takes time and patience.

Many factors need to be considered and understood when consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some factors are common, however many communities will have their own protocols and guidelines for engaging with external organisations and individuals and it is up to visitors to make themselves aware and respect these factors.

For example, in working with an integrated community in a large urban centre, consideration should be given to approaching a statutory body that advises and works with government, such as the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. In urban centres where many groups have come to live, there may be specific Traditional Owners organisations, e.g. The United Ngunnawal Elders Council in the ACT; or Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation in Alice Springs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples working in the various layers of government may be willing to facilitate contact. Furthermore, government entities may have developed guidelines for community engagement. It may also be possible to make contact through the variety of links that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations have with the broader community. They may, for example, have connections or established relationships with community organisations, such as Councils of Social Service; or Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled service organisations may also be able to facilitate contact. As already noted, flexibility and goodwill will assist in finding the right avenue.

Some remote communities have their own consultation protocols that should be respected and used. Contact should be made via the Aboriginal council, Land council or board, which may enact by-laws to regulate entry into the community as well as behaviour whilst on Country. For communities with an incorporated council or governing body contact information may be found through the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC).

Decision making and discussion in Indigenous communities involves maximum participation and representation because family responsibilities and authority go beyond the nuclear family unit. This may mean individuals (particularly Elders), extended families, and community organisations may all need to be included in the processes of consultation and negotiation and require time to absorb and discuss what is being offered or proposed.

It is important to recognise that not all contact can be managed via phone, email or online meeting. In some cases the only means of establishing a respectful and meaningful dialogue is to visit the individual or community.

This guide outlines the basics for community consultation following a simple set of actions. These actions may not always start at the very beginning or take place in sequence, but attempts should be made to cover each of the aspects when establishing a new project or a new area of engagement, whether initiated by the library or the community.

1. Research

Knowing the community that you will be engaging with is crucial. Context will vary across each state and region, and being aware of the nuances of community characteristics will be key when looking to develop mutually beneficial relationships.

- 1.1 Research into the community or organisations being engaged, including its history and background. For example what is its purpose? Does its business plan/strategic plan/vision statement say anything about community development, learning, literacy, or something else that is common to your business plan? Find ways of aligning your organisation's objectives to its.

Consider: Have you or your organisation engaged with this community in the past? Are there any reports from other bodies that would give you an insight into the community and its history of working with external bodies? What are the characteristics of this community, and what are the details of these characteristics. For example if the community strongly identifies by clan groups what are they? Understand the governance structure of the community as it impacts this collaboration. Ask yourself if this is the right community for this consultation/collaboration?

- 1.2 Be clear about the purpose and objectives of your contact.

- 1.3 Make yourself aware of any protocols currently in place.

2. Initial contact

First communication with a community is about clearly defining the why, what and how of developing a relationship or a meaningful dialogue around the project being initiated. Importantly, it is also the first step in relationship building with community.

- 2.1 It is important to be clear as to the objectives of the project, the outcomes and the time frame, this will assist with identification of appropriate points of contact concerning the project.
- 2.2 Establish the best way to contact the identified point, for example community office, shire or land office, organisation or individual and whether this is best done by email, fax, letter or phone. Also establish where any formal correspondence should be sent and to whom it should be personally addressed. This could be a CEO, chairperson, the finance officer or some other entity or individual.
- 2.3 Make sure you are direct and to the point. Many of these contact people are busy. Further details may be communicated later, once initial contact has been established.
- 2.4 If your initial contact is by phone explain you will send through a formal letter or email confirming what you have discussed and that you will call back in a couple of weeks to ensure it has been received. Always carefully note the name of the person with whom first contact has been made.

Note: Community numbers and occupancy may fluctuate due to family and cultural commitments. You may talk to one person during initial contact and then find due to other circumstances that you need to start the process again with someone else. This is where establishing contact can take time and patience.

3. Subsequent contact

Once you and the community have established that the project is of mutual interest and benefit, it is important to maintain a respectful and courteous line of communication.

- 3.1 Send formal correspondence detailing previous conversations and the project for consideration to specified persons including any other materials or items that might be of interest. (You may also need to copy this correspondence to other appropriate people, such as the chairperson of the community or other government entities.)

Also, if possible send a flyer that simply details the project in plain English and can be displayed throughout the community, such as the health centre, school, community office and so on.

Note: Isolated communities may rely on a mail delivery via plane, so delivery may take some time – be patient.

- 3.2 Follow up with a phone call, after sending your letter, to discuss the project again. Ensure the community has an opportunity to provide feedback or seek further advice regarding the project or any concerns/thoughts they may have.
- 3.3 Be respectful. Actively listen and give community members an opportunity to respond. Do not rush the consultation. The community may need several weeks to consider information and respond.
- 3.4 Identify who should be included in the consultation process as well as who may need to authorise any negotiations or approvals. These groups may be very different, but both are important roles.
- 3.5 Work with the community to gain a mutually beneficial outcome and develop a solid working a relationship. Remember this will take time and may require repetition to ensure that everyone is fully informed.
- 3.6 Meetings should be properly documented with agendas and minutes. Agendas should be distributed before the meeting, and minutes distributed following the meeting – this will inform those who were unable to attend.

Note: It is essential to maintain regular contact with the community, organisation or individual. Regular phone, email, or fax correspondence will assist in ensuring successful two-way communication.

At this point in a project's development, it is worthwhile to start building in some realistic timeframes about the project in negotiation with community and established partners.

4. Preparing for a community/face-to-face Visit

A community face-to-face visit requires a certain level of pre-knowledge and planning. You need to be aware of any protocols in terms of behaviour, communication and showing respect to the community. Be aware of the requirements of each community before deciding to visit.

- 4.1 Start discussing dates for the intended visit as soon as possible. Consider whether it is appropriate for your meeting to coincide with another community event, such as an Elder or Council meeting or gathering. Enquire if there are any other conflicting visits scheduled for that time. For example do Centrelink, other departments or NGOs have scheduled visits? If so, try to avoid visiting at the same time.
- 4.2 In some communities you may need to obtain written consent, or obtain an official permit before visiting. This may require an email from the CEO, Chairperson or other delegated community representative.
- 4.3 If you need to travel, organise your mode of transport and accommodation as soon as dates are agreed, as there may be constraints on these services.
- 4.4 If travelling to a remote community find out information on services within the community, such as accommodation, fuel availability, food supplies (a community shop) etc. Consider the weather when scheduling travel to remote communities – i.e. is there a wet season that impedes travel?
- 4.5 The week before your visit ring to ensure the planned visit is still ok. Other community factors may impact on the intended visit (e.g. community event, funeral etc.). Check again the day before and remember, you need to be *flexible* as unexpected things will happen while you are on site.

Note: For any community visit, *plan* well in advance and have a contingency plan to cope with unforeseen circumstances. Most importantly, *be flexible*.

5. Getting to know the community

Situations vary from community to community, it may be appropriate to seek guidance regarding protocols specific to the community you are visiting.

The following are some common points to note, but not all will apply in each situation:

- 5.1** Introduce yourself respectfully. Explain where you are from (the organisation, area or town) and what your business in the community is.
- 5.2** Have a general conversation first and take the time to get to know the community.
- 5.3** Ask if there are any restrictions on your movement whilst in the community, including sensitive areas you should avoid.
- 5.4** Be honest and sincere. Build a sense of trust.
- 5.5** Identify if you have worked with anyone from the community before, or know any of the community members.
- 5.6** Be aware that there may be sensitive community relationships and some people may not be able to work together.
- 5.7** Be respectful. Dress and behave appropriately. Wear identifying clothing if possible, such as corporate shirts or badges.
- 5.8** Listen to what is being said without imposing your interpretation. Respect and appreciate the implications of silence. Younger community members may be quite vocal, trying to ensure that the Elders understand clearly what is being discussed. Take into account what everyone has to say. There will be different points of view and each of these should be understood.
- 5.9** Be aware of body language. Sensitivities will differ between communities. For example, crossing your arms, and holding eye contact with the speaker may be considered impolite by some communities. Avoid any behaviour which may be construed as aggressive, for example stand to the side and not face on.
- 5.10** Be adaptable and flexible to accommodate changing circumstances.
- 5.11** Be respectful that the community may be trying to balance a number of projects and may have other priorities.
- 5.12** Recognise that individuals within communities are often placed under immense pressure to be involved in a myriad of issues and this may put them under great stress.
- 5.13** Allow for language issues – remember in many instances English is not the first language. Try not to use technical jargon, analogies, slang or any form of pidgin/Creole.
- 5.14** Doing business with remote Aboriginal communities is often a very different experience, with the process governed to a large extent by the priority of the day for the community. That priority may differ from the agenda set for your visit. There are often a number of different agendas being pursued within a community and the meeting you have planned and prepared for may be overtaken by another agenda or set of priorities. You need to be flexible.

6. Follow up

Community consultation takes time and patience.

- 6.1** Allow time for the request/proposal to be fully considered.
- 6.2** The project may require you to re-visit the community or for community members to visit you. It is recommended that, where possible, you build a return visit into the project timeline. Consider how you might assist, including by providing financial support.

- 6.3 Maintain relationships, partnerships and collaborations through good communication e.g., phone calls, visits, emails, fax, letters and other correspondence.
- 6.4 Think about other links. Are there other projects that might be of interest to this community? Would the community be interested in working with other individuals or groups that you know?
- 6.5 Be sure to document all communication and all issues. Maintaining a record of your engagement will assist in future planning and when developing new partnerships.
- 6.6 Establish an agreed timeline for the project's development; including short-term and long-term milestones for both the library and community.
- 6.7 Monitor and track the project milestones in collaboration with community and other key partners.

At the end of the project or engagement celebrate, honour the outcomes, acknowledge all participation and honour ongoing relationships in community.

Be sure to:

- acknowledge the contribution of community in the development and success of the project or engagement
- involve the community in the feedback process and report accordingly
- ensure the community has access to any resources, objects or items created as part of the project or engagement. (posters, flyers, promotional material, exhibition items, etc.)
- create opportunities for ongoing working relationships with the community – either with the library or other organisations.

Related resources

[Working with Indigenous collections – NSLA](#)