

Model Meeting Code Amendments - Online Submission Form : Entry # 12570

1. Your Details

I would like my name and personal details to be treated as confidential:

☐ I consent to my details being shared

Name:

Sarah Groom

Name of Organisation (If applicable):

Reconciliation Taree

Postal Address:

[REDACTED]

Telephone:

[REDACTED]

Email:

[REDACTED]

Which of the following best describes you?

☒ Community group

2. Targeted Questions

2.1. Will the proposed amendments made in the consultation draft of the Model Meeting Code achieve the policy outcomes identified in the paper?

Our feedback is provided in a political and social climate where culture wars and discriminatory actions against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are increasingly occurring at the local government level. Across Australia, several Councils have either debated or acted to remove the Acknowledgement of Country from their official meetings, demonstrating a concerning trend that risks undermining reconciliation efforts and the cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

For example, in early 2025, a Councillor for MidCoast Council (on unceded Biripi Country, where Reconciliation Taree is based) proposed a motion to remove the Acknowledgement of Country from Council meetings. The overwhelming public response – both in attendance at the meeting and online – showed strong opposition to the motion, with Biripi, Worimi, and other Aboriginal and non-Indigenous community members coming together in solidarity. The debate that followed was deeply distressing and re-traumatising for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, highlighting the immense emotional and cultural harm that such motions can cause. The fact that three Councillors knowingly pursued an action inflicted harm on an already marginalised community is unacceptable.

Similar incidents have occurred in other Councils across the country, including in Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, where motions to remove Acknowledgements of Country have been proposed or passes under the guise of “simplification” or, misleadingly, “political neutrality.” These actions reveal a dangerous precedent – allowing local governments to dilute or remove culturally significant protocols that affirm the rightful place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision-making spaces.

Given this context, we acknowledge that the proposed changes to the Model Code of Meeting Practice (the Code) may achieve the policy outcome of simplifying the Code and meeting procedures. However, we strongly caution that the way in which the Office of Local Government (OLG) proposes to do this creates a significant risk: it provides greater scope for Councils to remove the Acknowledgement of Country, either explicitly or under the guise of procedural streamlining.

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We assert that the preservation of the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must take precedence over simplification. Specifically, we are deeply concerned about the proposed removal of Provision 8.2, which establishes the order of business and includes Item 2: Acknowledgement of Country. The omission of this Provision, without an alternative mechanism to enshrine an Acknowledgement of Country in Council meetings, directly contradicts the policy objectives of promoting integrity and upholding the dignity of the Council chamber.

Additionally, we strongly disagree with the removal of all references to 'foreshadowed motions' (see page 25 of the Consultation Draft). At the recent MidCoast Council meeting when the harmful motion to remove the Acknowledgement of Country was put forward, another Councillor was able to foreshadow a counter-motion, which reaffirmed MidCoast Council's commitment to working with the Aboriginal community and maintaining the Acknowledgement of Country practice. This counter-motion, which was ultimately carried, played a crucial role in mitigating the harm caused by the debate that day. Had the ability to foreshadow motions been removed, the harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members would have been far greater.

Since references to foreshadowed motions largely exist in retained provisions about foreshadowed amendments, removing foreshadowed motions achieves little in terms of simplification while creating significant risks for governance and cultural safety. The proposed amendment to remove foreshadowed motions is, therefore, both unnecessary and harmful.

2.2. Are there any other amendments you would suggest that will achieve these policy outcomes?

To uphold the integrity and inclusivity of local government meetings, we strongly recommend the following amendments:

1) Enshrine an Acknowledgement of Country in the Model Code.

A new provision should be introduced that mandates an Acknowledgement of Country at the beginning of all Council meetings. This measure will protect against discriminatory attempts to erase this important protocol and reinforce the commitment of local governments to reconciliation.

2) Retain the right for Councillors to foreshadow motions, not just amendments.

The ability to foreshadow motions is essential for upholding democratic debate and preventing harmful or discriminatory motions from going unchallenged in Council chambers.

These recommendations align with existing commitments made by the OLG. Collaborate NSW, a resource kit developed in partnership with Local Government NSW, states:

"Aboriginal peoples are the original owners of the land and it is important that this special position of Aboriginal peoples is recognised and incorporated into official protocol to enable the wider community to share in Aboriginal culture and facilitate better relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the general community" (page 30). This guidance explicitly encourages Councils to incorporate Acknowledgements of Country into official events. The OLG must uphold its own best practice guidelines by including a Provision in the Code which enshrines the practice of an Acknowledgement of Country in all Council meetings.

2.3. Will the proposed amendments have any unintended consequences?

Yes, the proposed amendments will create serious unintended consequences that threaten reconciliation and cultural safety. These include:

- Enabling Councils to remove the Acknowledgement of Country, either explicitly or under the pretense of procedural simplification.
- Providing a platform for political ideology and culture wars to infiltrate Council chambers, shifting focus away from community service and governance.
- Undermining the wellbeing and cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by allowing local governments to strip away important cultural protocols.
- Discouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in Council forums and meetings, eroding trust in local government as a culturally safe space.
- Eliminating the ability for empathetic Councillors to counter harmful motions through foreshadowed motions, reducing opportunities for restorative action.
- Diminishing the dignity and integrity of the Council chamber by allowing debates that directly harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

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2.4. Are there any other amendments the Government should consider?

As outlined in Section 2.2, we urge the OLG to introduce a provision that mandates an Acknowledgement of Country in Council meetings and to retain foreshadowed motions in the Model Code.

We also recommend that the OLG conduct a comprehensive impact assessment on how the proposed amendments may disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This assessment should involve consultation with Aboriginal community representatives, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, and reconciliation groups across different jurisdictions to ensure that the Model Code actively promotes cultural safety and inclusion.

The OLG has a responsibility to ensure that local government remains a place of respect, integrity, and inclusivity. Removing key provisions without adequate safeguards will expose Councils to greater division and conflict, rather than streamlining governance.

By adopting these recommendations, the OLG can strengthen local government practices while ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be acknowledged, respected and welcomed in civic spaces.

Notes



Admin Notification (ID: 66d4f054bfdd8)

added February 26, 2025 at 8:49 pm

WordPress successfully passed the notification email to the sending server.