

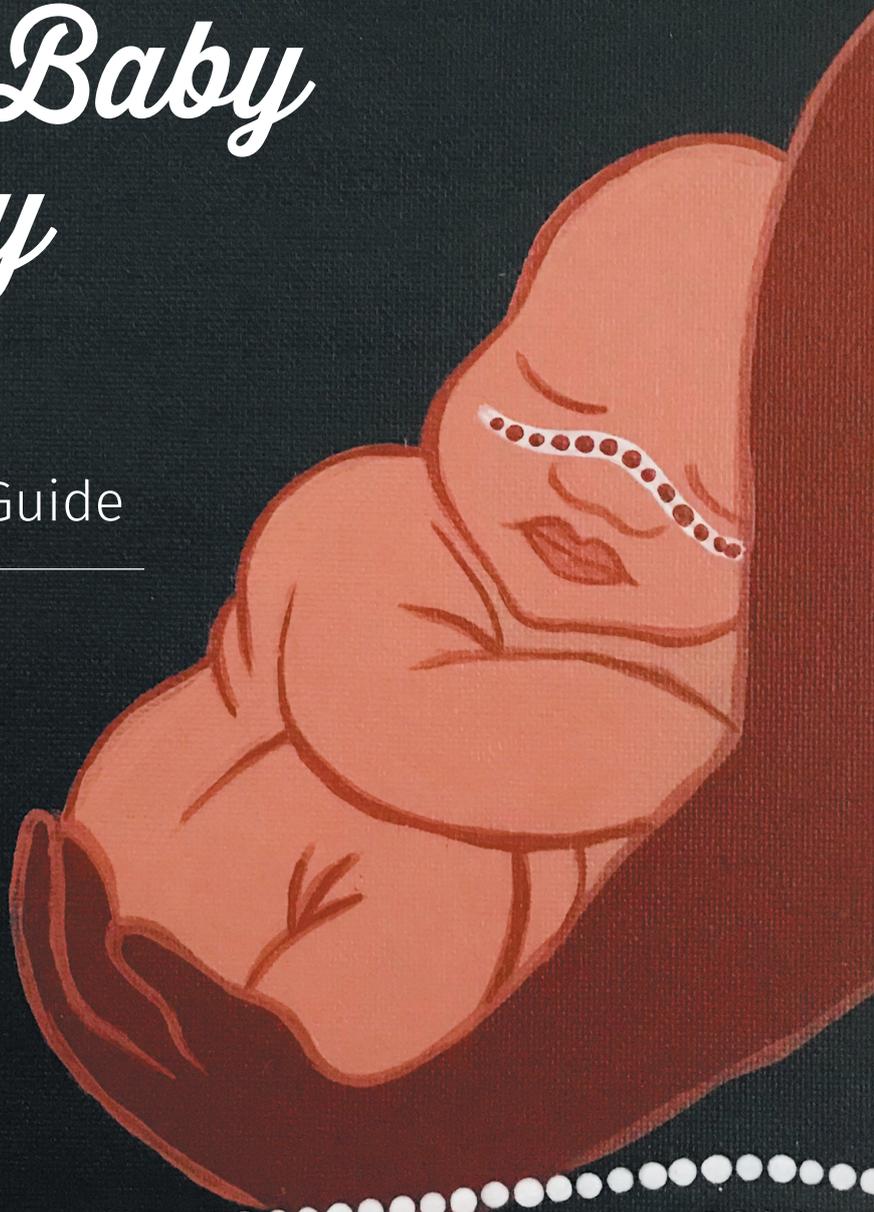
# *Welcome Baby to Country*

## Partnership Resource Guide

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A resource developed by:

**Professor Kerry Arabena, Sarah Bingle,  
Luella Monson, Elizabeth McLachlan**



**First 1000 Days Australia, The University of Melbourne**

**W** [www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au)

**E** [iheu-admin@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:iheu-admin@unimelb.edu.au)

**T** [@First1000DaysOz](https://twitter.com/First1000DaysOz)

Artwork by **Jhana Gray**



## Acknowledgments

First 1000 Days Australia gratefully acknowledges all Elders, sponsors, volunteers, community members, families, facilitators, Masters of Ceremony, the cultural gift makers, our knowledge holders, and the carers of our future generations for reviving these practices in ways that celebrate our children, our Country and our connection to this land. Thank you for your leadership, generosity and for using culture to protect our families.

We are particularly grateful to the individuals below for their input to the development of this resource, which is available on our website: [www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au).

Rose Gilby	Monash University, Mildura, Victoria
Deb Mellett	Mornington Peninsula, Victoria
Jackie Bennett	Regional Implementation Manager, Moreton Bay, Queensland
Faye Stewart-Muir	Honorary, Indigenous Health Equity Unit, The University of Melbourne
Deb Cleary	Manager, Mindle Bygul, Deception Bay, Queensland
Aunty Janine Wilson	Supported by Mildura City Council, Monash University, Victoria
Christine Stuart	Deception Bay, Queensland
Dr Eve Mumewa D. Fesl, OAM, CM	Moreton Bay Welcome Baby to Country Working Group

## Lands on which Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies took place

### Latje Latje Country in Mildura, Victoria

First held in 2012, this initiative was guided by Aunty Janine Wilson and supported by Mildura Rural City Council, Mildura Arts Centre and Monash University. It was presented in 2015 at the First 1000 Days Australia Community Development Symposium at the University of Melbourne by Rose Gilby (First 1000 Days Australia Council member) and Aunty Janine Wilson, and then again in 2017 by Rose Gilby, Michael Gilby and Jill Antonie at the First 1000 Days Australia Summit in Brisbane. First 1000 Days Australia would like to acknowledge the role provided by the organisers of the Welcome Baby to Country in Mildura in guiding the revival of further ceremonies.

### Boon Wurrung Country in Mornington Peninsula, Victoria

Welcome Bubup (Baby) to Country Ceremonies were held in Stringybark Bushland in 2015, guided by Aunty Fay Stewart-Muir and hosted by the Balee Koolin Bubup Bush Playgroup, with support from Communities for Children Cranbourne and the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. In 2017 another ceremony, guided by Elders in Rosebud and supported by the Mornington Shire Council and Koolin Balit Aboriginal Health Strategy, was brought to us by Deb Mellett, Senior Social Planner Aboriginal Culture and Community Development in Mornington Peninsula and First 1000 Days Australia Council member.

### Gubbi Gubbi Country in Moreton Bay, Queensland

Held in Deception Bay at the NAIDOC Family Day in July 2018, the inaugural Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony was guided by the Welcome Baby to Country Working Group made up of community members and local organisations. Twenty-one babies were welcomed by Gubbi Gubbi Elder Christine Stuart and hosted by Mindle Bygul Aboriginal Corporation in partnership with First 1000 Days Australia. Mindle Bygul, the First 1000 Days Australia Lead Agency in the region, works with Jackie Bennett our Regional Implementation Manager.

**Photographs:** Katie Bennett, Embellysh Photography

All photographs contained herein are from the Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony held at Deception Bay, Queensland, and are reproduced here with the kind permission of the Moreton Bay Regional Council, Queensland.



## Birthing Future Elders into Strong Healthy Families<sup>1</sup>

Welcoming a new baby into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is a cultural practice that involves the whole community – men, women, children and extended families. For thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have held Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies to acknowledge an infant's connection to the lands on which they are born. These practices are diverse and unique to each community across Australia.

First 1000 Days Australia recognises the important role that Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies have in meeting the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and connecting children to community, Country and Elders. This resource also honours the cultural contributions of our partners in reviving Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies in their communities, and puts forward ideas on how future partners can create and renew these ceremonies for families in their regions.

Welcome Baby to Country ceremony organisers worked closely with local families and parents, Traditional Owners and Elders in their region to 'reawaken' and 'reimagine' the ceremony into a modern-day setting. Held to welcome all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies on to the traditional lands of the community in which they are born or living, all these ceremonies were locally led events that involved families and Elders.

Rose Gilby, a current First 1000 Days Australia Council member who was instrumental in organising the ceremony in Mildura, describes the occasion as:

*... an ancient ceremony that's part of a ritual of being welcomed into this life; it's actually permission from the Traditional Owners for us to participate in community activities.*

Council member Deb Mellett, the Senior Social Planner Aboriginal Culture and Community Development at the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, described the impact of the Rosebud ceremony:

*Families were overwhelmed, feedback was positive, we had lots of tears of joy.*

At the ceremony in Deception Bay, Queensland, one of the mothers involved commented that:

*It meant a lot to my family and my children to be accepted into this land... and to have a home away from home... I am so excited and happy that my babies will have a sense of connection and belonging.*

Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies not only connect babies to the land on to which they are born, but also connect the child's family with other families, Elders, local agencies and the community. The Moreton Bay Working Group extended this connection by holding a Wunya Wolvai to Country Ceremony because they didn't want any children to miss out. In this ceremony, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in the region were welcomed to the Country on which they lived. The ceremony was held in conjunction with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day on 4 August.

The planning and preparation leading up to the ceremony values the importance of family life, identity and culture. The ceremonies create opportunities for families to hear from Elders, to be informed of local cultural parenting practices, to bring together different generations and to include children who may be separated from their families. They are also inclusive of non-Indigenous family members, and provide an opportunity for families presenting their children to connect through a positive shared experience.

## Planning a Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony

Cultural protocols and ceremonial practices are diverse and will vary from region to region. As Michael Gilby, a key organiser of the Mildura ceremony notes, 'there is no textbook on how to celebrate culture, it is in us and we just need to fan the flame'. The Regional Implementation Manager at Deception Bay, Jackie Bennett, reported that in the lead-up to the first Welcome Baby to Country ceremony to be performed in more than 80 years, those families who had registered their interest attended two pre-ceremony workshops that enabled them to connect with other Welcome Baby to Country families and to talk about what cultural parenting practice looked like back in the day.

This resource provides an outline of key activities undertaken by our partners in planning a meaningful Welcome Baby to Country ceremony in their community. Groups also noted the importance of learning what can be improved along the way to make the ceremony more welcoming and inclusive. Additional resources including videos, media stories and programs developed to support these activities can also be found on our website: [www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au).

<sup>1</sup> This title is used in the Healesville First 1000 Days Strategic Plan to guide the region's work in this area. For more information, go to: [www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au).

## Connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and Traditional Owners

A Welcome Baby to Country ceremony is safe for all families when they are led and informed by local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community knowledge. Connecting with Traditional Owners and Elders through the local Gathering Place, Aboriginal Land Councils, Torres Strait Regional Authority, Native Title Representative Body, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Groups can be a place to start if needed.

### Elders to perform the ceremony

Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders carry the cultural knowledge, languages and histories of their peoples, and it is their responsibility to pass on this cultural knowledge to strengthen the identity and wellbeing of the next generation. Elders also hold information about how traditional ceremonies were performed, in a way that was unique to their traditions, lands and seas, and often have valuable knowledge about clan and family histories and connections within their community.

*Important to the ceremony is authenticity and meaning... drawing on what is known about past practices and reclaiming this in the contemporary world. The ceremony is not a direct replica of what happened in the past but is authentic to what is known and conveys the original ceremony meaning.<sup>2</sup>*

In other parts of Australia, the ceremony has included Elders from many different communities being invited to welcome babies alongside those Traditional Owners who are welcoming infants and children to their lands.

*It meant a lot to my family and my children to be accepted into this Land... and to have a home away from home. I'm so excited and happy that my babies will have a sense of connection and belonging.*

— Priscilla

Elders can have different roles during the ceremony: some might paint the babies' faces with ochre, while others might present certificates, hand out headbands, share stories and/or support young families. Although each ceremony will vary, we have found that having at least one Elder for every 10 children being welcomed to Country is appropriate.

### Supporting Elders at the event

Elder participation is unique to the individual and to the Country on which the ceremony is taking place. Some Elders may require transportation support to attend on the day or to participate in meetings in the lead-up to the event at which they will share cultural knowledge with families of young children prior to the ceremony. Other Elders have been involved in going bush and retrieving the wood for coolamons, teaching families weaving skills, sourcing kangaroo pelts and making clap sticks to give as gifts.

Elders may need support to access cultural knowledge in order to guide the ceremonial practices confidently. Information about ceremonies can be found in archives and local libraries, and/or be available from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra or professional associations like the Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives.

It is important to discuss with Elders how to value their contributions so they feel respected and validated for sharing their time and knowledge with others in the community. For some Elders this is a ceremonial observance that involves community families and is a way of giving back. Others will need their costs to be covered, may want a one-off fee for being part of the working group and the activities on the day, or require payment for their time and contribution to the total event. This might be based on the cultural principles of reciprocity, where families themselves make an offering to the Elder or, alternatively, the fees might come from sponsorship monies.

<sup>2</sup> Gukwonderuk Indigenous Engagement Unit 2108, *Mildura Welcome Baby to Country: A Strength Based Approach to Aboriginal Community Wellbeing*, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, p. 9.



### Establishing a Welcome Baby to Country working group

The working groups included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, leaders, families and services from the local community together with non-Indigenous individuals and organisations committed to the goal of creating a memorable and meaningful event for the wellbeing of children and families in their community. Working groups also engaged their local councils and organisations in the cultural importance of the ceremony and some received donations of materials and funding.

The working group and community members volunteered their time to ensure a successful event. Over an eight-week period, they sourced sponsorship, artwork to use in the development of the certificates, and assisted with activities including:

- getting resources and culturally significant gifts – headbands, cloaks, coolamons, clap sticks
- gaining sponsorship, e.g. sausages for the lunch, cloth and paint for the artwork
- garnering local support
- inviting families with young children
- preparing the program and certificates
- arranging for the making of gifts
- organising a celebratory meal
- securing consent from families for photographs
- contacting the media
- employing a Master of Ceremonies, a photographer, traditional performers and an Elder or Elders to welcome the babies.

Involving parents and carers of the children in the ceremonies enabled them to engage with Elders, creating a safe space for families to learn cultural knowledge of that place and allowing for the cultural gifts to be sourced and made. It also connected Elders and children, allowing them to see a baby's qualities and characteristics so they could be properly named.

### The working group coordinator

The coordinator of the working group was usually employed by a local agency and was given the role because of their cultural sensitivities to the needs of families in the region. The coordinator provided the key organisational role for the ceremony, which included:

- creating a space for tasks to be achieved
- working with Elders and community members to source chosen materials – coolamons, cloaks, headbands, certificates, traditional names
- sourcing sponsorship for the event
- establishing the eligibility for child inclusion
- maintaining communication with families
- facilitating and supporting the Master of Ceremony and Elders.

## Organising a Welcome ceremony

### The timing and location of the event

A significant date was often chosen for the ceremony, with guidance from the Traditional Owners. Many ceremonies were held during NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Observance Committee) week in early July; on or near Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day, the 4th of August; or National Children's Day at the end of October. Others have been held on Survival Day at the beginning of the year to mark the strength and resilience of our communities, and also to welcome the children of newly arrived families into the community.

Holding the ceremonies in a prominent building underlined their significance for those who participated in the ceremonies held at the Mildura Arts Centre and the Southern Peninsula Arts Centre in Rosebud. Other ceremonies were held outside – in nature and on Country – to align with traditional practice, such as the Stringybark Bushland where the Balee Koolin Bubup Bush Playgroup families gather each week. In Moreton Bay, the Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony was held at Barujugan Park, Endeavour Street, Deception Bay.

### Eligibility

Ceremonies were opened to those who have birthed and/or are caring for the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child to be welcomed. In Moreton Bay, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies born in the Moreton Bay Region aged up to 13 months of age were welcomed, while in Rosebud children could be up to four years of age as long as they were living in the area. The ceremonies are an occasion for the entire family to be involved, although one community made the decision for parts of the ceremony to be only for women.

The Boon Wurrung Ceremony, for example, was made 'women's business' by Elders to revitalise traditional female cultural practices, and to empower and strengthen the bonds between mothers, aunties and grandmothers. A simple gum tree branch was placed over the entrance to the gathering place with a sign stating that Traditional Aboriginal Women's Business was taking place. The fathers and grandfathers, however, were encouraged to gather and cook up the celebration feast together. Other ceremonies encouraged, and have seen an increase in, the involvement of proud dads, uncles and grandfathers, along with carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not biologically connected to those in their care.

Using community organisations' networks and social media, ceremony organisers invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to register their interest in participating, and outlined the criteria for doing so, e.g. age of the infants.





### Registration to attend the ceremony

To know how many people need to be catered for on the day, and also to understand the size of the event place, it is important for families to register their intention to participate in at least two planning meetings as well as the ceremony itself. As this is cultural transmission in practice, families need to participate in the actual event to receive their certificates and other mementoes from the day. This not only gives the ceremony integrity, and follows local protocols set by the Traditional Owners and Elders, but also respects the time given by other families and volunteers who are invested in making the day a success. If, however, families arrive at the ceremony without registering, a previously planned response will support smooth proceedings. In this instance, many of the local working groups decided that the babies could still be welcomed on the day, and the certificates given to the families afterwards.

### Proceedings and preparations

An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elder from the Traditional Country on which each Welcome ceremony was held guided the ceremony and welcomed the babies to their lands. Elders have also supported families – especially those from other places and communities – to connect with the local community, particularly if the Elder has been a long time contributor to that community.

The working group coordinator has often facilitated the event, supported Elders and ensured that cultural transmission can take place in safe and secure locations. As ceremonies can be an emotional time for families, consideration should be given to providing a debriefing soon after the event.

### Sustainability

Sustainable practices have developed and grown from families' invested engagement throughout the process, ensuring they are given the chance to learn and share and grow. Many have participated as volunteers and cultural leaders and are supported by workers from partnering agencies who are there to sponsor others and be part of the ceremony.

### Photographs and artwork

Media interest in the Welcome ceremonies – whether it be social media, news, print media or a short video of the event – will require families to provide consent for any photographs taken of themselves and their children. Elders and others involved in the ceremony will also need to provide consent, and special consideration may be needed as to whether the images can still be used after their passing. When filming events, it is always helpful to be able to cite a person's name, their cultural affiliation and their position in the organisation and/or community in the film, so it is important to ensure that these are recorded appropriately.

Artists often require payment for their artwork and will need to give consent for its use. Special consideration should be made for any children attending who are in care, as many States and Territories have explicit policies about taking and using photos of those in their care. State child protection agencies can provide information to ensure the use of images align with these policies.

## Connecting families

Many families who have been disconnected from their culture expressed a desire to reconnect, importantly so that their children can learn about their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage, culture and history.

*Culture should be handed down and that has been kind of stolen from a lot of generations who haven't had that opportunity to pass down their culture. A lot of young guys are missing that. Having a son now, we want to pass that on to him, and to our girls. We want them to know who they are and to open that door.<sup>3</sup>*

In Moreton Bay, for example, families were able to attend two workshops prior to the Welcome ceremony, in which a male and female member of the child's family learned about culture on the Country to which their children were being welcomed.

Prior to the Welcome ceremony, families should be supported to explore the Country and language to which they belong and, if necessary, be linked to services that can help them find their mob, both of which are important for selecting a traditional name for their baby. However, if this information cannot be found, many communities are happy to welcome Aboriginal families who now live on the traditional Country where the ceremony is taking place, and for their children to be embraced and given a traditional language name by the Traditional Owners.

Aboriginal Elders often recommend that the naming of babies derive from plants, animals or elements of the traditional environment that relate to the culture of where the Welcome ceremony takes place. Commonly asked questions that Elders have used when selecting a traditional language word or name for the baby include:

- Where was the baby conceived or born?
- What were the surroundings, weather and season at the time of conception or birth?
- Did any animals, insects or birds become more visible in your environment during this time?
- Were there special events, moments or memories at the time of birth?
- Describe the baby's character, temperament or personality.

## Traditional practice, markings, certificates and keepsakes

While traditional practices and gifts given to each child vary across ceremonies, they are considered an invaluable part of renewing culture for families and reminding them of their connection with the community. All babies welcomed receive a certificate, and children and families at each ceremony are also photographed alongside the officiating Elder.

Aunty Janine Wilson, the Elder conducting the Mildura Ceremony, marked each child's face with a traditional ochre marking as a link to their heritage and ancestry. A Smoking Ceremony was performed at the Boon Wurrung ceremonies, with families invited to walk through the smoke as part of a traditional healing and Welcome to Country.

The crafting of gifts and traditional items used during ceremonies brought communities together to perform an important role, such as Aunties making headbands for each child, young and older men connecting to make a bark canoe and women learning traditional weaving of fishing nets to place on the stage in Mildura. Babies in Moreton Bay also received a headband made by a group of Aunties, who learnt how to decorate them by burning into the leather under the supervision of an Aboriginal community member, and a gift of a Kangaroo fur.

Possum skin pelts were traditionally used to wrap up new-born babies across the Kulin Nations of Victoria. Further pelts were added as the child grew, forming a cloak that told the story of the child, with songlines and significant markings about Country burnt on the underside of the skins. The reintroduction of possum skin pelts and cloak-making activities were a significant part of the Boon Wurrung ceremonies with ochre prints of the child's hands and feet placed on a pelt during the ceremony for the family to keep, along with clap sticks.

*It's important for our bubup [babies] to be Welcomed to Country in the traditional way. It gives them and [their] families a connection to place and their culture. Many of our families have not had that strong connection to Country. There are many of them on their own journey of finding their connection to Country. We want our babies to grow up strong in their identity and be proud of their Aboriginal heritage and their connection to place.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Ben Smee 2018, 'Welcoming Babies to Country: The Indigenous ceremony revived after 80 years', Guardian Australia, Sydney.

<sup>4</sup> Rose Gilby, Jill Antonie & Jim Berg 2015, 'Welcoming Baby to Country Ceremony: The First 60,000 Years', First 1000 Days Australia, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.



### Funding and sponsorship

An appropriate Master of Ceremony might also be needed on the day to introduce the Elder/s, invite families up to be welcomed and generally manage the proceedings. In many instances, this person will be from the local community and known to families in the region. This is an important role that may need to be supported by local fundraising or sponsorship; or alternatively the MC may decide to donate their time to this community event.

Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies can be held annually or biannually, depending on the level of local support or commitment around promoting culture as a protective factor. Some regions may have multiple

events, depending on the number of communities, organisations, Elders and families wanting to support their children to reconnect to culture. Other initiatives have involved Welcome ceremonies for children of all ages who have been born or live in the region (see p.3). Non-Indigenous families have also been encouraged to support practical reconciliation by taking their children to meet the Traditional Owner group so they know the local custodians of the places in which they live.

We want to thank all the families and Elders who are bringing back culture as a protective factor for our children. We hope this resource supports our families to connect our children to our lands, to our Elders, to each other and to culture.

### Resources

First 1000 Days Australia 2017, 'Mildura Welcome baby to Country: Interview with Aunty Janine Wilson, Michael Gilby and Jill Antonie'.

First 1000 Days Australia 2018, 'Wunya Wolvai to Country Ceremony: Resources'. Available at: [www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au).

First 1000 Days Australia 2018, 'Welcoming babies to Country – Building stronger families through culture', Media Release. Available at: [www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/welcoming-babies-country-%E2%80%93-building-stronger-families-through-culture](http://www.first1000daysaustralia.org.au/welcoming-babies-country-%E2%80%93-building-stronger-families-through-culture).

Gukwonderuk Indigenous Engagement Unit 2108, *Mildura Welcome Baby to Country: A Strength Based Approach to Aboriginal Community Wellbeing*, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne.

Rose Gilby, Jill Antonie & Jim Berg 2015, 'Welcoming Baby to Country Ceremony: The First 60,000 Years', First 1000 Days Australia, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Jennifer Douglas 2015, 'Painting Babies', ABC Open Sunraysia.

Ben Smees 2018, 'Welcoming Babies to Country: The Indigenous ceremony revived after 80 years', Guardian Australia, Sydney.

## Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony: Checklist

### Traditional Owners and community consultation

- Elders have permissions and supports from the appropriate Traditional Owner groups in the region to conduct the Welcome Baby to Country ceremony.
- Consultations are held with Traditional Owners regarding their participation in the planning days leading up to the event and on the day.
- Local organisations have advised on how to engage with, and support involvement by, Traditional Owners and Elders in the ceremony.
- All cultural protocols are understood and observed.
- Agreement has been made as to the recognition of Elders and their involvement in planning, preparing and participating on the day of the Welcome ceremony.
- The Elder is able to access cultural information that can support their role on the day.
- If part of another event, coordinate with those event organisers to ensure the ceremony goes to plan.
- Traditional Owners are advised in advance of the time and date of the ceremony.
- Are there public and private aspects to the ceremony or the knowledge that gets passed at this time? Is there specific information for men and women that needs to be provided? Who can provide this and how?
- A decision is made on whether the event will be for women only and, if so, how will men be involved.
- An appropriate ratio of Elders to children has been established.
- A program and running sheet are prepared for the event.
- There is catering both for the working group and the ceremony.

### Lead-up events/workshops

- An appropriate coordinator connects with Elders and families and brings together sponsors and local organisations.
- The working group has a venue in which to meet on a weekly basis, with enough space to learn cultural practices and to make cultural gifts.
- Elders are provided with opportunities to share information with families during the lead-up to, and on the day of, the Welcome ceremony.
- Families are provided with a registration form and a final date for registration.
- Families are informed that they are required to attend two lead-up meetings and to participate in the ceremony to receive the cultural gifts and the certificate.
- Criteria for children's involvement on the day is developed (i.e. siblings of infants being welcomed to country).
- A quiet space and other needs are provided for the Elder/s on the day of the ceremony.
- There is a place for families to relax before they are called on stage.
- Travel for Elders to and from the working groups and the ceremony is organised.
- Volunteers are assigned roles, instructions and timetables.
- All consent forms and processes have been developed.
- Sustainability of the event has been considered and planned for.

### Event organisation

- A budget is completed for the event.
- A sponsorship plan is developed that includes appropriate recognition.
- The cultural gifts are sourced.
- A date is chosen that gives people enough lead-time to make the cultural gifts.
- A decision is made as to whether to hold the ceremony on its own or as part of another event.
- Contingency plans
- Should an Elder not be able to attend on the day, the working group has developed a contingency plan.
- A contingency plan has been developed in case of bad weather.
- A process has been established for those unregistered families who present at the ceremony, including the sourcing of extra gifts and resources as required.
- Consideration has been given to inclusions and exclusions for the ceremony. *For example:* Is the Elder able to pass on kangaroo pelts to families or do they have a responsibility to protect kangaroos? Are they able to give black cockatoo feathers to families or are the cockatoos their totem?