Introduction
The government is committed to giving Australians the option to receive information in digital or hard copy form, depending on their individual circumstances.

This reflects the evolving nature of communication, new expectations for interaction, and the rapid adoption of internet enabled devices, such as smartphones and tablets. This trend in information preferences requires the government to remain up-to-date and respond to community expectations for digital content.

The Australian Government has established the Digital Transformation Office (DTO) to transform government services, to deliver digital by design and to make services simpler. The DTO will act as a digital champion across government and help entities with limited digital expertise realise the benefits of digital government.

Purpose
To support these objectives, the Department of Finance has developed the following guidance to provide Australian Government entities with good practice principles to follow when considering publishing information internally, as well as for the general public or other stakeholders. It is important that entities always consider the need to communicate in the first place, and whether it is an appropriate use of resources.

This document has been developed for Australian Government communications professionals, or staff who are involved in publishing printed or digital information. The information in this document relates to discretionary publishing of material. Entities must continue to comply with legislation, regulations or government policies that apply to printed materials.

Designing and distributing information
What is digital by design?
Digital by design refers to information that has been designed, from the outset, to be consumed online – or digitally.

Publishing materials in hard copy should continue by exception; for example, where digital information needs to be supplemented by hard copy materials or where there is unavoidable demand by the target audience.

Adopting a digital by design approach will require entities to challenge the way that information has historically been planned, developed, designed and delivered. Adopting this approach will provide entities with an opportunity to realise significant savings.
The Department of Health is one entity using this approach and has already reduced its hard copy printing by about 80 per cent in two years.

**Case Study: Department of Health**

The Department of Health (Health) is actively moving towards a digital by design approach, and is reaping the benefits of reducing its printing and warehousing costs over the past few years.

Health centralised its online and print functions to more efficiently manage its publishing activities. This governance process, underpinned by corporate business rules, has led to significantly reduced printing and warehousing costs as well as improved quality of digital publishing.

All areas in the department have access to consistent advice and support for each publishing project.

As increasing online access and changing consumer preferences for digital information have increased, Health has responded by delivering more information online and reducing printed materials where appropriate.

In 2006-07, the department spent $9.5 million on printing. Over time and as a result of a number of factors, including the refined publishing governance process, greater use of digital rather than offset printing and efforts across the department to reduce corporate printing, costs have dropped to less than $2 million in 2013-14.

In September 2013, Health’s website, was refreshed to improve its framework and make it more responsive to mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) - further reducing dependency on traditional printed materials.

Health is committed to improving the online user experience for people with disabilities. Its dedicated Web Content Accessibility Project is increasing awareness about accessibility and driving relevant action to achieve AA compliance. Metrics and feedback collected from users also helps identify further improvements to online information.

While significant gains have been made, Health continues its efforts to encourage more online publishing as the emphasis on digital first builds towards 2017 and the community expresses a growing preference for online information.

**Encourage demand for digital information**

The best way to benefit from a digital by design approach is to encourage the demand for online material. For example:

- Create, or highlight to stakeholders, incentives for accessing information online, such as improved timeliness and currency of information.
- Provide information in digital form as a first priority, with users being able to print it themselves if a hard copy is required.
- Explore ways of recovering the cost of printed documents where appropriate (e.g. where it would not discriminate against a targeted demographic with no other reasonable means to access the information, which may include low income earners, older people etc.), particularly when the information is otherwise readily accessible online for free.
- If printed material is required, consider using it as a supplement to digital material rather than as a ‘standalone’ product.
**Develop and design content for digital channels**
Entities should develop and design content with a digital publishing platform in mind, rather than a traditional hard copy publication. This requires more than just developing and designing material as if for a printed product and then having it digitised. Digital information should be designed specifically for viewing on screen. It should make use of the distinguishing characteristics of the medium (e.g. interactivity, electronic links, animation, navigation systems) and be suitable for the different reading patterns of digital information consumers. Digital accessibility for people with disabilities and older people is also a key design requirement and should also be considered.

If a combination of digital and printed material is required, early planning is vital so that information can be tailored and produced for both mediums simultaneously. This will streamline the publishing process and ensure consistency.

**Determine all costs associated with digital and printed information**
Entities should be aware that there are costs beyond the initial production of both digital and printed information. Printed information costs may include distribution, storage, warehousing and disposal of excess stock. In the case of digital information, there may be costs associated with hosting the information online. Entities should take these costs into consideration when deciding on the most appropriate communication channel and, if print is used, the quantity of materials to be produced.

Note that, in order to meet the online content requirements as set out in the Web Guide, certain entity publications that are printed or available in other formats must also be available online.

Entities are required to comply with the requirements under the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 including the Commonwealth Procurement Rules (see ‘Compliance with legal and other obligations’ below).

**Requirements for digital information**
Many of these requirements will be handled by an entity’s central communications areas (see ‘Using central communications areas’ below), however it is important that anyone involved in publishing digital material is aware of the following requirements.

**Requirements for accessibility**
Accessibility requirements for websites, including digital information and publications distributed via a website, are mandated under government policy, legislation and through whole-of-government commitments. This is to ensure that all government information is available to all online citizens, including those with disabilities and older people. The Australian Government has endorsed the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 for all government websites. This is a mandatory requirement under the Web Accessibility National Transition Strategy.

**Availability of digital information on mobile devices**
The Australian Government has indicated that digital services and information should be platform-agnostic and useable from mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones. Entities will be required to report on the proportion of their digital services that are not mobile-enabled from 2015 onwards.

As creators of content, maintainers or operators of a website, entities should use best practice to improve user experience on mobile devices. Entities may find it useful to refer to the Mobile Web Best Practices 1.0, produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

Mobile applications are another form of making information and services mobile-accessible. As such, entities should be aware that W3C has also produced Mobile Web Application Best Practices as an aid for developing rich and dynamic mobile web applications, including the most relevant
engineering practices, to enable a better user experience and warnings against those considered harmful. The W3C has compiled an extensive list of Mobile Resources for accessibility.

It should be noted that PDF documents cannot currently meet the requirements of WCAG 2.0 on mobile devices as determined recently by a report commissioned by the Department of Finance. PDF documents can be difficult for many to access on small screen mobile devices.

**Considerations associated with digital information**

While digital forms of information often provide an efficient and widely accessible form of communication, there are related considerations that entities need to be aware of and manage.

- Entities should develop and adhere to an effective web management strategy. This will ensure that the reputation of the entity for providing accurate and timely information is protected, and may also guard the entity from legal exposure. It will further reduce the number of complaints received from the public, decrease support costs and increase staff productivity. See [Web Guide – Content Management](#).
- Entities are required to retain their records for designated periods, and to take account of evidence legislation. This is the first step in ensuring long-term access to government information in electronic formats. See [Web Guide – Archiving Websites](#).
- Entities should consider the need to preserve and retain web content that becomes outdated, as it relates to obligations under the *Archives Act 1983*. See [Web Guide – Retaining Access to Outdated Content](#).

Entities should consult the [Web Guide](#) and ensure they comply with mandatory requirements. Non-mandatory requirements should be used as a source of good practice.

**Good practice for developing and producing printed materials**

Even in a digital by design environment, there will be some circumstances in which traditional printed information will still be required. The following advice should be considered best practice for developing and publishing this material.

**Establish a need for printed information**

Entities should not develop and produce printed information unless it is necessary to meet unavoidable demand or to suit specific characteristics of the target audience. Where very limited quantities of hard copy materials are required (e.g. to meet specific requests of individuals), consideration could be given to printing a hard copy of the digital version of a document in-house to meet this demand.

**Remove unnecessary design features from printed documents**

Entities should use graphics and colours in printed material sparingly, especially when these design features will not significantly impact on the effective delivery of information.

Where documents are to be presented to Parliament, entities should comply with the *Printing Standards for documents presented to Parliament*. These standards encourage entities to:

- minimise the use of colour (e.g. use black ink, with an additional colour only where it adds value to the understanding of readers)
- not use colour that ‘bleeds to the edge’
- eliminate unnecessary use of photographs or illustrations where they do not add value to the understanding of subjects discussed.

**Use alternative production methods to offset printing**

Alternatives to offset printing, including digital printing, print-on-demand and printing in-house, should be considered, taking into account the required quality of the product, the timeframes involved, and associated costs.
Link print quantities to demand

Use existing tools and knowledge to determine the expected demand for a printed product. Although spreading fixed costs over a greater number of copies can result in a cheaper cost per unit, this must be balanced against expected demand for a product to ensure the most cost effective print run for a project. Increased storage, distribution and disposal costs of larger print runs should also be considered.

Compliance with legal and other obligations

Entities should comply with legal and other obligations, which may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 and the Commonwealth Procurement Rules.
- the mandatory requirements under the Web Guide.
- other relevant legislation that may apply to communication activities including the Archives Act 1983, Evidence Act 1995 and Freedom of Information Act 1982.

Using central communications areas

Central communications areas will be able to provide strategic communications advice on the most effective and efficient means of communicating with specific audiences, including communications mediums. It is important to seek the input of central communications areas at the earliest possible stage to increase the potential to achieve better outcomes.

Where this expertise does not exist within an entity, explore opportunities to consult the portfolio department or other entities both within and outside the portfolio for advice, especially if they have carried out similar activities or share similar target audiences.

For more information

Please contact Efficiency Improvement Branch (efficiency@finance.gov.au) for more information.