# Contents

1 Executive Summary 1

2 Recommendations 3

3 Overview 5
   Methodology 6

4 Findings 9
   Terminology 10
   Purpose of use 10
   Interest 10
   Participation 11
   Expectations 11
   Features 13
   Registration 14
   Moderation 15
   Privacy & Security 16

5 Australian Government Submissions 19

## Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Submission Summary</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Consultation Submissions</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Government Submissions</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Online Survey Participants</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

The convergence of broadband and Web 2.0 technologies is transforming the way people use the internet to communicate and interact. As people embrace the interactive internet they expect to be able to interact with the Australian Government (the Government) using these new technologies. The increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance government service delivery provides opportunities for agencies to engage and involve citizens and communities in new ways.

While traditional ways of engaging will continue, agencies are exploring online approaches for involving the community. To assist development in this area, the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), a business group of the Department of Finance and Deregulation, conducted a public consultation on the proposed development and functionality of an Australian Government Consultation Blog.

The consultation sought the public’s view on online consultations and aimed to identify the public’s reaction to the concept of online consultation and whether people were interested in participating in such consultations. It also explored the motivational factors for participation and asked the public about general expectations of online consultations with government.

The consultation was conducted in three phases; a public discussion paper, focus groups and an online survey. The consultation was also discussed in popular Australian blogs.

In all three phases of the consultation there was overwhelming support for the concept of a Government consultation blog and discussion forum. Respondents expected that online consultations should form a part of the Government’s policy consultation process. However, when it came to actually participating in a Government forum, there was evidence to suggest that people who are not already engaged in online and political discussions would not actually participate. Respondents who had a positive interest in an Australian Government consultation forum indicated they would read and contribute to a blog.

Respondents provided a range of opinions on registration, moderation, the functionality of an online consultation website and privacy and security. The topic of moderation attracted the most debate amongst respondents. While the principle of automatically scanning comments for offensive language, and removing it automatically, was supported by the majority of respondents, many respondents rejected attempts to censor fringe but substantive opinions, however they were expressed. Respondents were enthusiastic about real time ‘web chats’ with Ministers, where people could pose questions and see them answered online. The idea of direct and immediate interaction with the top decision makers was of high importance to respondents.

Generally the public consultation indicated support for the development of a government online consultation web space that includes blogs, online discussion forums and details of public consultations. The findings suggested ways that the Government could encourage the public’s participation in online consultations. Respondents said they would be more likely to participate in government consultations if:

• the discussion topic were relevant to their personal circumstances;
• they had the opportunity to nominate the topics for discussion;
• discussion forums included the participation of Government officials;
• a range of registration options were available;
• the site was well designed, easy to find and use;
• participants were free to express their opinion without censorship; and
• it were unbiased in its operation.
two Recommendations
Recommendations

ONE: To foster greater citizen participation in government policy making, the Australian Government should consider establishing an Australian Government online consultation forum, to complement existing forms of community consultation. It should:

- be accessible from a single online entry point - www.australia.gov.au; and
- progress in a phased approach with a few initiatives as a trial of the proposed functionality and to test and address some of the issues around registrations, participation and moderation.

TWO: Following an initial trial period, the Australian Government consultation forum should evaluate citizen and government participation and usage and, if appropriate, consider progressing to an interactive consultation forum. The interactive forum should:

- include a range of consultation mechanisms like blogs to generate ideas to inform the shaping of public policy and discussion forums to generate discussion around specific topics;
- include the ability for users to suggest topics for discussion;
- be easy to find and use and be comparable, in functionality, to existing online forums;
- include mechanisms that acknowledge contributions, allow users to rate other comments and provide email alerts of upcoming consultations;
- include policies for acceptable use, registration, participation, privacy and moderation guidelines; and
- include a feedback and evaluation section for users, both the community and government, to allow users to shape the site and for the continued improvement of the consultation forum.
Overview
Overview

The convergence of broadband and Web 2.0 technologies is transforming the way people use the internet to communicate and interact. Real time interaction, social networking, democratized web spaces, user-generated content and citizen journalism are flourishing. As people embrace the interactive internet they expect to be able to interact with the Government using these new technologies.

Government agencies in Australia have traditionally involved citizens and community in the processes and decisions that affect them. With the advent of e-government and the increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance government service delivery, opportunities arise for agencies to engage and involve citizens and communities in new ways.

While traditional ways of engaging will continue, agencies are exploring online approaches for involving the community. To assist development in this area, the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), a business group of the Department of Finance and Deregulation, conducted a public consultation on the proposed development and functionality of an Australian Government Consultation Blog.

The consultation program sought the public's view on online consultations and aimed to identify:

- public reaction to the concept of online consultation;
- public interest in participating in such consultations;
- factors which would motivate online citizen engagement with the government; and
- general expectations of the form and results of online consultations with government.

The consultation program was conducted in three phases and consisted of:

- a public discussion paper;
- focus groups; and
- an online survey.

The Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper was released for public consultation from 24 September 2007 to 1 December 2007. The discussion paper, available from the Australian Government website www.agimo.gov.au, invited the public to provide feedback regarding the possible functionality and operation of an Australian Government Consultation Blog. Australian Government agencies were also invited to provide a response to the discussion paper. The subsequent report Public Submissions to the Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper was published in April 2008.

In addition to the public discussion paper, Global Access Partners Pty Ltd (GAP) was commissioned to conduct complementary consultations including a series of focus groups and an online survey. The findings of the survey and focus groups are reflected in this report.

In addition to the Government’s public consultation program, interest in the Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper was generated in popular Australian blogs. These blog posts and their subsequent comments attracted both supporters and sceptics. It is appropriate to acknowledge this body of discussion, and note the general sentiment expressed by the public in these blogs is largely reflected in the findings of this report.
Methodology

Public discussion paper
The Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper was released for public consultation from 24 September 2007 to 1 December 2007. The paper was available from www.agimo.gov.au.

Members of the public were invited to provide feedback regarding the possible functionality and operation of an Australian Government Consultation Blog. The paper sought views on a range of topics including features, user expectations and registration for participation and posting information, moderation, privacy and security issues. The proposed functionality preceded a list of questions people were invited to consider as the basis of a submission.

Twenty submissions were received in response to the Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper, details of submissions are included in Appendix 1. A report, Public Submissions to the Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper, summarising the submissions received by AGIMO, was published in April 2008 and is available for download from www.agimo.gov.au. The summary and findings have been included in the findings outlined in this report.

Focus groups
Global Access Partners organised a series of focus groups in Sydney and Wagga Wagga in rural New South Wales. Four focus groups were held in metropolitan Sydney and two in Wagga Wagga in October 2007. Focus group participants comprised:

- 1 group (Sydney) 14-17 year olds
- 1 group (Sydney) 18-29 year olds
- 2 groups (Sydney & Wagga Wagga) 30-45 year olds
- 2 groups (Sydney & Wagga Wagga) 45+ year olds

Each focus group included an equal split of gender and involved 8 to 10 people discussing the proposed consultation blog over a period of one and a quarter hours. A facilitator introduced the concept of online consultation and led the discussion. The groups explored their interest in, attitude to, and expectations of online consultation forums (including blogs, discussion forums and web chats) with the Government.

Online survey
An online survey was conducted by Global Access Partners through the Open Forum website at www.openforum.com.au. The survey was available online between 9 October and 11 November 2007. The online survey canvassed the views of those already engaged in online political discussions. The survey was publicised, via email, to the Open Forum community. A total of 131 surveys were completed by people via the Open Forum website.

A demographic breakdown of survey participants is included at Appendix 2.

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1 Open Forum is a non-partisan collaborative online think-tank hosted and moderated by GAP. Open Forum explores the concept of e-democracy and provides a platform for focused dialogue on social, political, economic, ecological and cultural issues and challenges.
Archived
Findings

Terminology

Submissions from the public consultation blog discussion paper highlighted the need for consistent terminology in describing new communications media. It cited confusion in the terms used in the discussion paper where the term ‘blog’ and ‘discussion forum’ were used interchangeably when they serve different purposes.

For clarification, a ‘blog’ is a website entry made by an individual and is available for others to post their individual opinions.

A ‘discussion forum’ is a defined area on a website made available specifically for a multi-person discussion to take place, similar to a ‘town hall’ meeting. It may have one single topic focus or be the subject of multiple topics of discussion. Discussion forums allow people to make comments or post messages for a defined period of time.

Attention was also drawn to the need to be concise about the use of the terminology describing the way people use these different technologies. For example:

- discussion forums generally use ‘topic’, ‘thread’, ‘post’ or ‘reply’ in inviting responses; and
- blogs generally use ‘blog post’, ‘blog entry’, ‘comment’ or ‘reply’ in inviting responses.

Purpose of use

A non-government submission made reference to the intended use of the specific technologies addressed in the discussion paper. It proposed the first principle for consideration in any consultation using information and communication technologies (ICT) should be the intent or ‘purpose’ of the consultation.

The submission proposed there are two general purposes for using ICT in the consultation process and they are to:

1. generate discussion around the subject of the policy or service delivery, where the purpose might be to acquire a general knowledge base that may inform the process; or
2. generate ideas to inform the shaping of policy or service delivery by having users provide their ideas in response to an artefact.

Depending on the proposed intent of the consultation a discussion forum may be better suited to generating discussion around a topic. It might include an online facilitator that supports and encourages discussion, responds to postings and provides simple moderation. A blog may be better suited to a policy consultation seeking specific views; it may include a set of blog posts in any format, a set of formal terms of use, the capacity for tagging (labelling information) and a method of moderation.

Interest

Across the entire consultation program there was overwhelming support for the concept of a government consultation blog and discussion forum. The large majority (96.9%) who responded to the online survey considered the online Government forum a worthwhile project, a sentiment also reflected by respondents to the public consultation blog discussion paper.

However, when it came to actually participating in a Government forum, there was evidence to suggest that people who are not already engaged in online and political discussions would not actually participate. A notable difference was highlighted with participants of regional focus groups. While most participants considered the consultation blog a good idea in theory, few thought they would personally contribute to it in practice.

It was perceived, especially by the 45+ year old group, to appeal to a small core of political activists. This finding is comparable to other research that indicates only a small minority (10%) of people involved in online communities will actually participate in them.

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2 Jakob Nielsen reported that ‘in most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little and 1% of users account for almost all the action’. (www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_equality.html)
Younger users considered themselves ‘too busy’ to contribute to such a site, and believed older people would be more interested. Although the focus groups had shown that younger age groups are prolific users of the internet for entertainment and social networking, their participation in political blogs in Australia would appear to be relatively minimal. Teen participants of focus groups said they would prefer direct interactive contact, through web chats or internet ‘phone ins’, to politicians and decision makers in preference to a comment based debate on policy with other citizens.

**Participation**

Respondents who had a positive interest in an Australian Government consultation forum, indicated they would read and contribute to a blog. Other respondents preferred to simply post a comment on a blog rather than enter a discussion. Most respondents indicated that their motivation to contribute to discussions or blogs, and recommend them to others, is highly dependant on the topic and its personal relevance to them.

In contrast to most respondents, teenagers (14 – 17 year olds), participating in the focus groups held a different view. They were keen to participate in this debate only if they felt their views were being listened to. Teenage participants were more interested in engaging with a local, rather than Federal, version of the consultation blog as they felt local politics affected them directly and in a more personal way. They thought that the small scale of the problems involved in their locality meant there was more chance of their input actually changing council policies and provisions.

The majority of online survey respondents indicated they would participate in a blog by posting and reading comments. However, as the survey sought to capture the views of people already engaged in social affairs and active on political sites, it was not surprising that most respondents would read and participate in such discussions. It was important to online survey respondents to read the comments left by other participants. Some indicated they would do this before posting their own comments to avoid duplication. Others proposed a ‘thumbs up’ endorsement system for comments that encapsulated their own opinions that they could simply agree with.

There was little interest exhibited by any of the focus groups participants in reading comments posted by others. Most participants merely wanted to proffer their own opinions on an issue of particular relevance to them. There was little willingness to engage in a debate with others who have different views.

Overall, respondents indicated they would be more likely to participate in consultations with the Government if:

- the topic was relevant to their personal circumstances;
- they had the opportunity to nominate the topics for discussion;
- discussion forums included the participation of Government officials;
- a range of registration options were available;
- the site was well designed, easy to find and use;
- participants were free to express their opinion without censorship;
- it was unbiased in its operation; and
- any previous participation were acknowledged.

Government could encourage use and participation by ensuring that discussions and consultations were well publicised and targeted to the stakeholders most impacted by the topic. For example a youth forum targeted at 16 – 18 year olds, publicised via a social networking site on the topic of ‘P’ plate licensing restrictions would attract many participants.

**Expectations**

Overall, respondents expected that online consultations should form a part of the Government’s policy consultation process and not replace existing community consultations. A range of other expectations included, but were not limited to, the following:

- appropriate officials and Ministers would participate in online consultation forums, blogs and discussions with the community;
- that participants would have the ability to nominate topics for discussion;
that responses to the outcomes of public consultations would be provided;
that agencies and departments would provide feedback as to how forum and discussion input would be used following an online consultation; and
that there would be an acknowledgement of significant contributions made to online consultations.

**Government involvement**

Respondents expected that the Government, through officials, representatives and Ministers would participate in discussions. Many cited this as a success factor in engaging and maintaining public participation. Respondents expected that in the Government’s operation of the forum, it would not censor comments and would encourage free and frank expression. It was seen by many respondents, especially those participating via the online survey, that Government officials and Ministers would be able to prove their interest in, and commitment to, the various topics under discussion by participating. Many noted the need for political impartiality. The success of any public online forum was seen to depend on the willingness of those in power to participate in the debate and respond to the issues presented.

While many respondents expressed their cynicism about Government actually participating in the discussion, some respondents were optimistic and believed that Government officials would take the website and its discussion forums seriously. In the same vein, there were clear expectations that an online consultation forum should focus on generating solutions to problems rather than rehashing political debates.

**Topic selection**

It was an expectation of all respondents that any government consultation blog or online discussion forum would allow the public to generate topics for discussion. Some respondents believed topics should be suggested by the public to the moderators while more than half of respondents thought that topics should be freely created by the public. Overall, only a minority of respondents said that the Government or forum moderators should be entirely responsible for generating the topics for debate.

Both the focus groups and the online survey investigated a sample range of topics that might be discussed. Online survey participants were invited to rank their priorities according to their level of interest. The most popular topics, in order of ranking, included:

- water policy and climate change;
- public health provision; and
- education and childcare.

There was also a rich variety of suggestions for topics respondents wished to see discussed on the consultation blog. Few subjects appeared often and almost every respondent appeared to have different interests uppermost in their mind. This perhaps underlines the expectation for the public to be able to originate, or at least nominate, subjects for discussion as well as moderators or government officials. Some topics included, but were not limited to, broadband access, drug legislation, maternity leave and women’s rights in the workplace.

**Acknowledgment and recognition**

Respondents were equally divided in their expectations about being formally acknowledged if they responded to a government consultation. Some respondents suggested that those people who expected a formal response should make a formal submission to a consultation using a more traditional channel i.e. via mail. Other respondents indicated they would not expect their contributions to be recognised if they participated in a discussion forum, but would like to be recognised or acknowledged (i.e. thank you email) for their contribution to policy consultation, especially if their ideas or suggestions were adopted by the Government.

Participants expected the most enlightening comments might be quoted in a formal report. There was no expectation that all comments would be published in a written report; instead a summary of the central argument with appropriate quotes. Focus group participants were more interested in responses by Government representatives compared to the public’s comments and suggestions.

Few respondents expected their own ideas to be praised; most wanted politicians to take notice of comments posted, in order that they gain a wider perspective. Respondents believed that the public could influence policy
by participating in the blog. It was presumed by some respondents that if an individual offered a valuable solution, via the blog or an online forum, they would be properly recompensed for their idea.

**Features**

Participants in the focus groups wanted a site which was simple in design, quick to load, easy to navigate and which offered links to relevant information and organisations. Their desires were echoed by respondents to online survey and the general public. Focus group participants offered popular social networking websites, such as MySpace and Facebook, as examples of websites they found attractive noting that they are minimalist in appearance, easy to use and connect the user to everything or everyone else.

The need to keep the design of the blog or online forum simple was emphasised by many respondents. Teenage participants in focus groups also noted the need to keep the blog ‘interesting’ and ‘lively’ so as to maintain a balance between sophistication of content and simplicity of design.

Cumbersome registration procedures, slow loading times, overly bureaucratic language and long lists of conditions were seen by virtually all respondents as unnecessary obstructions. Many respondents observed that a few seconds is an eternity online and that any site offering unnecessary complications, long disclaimers or complex instructions would be abandoned. Most blogs and online discussion forums use similar templates which can be navigated quickly and intuitively and require only a user name and email address to register. It was suggested the Government site should resemble these, to provide familiarity for users where established skills could be applied, rather than attempt to impose a new system on users.

Respondents to the online survey were asked to select the three top design features they would like to see from a list of eight, they ranked in the following priorities:

1. the presence of Government responses (73.3%);
2. email access to Ministers\(^3\) (45%); and
3. the ability to be kept in touch with topic developments via email (45%).

Other items included the availability of internet links, access to opinion surveys, searchable comments, the ability to rank comments and the provision of embedded audio and video.

In addition to features noted above, respondents agreed on some basic functionality which included the following features:

- discussions, forums and consultations that were easy to find;
- a notification system; and
- the ability to recommend the forum to others.

**Finding a consultation**

Respondents across all groups agreed on the need for a clear and concise classification system for consultations to enable easy search and location. Some respondents indicated they would like the ability to ‘tag’ comments and posts with their own data, although this was not supported by the majority of respondents. Instead, respondents preferred simple search mechanisms using keywords, a search by agency and/or topic and the use of tags.

**Notification systems**

Respondents indicated their desire to be kept informed of developments occurring in government discussion forums and consultation blogs whether they made submissions or not. A system that allows the user to customise alerts via email for items or topics of relevance was the preferred method of notification for the majority of respondents.

**Recommending to others**

Respondents were generally supportive of features that assisted them to ‘tell a friend’ about consultations or comments of relevance. Submissions from the non-government sector supported a range of social networking functions that could support the dissemination of information about consultations. They included ‘book

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\(^3\) Ministers can be emailed now via their Australian Parliament House web addresses.
marking' like del.icio.us4, the ability to invite others to join the consultation, and the use of syndication services which would allow information about the consultation to be relayed to other websites with large audiences.

**Other desirable features**

Focus group participants were enthusiastic about the possibility of communicating one on one with politicians and decision makers in real time. They thought this was the only way their voices might really be heard. A real time 'web chat' with a Minister, in which people could pose questions and see them answered online over the course of perhaps an hour, would be an attractive proposition and encourage wide participation. All participants of the focus groups wanted to see such direct and immediate interaction with the top decision makers above any other feature, with the idea especially popular in the younger age groups.

**Registration**

The discussion paper proposed respondents register (voluntarily) on the blog site by providing an email address; a password; and, optionally an alias name and contact details.

Respondents were divided on the need to register to participate in a government online consultation. Several themes were raised in respect to registration, they were:

- participants providing false or incorrect identities;
- the quality of the submissions;
- concerns about lobbyists; and
- concerns about spam from the provision of email addresses.

Suggestions concerning posting and registering included that registration for online consultation processes should be the same as the registration or identification procedures for all submissions, regardless of its channel. Around two thirds of respondents were in favour of registration, although such procedures on blogs usually require nothing more than a user name and an email address.

Those who supported registration indicated that they would provide their real contact information; however, the provision of contact information would depend on privacy rules and statements made on the website about how the information was to be displayed or used. There were about a quarter of respondents who indicated they would give false information, more through force of habit through an instinctive mistrust of the internet rather than any anti-government sentiment.

Some respondents proposed restricting the participation ability of people who did not wish to identify themselves by registering, i.e. provide access to read information only, not to contribute. Respondents generally assumed that people who did not wish to register and provide their real identity may limit the quality of the discussion. Further suggestions were made by respondents around the quality of the submission being enhanced by requiring that participants be registered and validated, but always allowing participants to select whether they wish to be identified or not, either by their name or an alias. Many respondents advocated registration to prevent spam and disruptive or ill considered ‘drive by’ comments which would sully the debate for others and may lead to people taking the consultation less seriously than they would otherwise.

Concerns were raised about the number of comments that could be made per individual. One concern raised included the suggestion that requiring a registration process would limit the number of posts a person could make to a blog to avoid duplicate ‘lobbying’ that might give the impression that the opinion is shared by a larger number of people. If participants are not required to be registered it may impact on the degree of genuineness of each post or the validity of the consultation process overall. Requiring registration may limit malicious misuse.

A minority of respondents indicated they would not register to participate in a consultation blog or forum. If it were a requirement for participation, they would prefer to provide submissions via email and identify themselves with an email address only.

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4 del.icio.us is a social book marking web service. Social book marking is a way for internet users to store, organise, search, and manage bookmarks of web pages.
In contrast, a submission from a Government agency noted that should the Government require registration to enable participation in the consultation, consideration would need to be given to a process that might confirm that personal details provided by a participant were true. This would prevent anyone from pretending to be someone else.

Moderation

The topic of moderation attracted the most debate amongst respondents in all categories. Themes arising around moderation included:

• automatic scanning for malicious or inappropriate content;
• moderation of posts and comments before they are published;
• balance between moderation and censorship; and
• moderation guidelines.

Malicious or inappropriate content

The principle of automatically scanning comments for offensive language was supported by the overwhelming majority of respondents. Respondents expected that automatic scanning would take place against a set of published rules for participation. The acceptability of such automated editing of posts would depend on the exact nature of the language deemed unacceptable. Few appeared to object to the elimination of profanity, but an overwhelming majority of comments rejected attempts to censor fringe, but substantive, opinions however they were expressed. The question of whether the whole post should be rejected if found to contain a banned word, or whether the word itself might merely be replaced by a string of asterisks, is something for consideration.

Discussions that are not focused on the topic, personal attacks on individuals, content inconsistent with privacy principles, offensive language, sexual content, racial vilification and advertising or commercial ‘plugs’ were all cited as inappropriate.

Moderation of posts before publishing

Respondents were not generally supportive of moderation that inhibits discussion if the time taken to moderate comments is too long. An acceptable timeframe for moderation was not specified. Pre-moderation was seen as an unwanted imposition which would kill the freshness and immediacy of the debate. People wanted to see their contributions posted immediately and would be disheartened, and much less likely to contribute, if their comments were stuck in pre-moderation limbo.

Focus group participants, especially in the younger age groups, saw the web as a twenty four/seven phenomenon and expected to be able to post as easily at two on a Sunday morning as at eleven o’clock on Monday. Focus groups agreed that pre-moderation would lose far more potential users than it would gain in protecting the sensibilities of easily-offended citizens. They wanted the website to be as simple to use as possible and pre-moderation would add another layer of unneeded complexity and delay.

Moderation versus censorship

The majority of respondents believed the blog should be moderated to remove ‘irrelevant material,’ but same respondents believed this would inevitably ‘introduce censorship and bias’. The trade off between freedom of speech and operable forums was alluded to by some respondents who proposed that irrelevant, scurrilous and uncivil contributions can ruin a forum for the vast majority of responsible users.

Some respondents suggested introducing a ‘merit’ system of moderation that recognises a participant’s level of use, i.e. they were frequent contributors to government consultations. If their use complied with the websites proposed moderation guidelines (i.e. non-offensive, correct use of language etc) over a set number of comments or posts, would no longer be moderated.

5 Information Privacy Principle 8 requires reasonable steps to ensure personal information is accurate before being used.
Moderation guidelines

It was generally agreed that moderation guidelines, for blogs or discussion forums, need to be supported by a policy framework that includes a content policy, take down policy and grievance procedure. Respondents agreed that the moderation guidelines proposed with the consultation blog discussion paper were adequate, although some respondents raised concerns over the prohibition of adding website links to other information.

Some respondents noted that user generated information has proved central to the success of many sites and to forbid the posting of links by commentators would stymie their ability to offer evidence or widen or deepen the debate. Focus group participants, in particular, did not want the Government to dominate the debate, but to take account of it. They wanted to see links to other sources of information and these could be provided by users as well as Government officials to improve the quality of the discussion.

Other points on moderation included:
- that the agency or department conducting the consultation or discussion should be responsible for the moderation as they would have the expertise to address the issues raised; and
- the importance of a positive note applying to any forum, where the moderator engages with participants and challenges them to address issues in a reasoned and deliberative fashion.

Privacy & security

The majority of respondents indicated that privacy concerns would not prevent them from using the consultation blog. Some respondents would like to have the ability to hide their real identity if they choose, but participate under a user alias. Respondents indicated that privacy rules reviewed by an independent body (i.e. the Privacy Commissioner) would provide them with greater confidence in the stated privacy principles.

It should be noted that the consultation blog discussion paper, survey and focus groups did not expressly seek to explore reasons or the nature of security concerns. Rather, it asked whether concerns about security would ‘prevent’ people from using a government online consultation forum. The only concern raised across all respondents and participants was that of personal data being used for purposes other than what was intended.

A small minority expressed doubts about the potential misuse of data; there were several comments pointing out that anyone harbouring such suspicions would not be silly enough to provide [their] real contact details’. This hesitancy was generated as much by a suspicion of the safety of using the internet in itself as by any ingrained mistrust of the Government.

Respondents expected that all messages and artefacts associated with an online consultation would be free of malicious code and that the technical environment would be able to cope with high and sudden levels of usage, spamming and denial of service attacks.

Other issues raised around privacy and security concerns included:
- that some contributions, dependant on topic, may require greater privacy assurance than others and may prompt users to make anonymous contributions; and
- that contributions to the consultation process might be encouraged by ensuring participants have the ability to:
  - specify privacy of some or all of their identifying information;
  - specify that any or all of their information is not supplied with comments; and
  - remove or delete information about themselves once a consultation is closed.

There were no specific concerns about the site being hacked and few concerns about government officials identifying people who may have expressed controversial opinions. The rights of those who work in government to maintain their anonymity, and so feel able to post their views without fear or favour, was another point raised by some respondents.

The majority of respondents assumed that those people who were concerned about privacy would post under an anonymous or assumed identity or not post at all. Many respondents observed that an ability to leave anonymous comments or adopt various pseudonyms would enable those with privacy concerns to post on the site, but others countered by arguing that ‘anonymity [equals a] lack of credibility’ and that anonymity should be ‘disallowed’ to cut down foolishness. Most respondents ‘assumed’ that ‘appropriate measures’ would
be undertaken to preserve the sanctity of the email addresses given in registration and that users would be protected from ‘spammers’ or anything more sinister.

Many respondents noted that open source information is a good thing and censoring relevant information for ‘security’ reasons is unwarranted. It was stated, in the consultation blog discussion paper, that contact information provided by people to register to participate in a government consultation forum would be protected from perusal by other users, including political parties.

Submissions received from Government agencies highlighted that collection of personal information through a registration process would be subject to the Information Privacy Principles (IPPs) set out in the Privacy Act (1988). The principle would place specific obligations on the owner of the consultation website. It was proposed that the Government would need to give careful consideration as to whether the collection of personal information would be necessary for the purpose of the consultation. While there may be a benefit for participants and Government in being able to differentiate contributors, i.e. through unique aliases, it is not as clear that provision of an individual’s ‘real’ identity details would assist the consultation process.

Further submissions suggested that to protect users of the site from identity theft, it is preferable not to publish the identity or other personal details of respondents. Instead it proposed that consideration could be given to other options that may include:

- default to anonymous responses, providing automatic protection to members of the public;
- an alias could provide a means for following the posts relating to a particular discussion; and
- moderation prior to publication to ensure identifying personal information is removed from responses as appropriate.

Users may find it helpful for the proposed consultation site to contain guidelines on how responses and authorship information will be recorded and/or displayed and the duration of their responses on-line. This might also include information for users about how to have their comments or posts removed.

The overwhelming majority of responders implied or clearly stated a faith in the Government’s integrity and ability in this area.
Consulting with Government – Online

Archived
Australian Government Submissions

Australian Government agencies were also invited to contribute submissions on the Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper. Many of the responses from agencies supported the points made in this paper. Rather than repeat many of the assertions and findings already made in this report, a list of additional but specific comments made by agencies has been included in this section.

**Accessibility**

Some agencies asked the Government to note that by their nature blogs and discussion forums empower a particular group of citizens – those who are technologically literate and have access to the necessary equipment. It can therefore not be considered representative of the view of the broader community and, in particular, is likely to not capture the views of people who are already marginalised. An online consultation channel should be seen as an adjunct to broader consultation and communication mechanisms and should not supplant them.

Communities that do not have access to the internet may be disadvantaged by an online consultation method. Access to remote and rural localities is a factor for consideration when using the internet to consult with the Australian community. While there are access points in rural and remote communities (such as rural transaction centres, Centrelink Agencies, internet cafes and local libraries) the reality is that use of these access points is usually for a purpose such as study, communicating with family, completing Centrelink transactions and conducting other government business.

In line with accessibility legislation, there would be a need for the website to list alternative communication approaches for a specific consultation. Contact details for IT support should be provided on the website for users who may have limited skills or knowledge, and to support people with disabilities.

**Other considerations for Government**

**Mandatory online consultation**

A single online entry point to consultation with the Australian public is likely to create a valuable resource and a new way for Government and the public to engage. However, there may be instances where a particular consultation exercise is not amenable to consultation through online means. Accordingly, it is important to ensure that consultations through online means are not made mandatory upon agencies.

**Trial**

Many agencies proposed a small scale phased approach on a small number of initiatives to trial the technology and proposed functionality. This would provide evidence and resolve some of the issues about the need for registrations and moderation.

**Legislative submissions**

Terms used within the context on online consultation may need to be defined. For example, the term ‘submission’ has different meaning particularly if there are legislative obligations for public submissions during consultations.

**Defamation**

The potential for defamation should not be overlooked where an agency might be publishing material falsely ascribed to an individual.

**Consultations with the business community**

Online consultations that focus on regulations and policies that are primarily business centric are currently catered for on the www.business.gov.au website. The Business Consultation website has provided a new way for Government to consult with business. The website provides a mechanism to inform business about future regulatory activity and for Government to consult with stakeholders to obtain information and minimise compliance costs and improve regulation.
Business owners, operators, associations and other relevant stakeholders can register their interest in being consulted about particular policy and regulatory proposals. They can elect to be notified by email when new consultations are published on the site. The business consultation website also:

- provides information on the Government’s public consultation objectives and policies;
- provides links to current and past consultation processes; and
- includes information about new and upcoming changes to regulation.
Submission Summary

Public Consultation Submissions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>14</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr David Bath</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Alan Biggs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Jacques Chester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Andrew Donnellan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Karen Fainges</td>
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<td>Mr Fraser Henderson</td>
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<td>Mr Garth Holmes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Matthew Links</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Jeremy Malcolm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Robert Merkel</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other submissions were not for publication</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-government Organisations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Guy Carvalho for BrandAide Communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Sarah Wilson for Consumers’ telecommunications Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Greg Black for Education.au Limited</td>
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<tr>
<th>Government Organisations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Centrelink – Indigenous Services Branch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations</td>
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<td>Other submissions were not for publication</td>
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Total Submissions 20

Australian Government Submissions

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<th>Government Organisations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attorney-General’s Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>Australian Taxation Office</td>
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<td>Department of Human Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources</td>
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<td>Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet</td>
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<td>Insolvency and Trustee Service Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office of the Privacy Commissioner</td>
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6 Education.au Limited is a not-for-profit ministerially owned agency, governed through a Board by nominees from the Australian Government, higher education, school education and vocational education and training sectors.
Online Survey Participants

The survey participants were largely male. Of the online forms completed, 77.1% were completed by men, as opposed to 22.9% by women.

Nearly half (47.3%) of the respondents were aged 45 or over. Just over a fifth of the surveys were completed by those aged under 30, while nearly a third (31.3%) were completed by people aged from 30 to 45. A small number of submissions (1.5%) came from 14-17 year olds.

The geographical location of survey respondents, compared to the actual population distribution in Australia’s states, revealed that the Australian Capital Territory produced 12% of the replies although it accounts for only 2% of Australia’s population. This perhaps reflects the relatively high number of people employed in the political or government sectors in the capital. New South Wales dominated the poll, as it does in Australia’s population overall. The lack of interest in Queensland, compared to its population share, was the other major discrepancy between survey responses and overall population distribution.
Archived