

# Local Council e-Consultation Guide

A resource for local governments,  
developed by Darebin City Council  
in partnership with Deakin  
University

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**Author:** Jackie Bailey  
Darebin City Council

**Project Manager:** Dr Monika Merkes  
Coordinator Social Policy and Research  
Darebin City Council

**Project Partner:** Dr Lucas Walsh  
Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights (CCHR)  
Deakin University  
Email: [lucas.walsh@deakin.edu.au](mailto:lucas.walsh@deakin.edu.au)  
Web: <http://www.deakin.edu.au>

## All enquiries should be directed to:

Dr Monika Merkes  
Coordinator Social Policy and Research  
Darebin City Council  
Email: [monika.merkes@darebin.vic.gov.au](mailto:monika.merkes@darebin.vic.gov.au)  
(Tel) +613 8470 8464

Darebin City Council, Victoria Australia  
274 Gower Street, Preston Vic 3072  
Post: PO Box 91 Preston VIC 3072  
(Tel) +613 8470 8888  
(Fax) + 613 8470 8877  
Email: [mailbox@darebin.vic.gov.au](mailto:mailbox@darebin.vic.gov.au)  
TTY (Hearing Impaired): +613 8470 8696  
Multilingual Telephone Line: + 613 8470 8470

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Cr Marlene Kairouz  
Mayor of Darebin

## Mayor's foreword

Welcome to the *Local Council e-Consultation Guide*.

e-Consultation is emerging as a valuable tool for councils to engage with their community. The Darebin eForum attracts more members than most public meetings and the citizen discussions on the eForum have been thought-provoking, complex and provided useful information to Council officers. The use of e-consultation has resulted in a real boost to citizen participation in Darebin City Council's policy-making.

I encourage other local councils to similarly take advantage of online opportunities to engage communities in decision-making processes. I hope that this Guide proves to be a practical tool in helping councils to set up their own e-consultation strategies.

On behalf of Darebin City Council, thank you to the auDA Foundation for funding this project, the e-consultation Guide Reference Group who provided valuable advice in the development of the Guide and the Council staff involved in the project. Thank you also to our project partner, Deakin University.

Cr Marlene Kairouz  
Mayor of Darebin

# 1. About this guide

This Guide was developed by the Darebin City Council in collaboration with the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights (CCHR) at Deakin University with funding from the auDA Foundation.

The author would like to thank the following for their support throughout the project:

## **Local Council e-Consultation Guide Reference Group**

Mr Neil Alexander, Manningham City Council  
Mr Damian Alway, Kingston City Council  
Mr Glenn Boyd, Brisbane City Council  
Dr Peter Chen, Consultant  
Mr Alan Davies, Victorian Local Government Association  
Mr Chad Foulkes, Surf Coast Shire Council  
Ms Paula Giles, Municipal Association of Victoria  
Dr Richard Solly, Melbourne PC User Group  
Dr Lucas Walsh, Deakin University

## **Darebin eForum Strategy Group, Darebin City Council**

Mr Pradeep Agrawal  
Mr Kevin Breen  
Mr Tom Gray  
Mr Dean Griggs  
Ms Emma Hopkins  
Mr Roderick McIvor  
Mr Ray McQuillen  
Ms Sonia Petrilli

Special thanks to Monika Merkes, Project Manager.

This Guide can also be accessed online at:

<http://econsultation.wikia.com> (wiki format)

<http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/eforum> (PDF and Word formats)

## 2. What is e-consultation?

Local councils use electronic media for a variety of communication with the community. You may already use online technology to:

- provide information to the community
- enable business with Council online (eg paying Council fees, filling out forms)
- encourage active and direct involvement of citizens in decision making (eg electronic referenda)
- engage the public in discussion and consultation

In this Guide, we are specifically focusing on the last of these, "e-consultation."

"e-Consultation" refers to the use of electronic media for:

- **developing greater citizen participation** in government generally
- **consulting with community members in the policy making process**
- gathering views in order to **make a decision**

Electronic media used in e-consultation include:

- Internet forums (also known as "e-forums")
- online polls
- online surveys
- online feedback forms
- webinars (online seminars or meetings)  
[http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/publications/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Webinars-e.html](http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/publications/Fact_Sheet_Webinars-e.html)
- webcasting meetings
- podcasting
- electronic voting

This Guide focuses on e-forums as the main vehicle to start up dialogue amongst community members and local government on local council policy issues. The Guide also covers online polls and online surveys as tools which can be used in conjunction with e-forums.

### 3. What can I use e-consultation to do?

Consultation is a dialogue amongst community and council. e-Consultation can enhance traditional face-to-face or paper-based consultation tools.

This Guide will look specifically at how you can use e-forums, online polls and online surveys.

#### 3.1 Developing greater citizen participation

You can use e-consultation tools to increase the public's level of involvement with local government. You may already do things to enhance community engagement and participation in government, such as running open forums on local issues, using surveys to find out what issues matter to your local citizenry, or having a suggestion box in your Council foyer. It is not a great leap to run the same kind of general forums and surveys on your website or have online feedback and your say forms.

*Darebin eForum has more users and members than most of its public meetings or surveys: <http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/>*

The key to making these tools work, as with all consultation, is to act on the community input – for example, on the basis of the e-forum discussions or survey results, your Council could pick focus areas for policy development and let the community know what action you are taking.

#### **Darebin eForum: Arts and Leisure Strategy**

Darebin City Council held a discussion in December 2006- January 2007 on the Arts and Leisure Strategy which it proposes to develop. This is an example of using the eForum for direct input into current policy making.

Go to [http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/aaa\\_division/index\\_html](http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/aaa_division/index_html) to read the discussion.

#### 3.2 Consulting community members in the policy making process

There are two main points at which consultation with community is particularly helpful in policy making:

- at the beginning, when you have an issue you want to develop a policy on and are looking for general ideas and views from the community - "blue skying"
- once you have a policy approach and want to get community input before it is finalised – this stage is generally known as consultation

*"Consultation isn't just about asking citizens for their opinions; it is about triggering discussions and then actively involving people with democratic processes and their communities." International Centre for Local e-Democracy UK*

### 3.2.1 Blue-skying

Your Council (eg you, your boss or a Councillor) may have identified an issue which you want to have general discussion on before you start developing policy or deciding your program priorities.

#### **Example: Your Council wants to talk about youth services**

For example, you may have identified youth services as a real concern for your local community and you want to have a discussion on what should be done before you go ahead and draft policy for more targeted consultation.

In this situation, you might hold an open meeting inviting any member of the public to come along and discuss the issue, or you might take a paper survey to find out people's general views.

Using e-consultation tools, you could also:

- put the topic on an online forum and open it for comments and discussion
- conduct an online survey asking people questions about youth services
- specifically attract young people to online discussion and comment using online media like video or podcasts on your website which link back to the discussion of the issue

### 3.2.2 Consultation on proposed policy

Consultation on a proposed policy approach is a recognised step in the development of policy by government officials on behalf of government. For more information about consultation generally, [visit](#) the VLGA website:

<http://www.vlgaconsultation.org.au/definitions.shtml> or the Darebin website [http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/Page/Download.asp?name=community\\_consultation\\_policy\\_and\\_guidelines.pdf&size=792989&link=../Files/community\\_consultation\\_policy\\_and\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/Page/Download.asp?name=community_consultation_policy_and_guidelines.pdf&size=792989&link=../Files/community_consultation_policy_and_guidelines.pdf)

Currently, you might:

- develop a draft discussion paper or policy paper and release it for community members' comment
- hold open meetings and meetings with specific community representatives
- form a working group of people in the field to advise Council in the project's development.

#### **Example: your Council is about to develop an urban renewal strategy.**

You have a consultation paper and want dialogue on it – a conversation amongst community members and with you - not just one-way feedback where the public sends you submissions.

Using e-consultation tools, you could:

- use an online forum to discuss specific set of issues arising from the paper in an ongoing online dialogue. You could run one set of issues one week, then the next set of issues in the second week, and so on, just as you would run a meeting agenda
- invite people into discussions as they arise and maintain interest by starting up related discussion threads (“hot threads”) regularly
- conduct quick online polls of views on specific aspects of the issue

### 3.2.3 To make decisions

You might want to get a clear direction from community members on a specific issue with their input helping to establish a clearer mandate. In this instance you could use an online poll or survey.

The following table matches goals of consultation with e-consultation tools.

<b>General goal</b>	<b>Specific goal</b>	<b>Existing Consultation tools</b>	<b>e-consultation tools</b>
General engagement	Council wants to encourage general engagement and participation by community	Hold open meetings  Run surveys on what issues are important to locals  Have a suggestion box at Council foyer	Online forum  Online survey  Online feedback form
Early policy development - blue-skying	Council has identified an issue and wants to have general discussion around what to do about it, eg youth services	Hold open meetings  Run surveys asking specific questions and getting views on the chosen issue, eg youth services	Online forum with discussion topic focus on youth services  Online surveys  Use youth targeted media to get interest eg video/podcasts
Mid-policy development – consultation	Council wants to get community input on a proposed policy, eg “draft youth services strategy”	Put out a discussion paper or consultation draft of a strategy incorporating a feedback form and survey.	Publish an online article and link to a e-forum discussion open for a specific time period and moderated by someone from youth services policy area. Set up an online survey same as that

		<p>Hold stakeholder group meetings with community representatives</p> <p>Hold a youth services sector open e-forum</p>	<p>distributed with hardcopy paper.</p> <p>Specifically invite key stakeholders into discussion</p> <p>Invite the youth services sector in to the e-forum and invite "experts" to participate in a time limited online discussion</p>
Feedback to community	Council has finalised its policy and wants to let community know the results of their input	Publish final policy with a consultation report	Send out an email newsletter and publish an article on website on results of consultation and actions taken

For further information on e-consultation and its role in policy development a further reference in an Australian context is the Online Policy Consultation document available at <http://www.agimo.gov.au/practice/delivery/checklists>

## 4. Why should local councils do e-consultation?

### 4.1 Benefits of e-consultation

Internet access at home is not just mainstream it is becoming the norm. The type of network connection is also quickly shifting from lower speed dial-up to high speed Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) or cable connections. In 2005-06, 60% of all Australian households had home Internet access: see <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/acc2d18cc958bc7bca2568a9001393ae?OpenDocument>

This figure is even higher in metropolitan areas, for example in Brisbane 76% of households have access at home with most (57%) of these having high speed connections.

The benefits of e-consultation include:

- increasing the ultimate take-up of a policy
- reducing the amount of resistance to change
- developing a general sense of civic participation and “being heard”
- targeting people who operate in an online environment and are unlikely to participate in other methods of consultation, such as young people, some categories of professionals, the time-poor, people in remote areas of your region and people with disabilities
- using video and other online elements to appeal to various sorts of literacy

e-Consultation makes it possible to:

- reach more people, more of the time
- get the views of individuals as well as community group representatives
- conduct sustained discussion over time, allowing for ideas to grow and develop (not always possible in a one-off, face-to-face consultation)
- grow relationships between council and community members
- enable more people to give input as they contribute at a time that is convenient to them
- provide an environment for persons to comment who may not feel comfortable speaking at a public meeting

e-Consultation can be quick and easy for community members to use, and provide you with fast and direct feedback on policies. This means you can:

- hold more consultation more frequently if you wish for less cost than print and face-to-face consultations
- get a broad brushstroke perspective on views quickly and cheaply

### 4.2 Public confidence in government

“Public confidence in the integrity of the Government is indispensable to faith in democracy; and when we lose faith in the system, we have lost faith in everything we fight and spend for.”

- *Adlai Stevenson*

Recent studies have indicated that citizens feel increasingly alienated from their governments. They are demanding greater accountability and transparency from their governments, and want greater public participation in the development of policies that affect their lives (OECD 2001).

e-Consultation can be used as a tool to help citizens participate in government policy making and feel more enfranchised.

An increasing number of people already use the Internet to learn about government services and policies, and to use online government services, such as paying bills and rates. It is only one sideways step to add e-consultation mechanisms to a website, turning the government's internet involvement into actual dialogue with people rather than just the provision of information.

Local government as the government closest to the people is particularly well placed to use online technologies to enhance and expand participatory democracy.

The importance of developing Web-based technologies for e-governance has been recognized by virtually all States and Territories in Australia (Trinitas, 2002).

In May 2005, the Victorian Parliament's Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee released its final report on the Inquiry into Electronic Democracy. The core finding of this report "is that the Public Sector of Victoria, its institutions and elected representatives, need to develop the capacity to learn and experiment with the range of opportunities and applications new technologies bring to the democratic process" (Victorian Parliament 2005, p. xliii).

## 5. The tools of e-consultation

- Internet Forums (e-forums)
- Online Polls
- Online Surveys

### 5.1 Internet Forums

An Internet forum, also known as an e-forum or an online forum, is a facility for holding discussions via the web.

The basic elements of an e-forum are

- Topics / Discussion Groups
- Posts
- Discussion threads
- Moderator
- Forum members

“Topics” are the issues that are discussed on the forum. They can be structured in “discussion groups” for each different topic.

A “post” is someone’s comment on the topic.

A “thread” is a sub-topic or line of discussion which is made up of posts by various members of the forum on a particular topic.

The “moderator” is the person responsible for vetting comments, checking them and allowing them to be published, and steering the discussion. The moderator may also be joined by a “co-moderator” for each separate discussion, the co-moderator being a subject matter expert who can steer discussion whilst the moderator continues to be responsible for general vetting and forum website maintenance and control.

“Forum members” are the people who are registered to comment on the forum (not all forums require registration).

## 6. e-Forums: Key elements

The following section outlines the key elements of a successful e-forum. See sections 10 and 12 for a step by step guide on how to achieve these elements.

1. Relevance of topics
2. Good moderation
3. Momentum
4. Sense of membership
5. Accessibility
6. Advertised
7. Council action on basis of e-forum input
8. Internal Council support
9. External community support

### 6.1 Relevance of topics

Topics on forums should:

- directly link to current policy issues
- have relevance to a hot issue in society or the municipality
- integrate with the real world - encouraging real-life meetings, when appropriate, or linking to special days eg Environment Week, White Ribbon Day
- support offline community engagement.

### 6.2 Good moderation

The moderator of a Forum is basically an online meeting chairperson. A chairperson in a meeting will introduce each topic, guide people back on to the topic when they digress, censure offensive comments, stimulate comment when discussion flags by introducing new angles or questions, and periodically summarise discussion. The moderator does exactly the same things, but in an online environment.

You can have more than one moderator. Darebin City Council uses a moderator plus a subject matter expert co-moderator drawn from Council staff, one each topic. You could also have a community member or acknowledged expert in the role of co-moderator (Richards: 2002).

See section 12 Moderator Guidelines for a detailed how-to guide on moderation.

### 6.3 Momentum

It is essential that a discussion moves. If there have been no posts from community members for a day or more, the moderator should post something.

Ways to keep discussion moving include:

- have interesting facts about the issue ready to post in a slow time

- send out regular email updates (eg weekly updates) of where the discussion is up to
- highlight questions which have emerged through the discussion
- release new questions as “hot topics” related to the issue periodically during the discussion
- send out email alerts and e-newsletters which direct people to the discussion
- run competitions or regular giveaways, eg free movie tickets
- ensure that your topic is relevant and interesting in the first place, eg directly related to policy
- use polls and surveys to kick off a discussion and add new ones partway through the process
- regularly update your topics and discussions and publish a list of upcoming topics
- organise and promote cyclic events eg a monthly online two-hour debate
- consider holding regular 'board meetings' which create a sense of routine
- host unusual events such as a chat with a Councillor, academic or community expert or celebrity
- have milestones in a discussion and mark them with scheduled activities

You can also use the Forum website to create a sense of momentum by using a communal calendar; reminders about upcoming events; invitations to join in; the use of occasional synchronous events, such as teleconferences, virtual chats and online meetings; and publications of summaries of discussions soon after they happen.

#### **6.4 Sense of membership**

It is a good idea to have people register to join your forum rather than having an open forum that anyone can comment on without joining. This way you can ask key questions of people useful to evaluate your forum later, you can identify people and create evolving member profiles.

You can then build a real sense of membership and online community by:

- providing a range of roles, for example by recruiting discussion leaders from within the forum community membership
- enabling people to personalize their posts with an avatar or information in their profiles about themselves
- including an off-topic forum space for discussion of anything outside the formal forum topic list, such as advertising local community events, socializing, exchanging stories.

#### **6.5 Accessibility**

The Australian government has website access rules <http://www.agimo.gov.au/practice/mws/accessibility>. Your e-forum website should comply with the same requirements that your regular website complies with, such as ensuring there are alt tags for non-text elements (an alt tag describes an image or graphic on a web page for those who cannot see the image). There is also an open standards movement and standards such as W3C <http://www.w3.org> When designing your forum website, you have to accept that your forum cannot include everyone, but should also not exclude particular groups, for example the

visually impaired. You also have to recognize that e-forums will not reach everyone just as a public meeting does not get 100% community attendance.

You also have to take into consideration who is your target audience. For example if you think that the majority of your users will have broadband then you can include larger graphical and video files on your main page. If you want the site to be accessible to those with dial-up, then you would probably link to larger graphical elements such as video files rather than embedding them in the main page, so the main page of the forum does not take a long time to download.

You will probably find that your main Council website already seeks to comply with Government guidelines and your main task will therefore be to make sure that the forum site does as well. For example you might consider delivering the content in your e-forum in languages other than English. Video or other multimedia files should also have a text-based equivalent describing the content of the files so that those with a slow connection or visual impairment know what is going on.

## Usability

A usable website is the key to success. The following are questions asked in a story at *webreview.com*, taken from *Bowling Together* <http://www.bowlingtogether.net> which you should ask yourself in designing your Internet forum:

1. Is it efficient?
  - Can tasks be performed with keyboard strokes?
  - Does the site reflect a clear understanding of how users do their work?
  - Are response times fast enough to keep users in a flow state?
2. Is it intuitive?
  - Does it behave consistently throughout?
3. Is it visually consistent?
4. Is it supportive?
  - Does it allow mistakes to be easily undone?
  - Does it provide advice/ tools/reference materials?
5. Is it engaging?
  - Do users feel in control?
  - Do users enjoy their experience?

You should user test your forum before you go live with it. Darebin did a four month pilot and evaluation before committing to an ongoing forum with its current website layout which is powered by GroupServer, and a one year evaluation due in March/April 2007.

## Readability

Always use plain language on your e-forum.

## 6.6 Advertised

You have to spread the word using offline and online mechanisms, otherwise no one will use your Forum. A good communication plan that has been acted on in advance of the Forum launch is essential.

## **6.7 Council action on basis of e-forum input**

The Council has to use the input from the e-forum and the community needs to know what the outcomes of their comments and discussion has been, otherwise they will think it has been pointless and will become cynical about your Council's consultation processes.

The best feedback clearly identifies how the public input has specifically been used or made a difference. A good example (even though it is based on a traditional meeting) is at <http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/council/projects/churchill/consultation.asp>

Given political and administrative processes can be slower than the public expect feedback to the community can be staged, you don't have to wait for the final decision. You should always look to give feedback when you can, this could be as simple as an acknowledgment email, it could also be a short report, an e-newsletter, or an update on the Forum page.

## **6.8 Support from inside and outside Council**

Your forum needs to be championed by people within the Council and outside the Council in order to get off to a good start. That way you will have people to contribute, getting the discussion going, and people on staff to co-moderate topics with you and ensure the relevance of your forum to the Council from the outset. Ways to ensure support include:

- setting up a project reference group for the e-forum with members of the community and Council
- engaging senior managers with an interest in e-government, communications or with an upcoming consultation
- engaging key community representatives to see the benefits of an e-forum and championing it amongst their sectors
- providing a compelling case of the benefits of a forum to engage other staff.

## 7. e-Forums: Examples

### 1: The Darebin eForum

<http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/>

Software used	GroupServer (open source)
Purpose of forum	General citizen engagement Discussion of specific policy issues
Resources required	Site support: Volunteer 2 hours per week plus time to sort out bugs Moderation: (rotates amongst policy areas of Council as per topic): 2 hours per week. Oversight of e-forum: 2 hours per week. Additional costs of site: Nil (hosted on Darebin server)
Moderated (this means that comments are checked before being published on the e-forum)	Yes
Number of members	103 as of 24 January 2007
Can members of the public start discussion threads?	No

### 2. Brisbane City Council: Your Say Online

[http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC\\_76](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76)

Software used	Developed in-house
Purpose of forum	To provide a space where informed feedback and comment can be obtained from the community to support policy development or project planning. All discussions are supported with additional information on the corporate website.  A secondary role of the forum is for residents to see what others are saying and to potentially be more considerate of other perspective's. The discussion forums have many more readers than they do contributors and this is ok.  Associated quick polls and surveys not only collect valuable feedback it is anticipated they help participants to make the leap from reading to contributing in forums.
Resources required	Site support: Set up for a topic is about 1 hr per topic Moderation: Around 1/2 hr a day when active otherwise 5 min to review latest

	posts Oversight of e-forum: 1 hr a week Additional costs of site: Nil (hosted on Council server)
Moderated (this means that comments are checked before being published on the e-forum)	No - comments go live automatically. In past two years have only had a handful of incidences that have required moderation.
Number of members	Open to public and anyone can contribute. Do directly promote new topics to Your City, Your Say community reference groups members who have supplied us with their emails (6,800).  Previous website users research identified that a username/password process that was in place was a barrier to contribution.
Can members of the public start discussion threads?	No - A suggest a topic link was in place but vast majority of contacts were service requests, now use YCYS member research to identify areas of interest.

### 3. Surf Coast Shire Council

<http://www.surfcoast.vic.gov.au>

Software used	Provided by a contractor written in Visual Basic
Purpose of forum	General citizen engagement Discussion of specific policy issues
Resources required	Workload is estimated to be the same as Darebin.
Moderated (this means that comments are checked before being published on the e-forum)	Yes
Number of members	The e-forum should be active March 2007
Can members of the public start discussion threads?	No
Site traffic (average volume)	The e-forum should be active March 2007

Other councils in Victoria which are commencing online forums include Manningham and Kingston City Council.

### International examples

- o Brazil's city council of Porto Alegre has used email and the web to facilitate a degree of direct democracy by enabling citizens to discuss and vote on issues.
- o Minnesota e-Democracy also hosts online public spaces for citizen interaction on public issues to increase participation in elections and public discourse in Minnesota through the use of information networks (<http://www.e-democracy.org/>).

- Citizens of Estonia use an online consultation process to comment on draft laws and suggest new ones (<http://tom.riik.ee>).
- <http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk/casestudies.htm>
- <http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk/toolkit/default.htm> E-Democracy Toolkit developed by the International Centre for Local e-Democracy

## **Australian Government Citizen E-Engagement Initiatives**

Queensland Government's e-Democracy Unit

<http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/community/edemocracy.html>

WA Office of e-Government

<http://www.egov.dpc.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?event=policiesEengagement>

ConsultWA

<http://www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?event=consultWaView>

- provides a list of consultations being conducted by Western Australian state government departments and agencies

Citizenscape

<http://www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/>

- an information rich site of resources for those interested in active citizenship and community consultation and participation.

Victorian Parliamentary Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee's Inquiry into Electronic Democracy (Parliament of Victoria, 2004).

[http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/SARC/E-Democracy/Final\\_Report/ToC.htm](http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/SARC/E-Democracy/Final_Report/ToC.htm)

## 8. Darebin eForum: A case model

The Darebin eForum was piloted in 2004 and has been online in its current form since March 2006. It has been approved by Darebin Council as an ongoing project with an evaluation after its first year of full operation. The Darebin City Council established the Forum as part of its *Governing Darebin* strategic plan, which recognises greater community participation in local government and better consultation in policy making as critical to good governance.

Darebin eForum is run as an Internet based forum combined with an email list which means that members can post to the Forum via email as well as directly on the website. It uses open source GroupServer software.

Darebin eForum is moderated, which means there is someone who oversees discussion and checks comments before they are published on the Internet. There is a key moderator who oversees all discussions and vets posts before they are published. The moderator sets a topic in consultation with other Council department officers. The moderator remains constant throughout the year, with co-moderator for each topic drawn from the relevant Council department. The moderator consults with the other Council departments via a reference group made up of officers from across the Council in order to choose topics which are relevant to current policy undertakings or hot policy issues in the community.

At this stage, Darebin eForum does not allow citizens to create topics or start discussions.

Issues discussed on the Darebin eForum so far have included:

- Community harmony. This was chosen in the aftermath of the Cronulla riots and because Darebin is a multiculturally diverse community.
- Key environmental issues. This included bicycle usage and green energy policy.
- Australian citizenship. This topic came about because of the new Federal policy to introduce a citizenship test.
- Arts and leisure strategy. This topic was discussed as part of general public consultation in the development of a new Darebin arts and leisure strategy, linking directly into a current policy process.

Dr Lucas Walsh, Deakin University is undertaking an evaluation of the eForum after one year's operation. The following are his preliminary findings. The final report will be available by April 2007.

Benefits listed by the Council officers who used the Darebin eForum for consultation on an issue relevant to their policy area:

- Council officers suggest that the type of discussion taking place is good quality deliberation, including informed debate between users and refinement of views that provides useful feedback to Council.
- Council officers entering the consultative process as participants received positive feedback from users. As one officer/ moderator noted, "it's also good

that the community sees that we are councillor officers yes, but we are also humans...and have opinions about things too". (Example of this is provided below)

- Councils Officers are highly aware of the particular benefits to users who are "time-poor" and who want to participate in Council from home.

Lessons learned:

#### *Internet-only forum software vs GroupServer*

- GroupServer software, which is used by Darebin to power their forum, makes it possible for people to post to the forum and receive all the comments posted via email as well as being able to post directly on the Internet. About 80% of forum comment came on via email, showing it was a well utilised posting method.
- On the downside, GroupServer is not as simple to administer as other forum applications which run solely on the Internet and which do not offer the comment via email capability. However there are many Internet-only forums which offer email notification, which means a Forum member can choose to receive emails telling them if someone has left a comment on the Forum. This kind of forum might be a good compromise.
- GroupServer also enables private discussions. Other Internet forums generally have this capability also by setting permissions for a forum.
- The current release of GroupServer (as at March 2007) requires a fair amount of initial work to make bug-free as it did not comprise a fully tested set of files.

#### *Moderators as Council officers vs private citizens*

- Public servants moderating forums need to be clear about their role as public facilitators. For example, if there is an issue or question raised by a user to which the moderator feels it is not appropriate to respond, the relevant person in Council, such as a manager from the subject area, could speak to the participant directly.
- One Darebin eForum moderator cites a specific example of where a participant's concerns could not be addressed via the online forum because the moderator was concerned about breaching a politically sensitive area. The concern was then forwarded to the relevant Council personnel who chose to contact the citizen directly and in private. Sometimes, information cannot be shared because it may damage a relationship or offend, so moderators have to be strategic.

#### *Providing opinion vs information*

- Darebin moderators have considerable independence in determining what takes place within each topic, occasionally offering personal as well as professional suggestions to users. Personal suggestions from moderators have been well received by users, and have extended and enhanced the discussion. But because moderators provide opinion as well as information, they sometimes encounter challenges as to how they can respond to potentially politically sensitive issues.

### *Ensuring the representation of interests and technological inclusion*

- The forum faces challenges to access, particularly in a community characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity, access to computers and residents with low computer literacy.
- During 2006, the Darebin eForum averaged around 200-300 user hits per month. The typical user to post a message was male. (During the pilot, however, the typical poster was female, middle-aged, professional and working full-time). Efforts will keep being made to ensure that representation on the forum is as wide as possible.
- Darebin City is characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity. 40% of the population is Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) - as many as 140 languages are spoken across the Darebin City area. One eForum moderator suggests that the language barrier is important challenge – especially because of high levels of new migrants and refugees, and older migrants who prefer to communicate in their heritage languages (e.g. Greek and Italian). While the main website for Darebin Council has a multilingual component, the eForum does not have a translation service.
- The effectiveness of any e-consultation requires technological skills and political literacies amongst representatives, constituents and the public service to effectively engage the consultation process.

### *e-Consultation needs to be integrated into broader consultation processes*

- While there is an explicit effort to link discussion topics to policy initiatives, e-consultation needs to be more formally and explicitly linked to the overall consultation or policy making processes within Council. For example, the first topic on Community Harmony was aligned to policy development within the Council's Multicultural Unit.
- e-Consultation needs to find ways of including the active involvement of Council members.
- Online consultation is best used as part of a group of strategies to achieve maximum impact. As one eForum moderator suggests, the type of e-consultation that would ideally take place in future "would have to be within a suite of consultation methods... Just as we do now, we try not to just do a survey... but we also have a public meeting, and we have a focus group as well..."

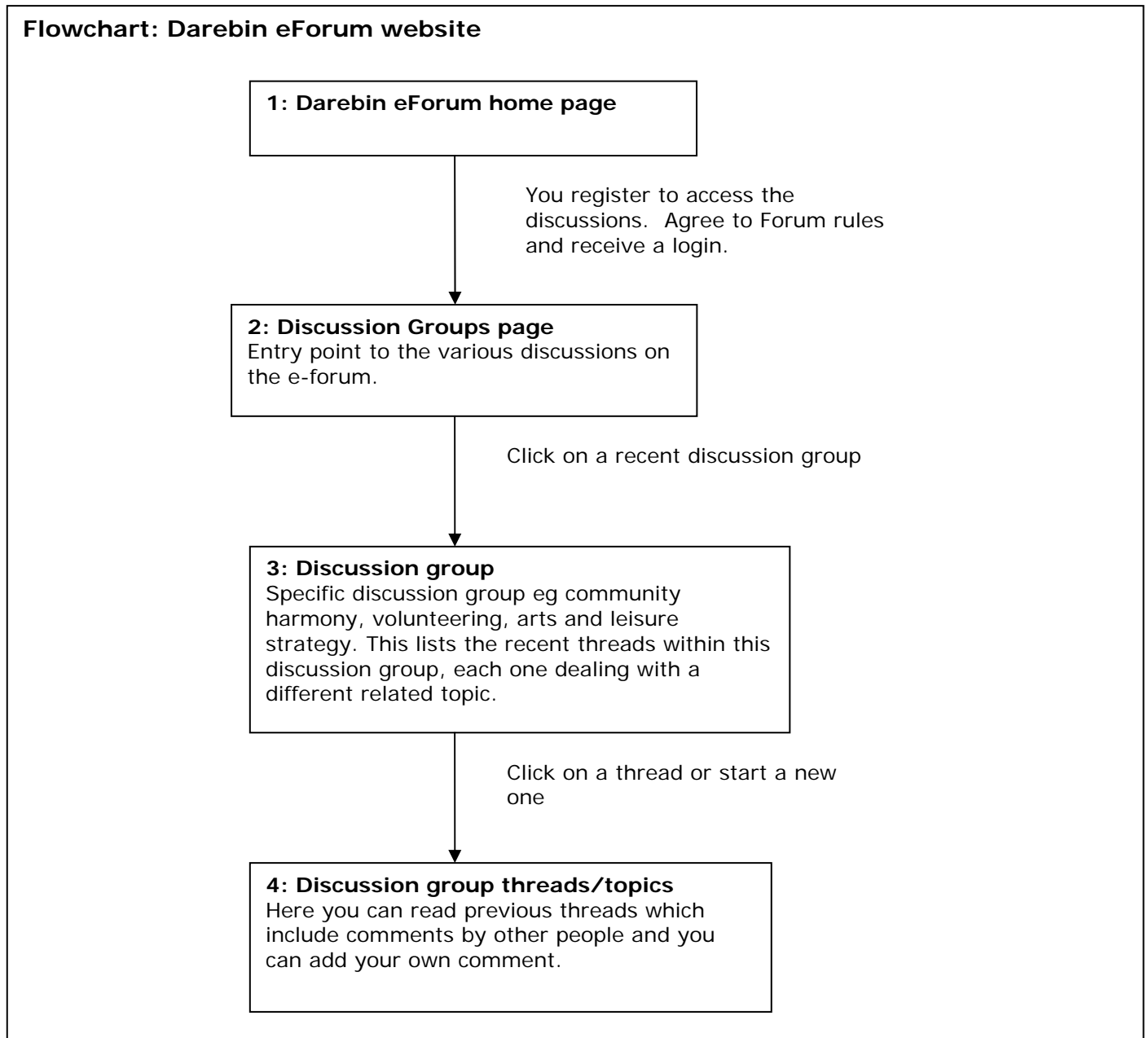
### *Potential benefits of subscriber-only topics*

Darebin is planning to introduce topics on the eForum that are subscriber-only, that is, only visible to people who subscribe to the topic, for example in developing volunteering infrastructure in Darebin. These topics will not be moderated. The aim is to enable a virtual space in which people can be more candid and have specific / specialised interests in the topic.

### **Darebin eForum structure**

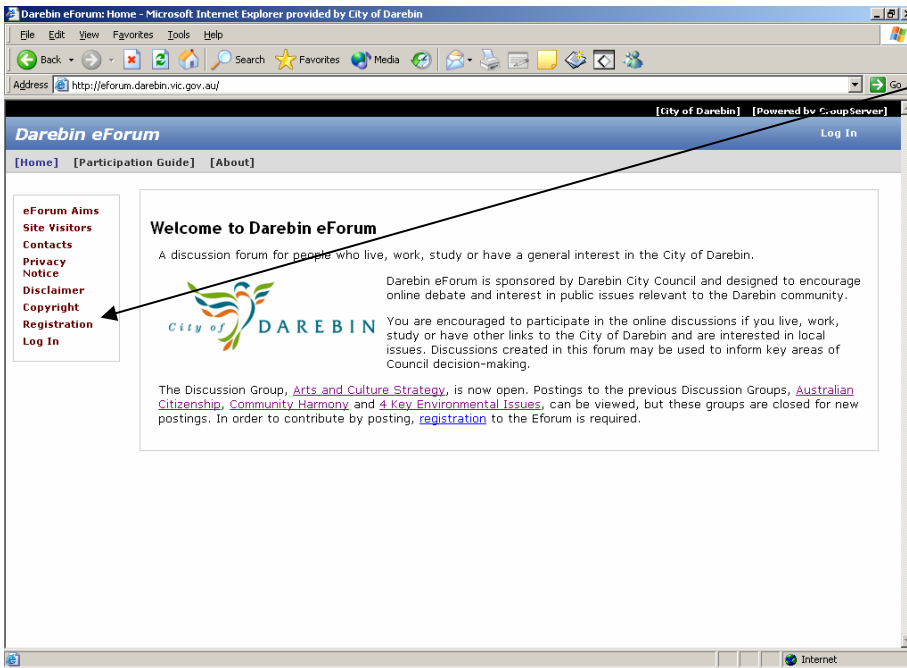
The Darebin eForum has the following structure:

- Issues/topics are created as "discussion groups," for example the community harmony discussion group which is the section of the forum dedicated to discussing community harmony topics.
- Discussion threads within a discussion group are called "topics." These can be started by the moderators and the group's members and kickstart discussion of issues, for example related to community harmony.
- Members then post within the thread or "topic."



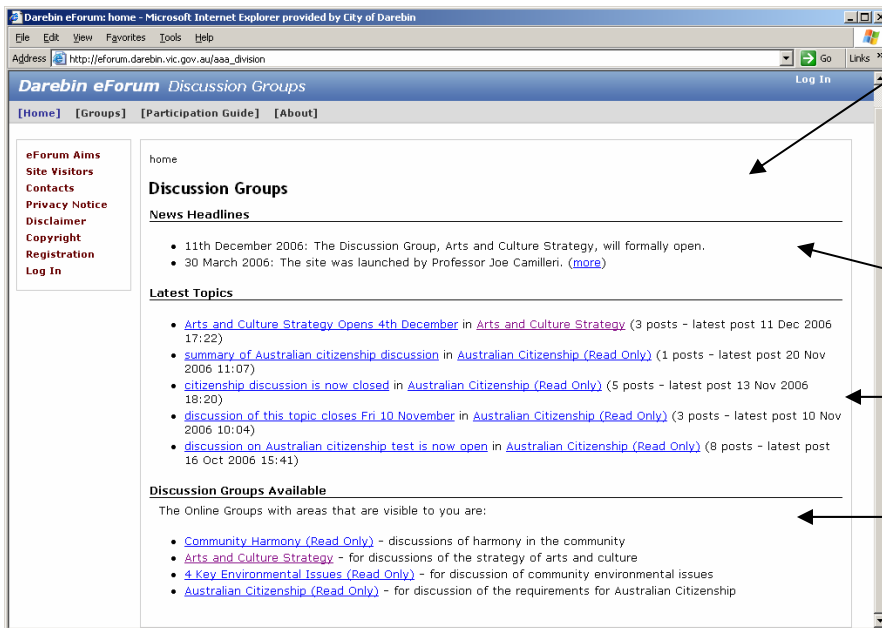
The following screenshots match the flowchart steps of how Darebin eForum works.

# 1. Darebin eForum home page



This is the home page. From here you can register and then login to see and contribute to discussion.

# 2. Darebin eForum "Discussion Groups" page



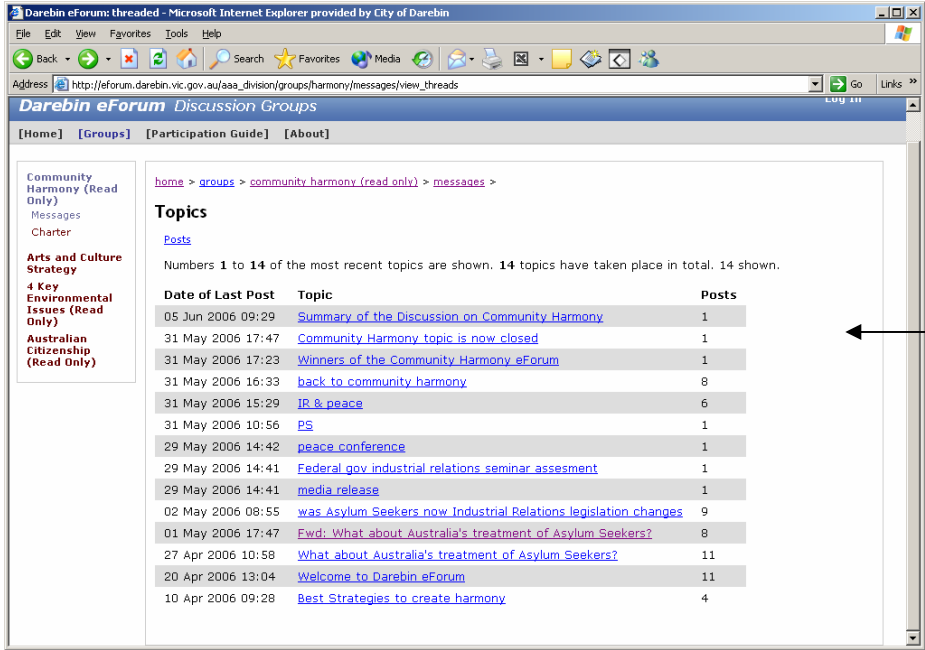
Once you have registered and logged in you can access the "Discussion Groups" page. This page takes the forum member to the list of most recent threads and topics as well as previous topics discussed on the forum. From here the member can click on a recent thread to read further or make a post, or read previous discussions (which are listed as read-only.)

"News headlines" is a section making general announcements to Forum members at a glance.

"Latest topics" link to the most recent threads started.

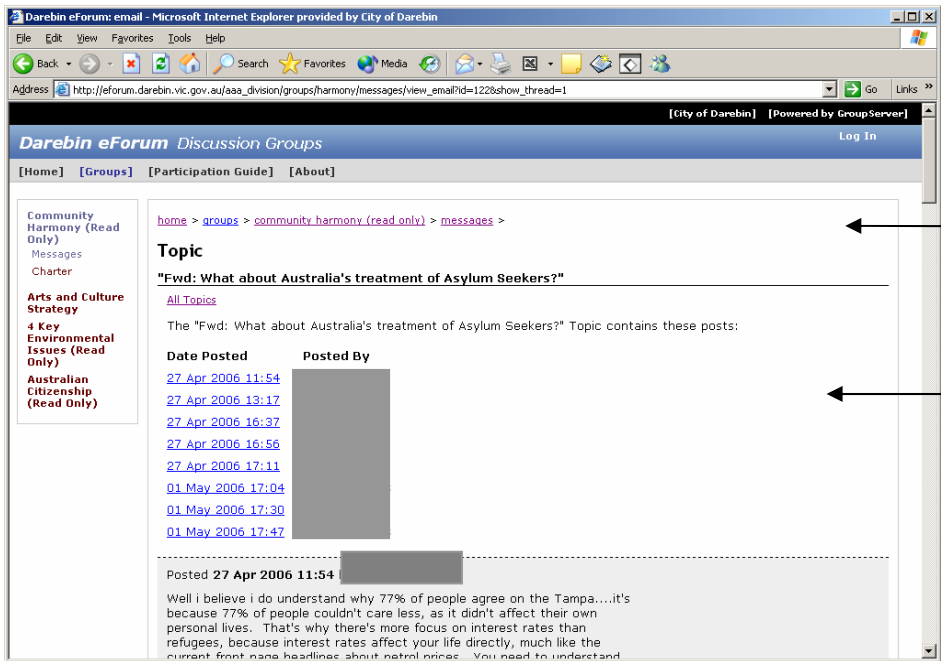
"Discussion Groups available" are the topics/issues which have been discussed on the forum.

### 3. Darebin eForum Community harmony discussion group topics (threads) page



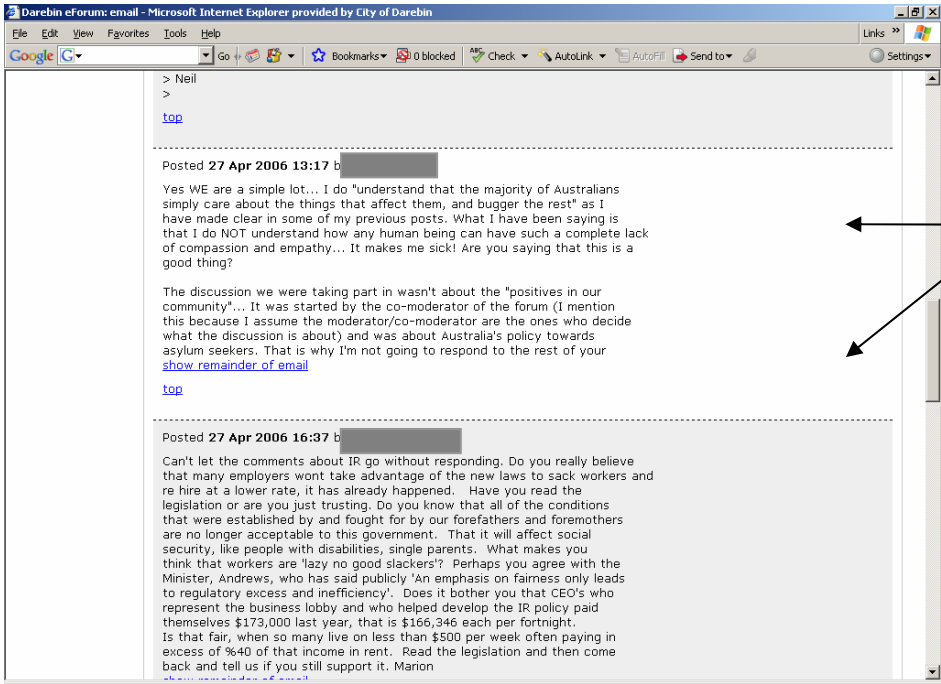
Each "topic" is a discussion thread created by the moderators or members of the Forum. Forum members can click on a thread and post their views.

### 4. Darebin eForum Community harmony discussion topic (thread)



This screenshot is an example of one of the discussion threads within the community harmony discussion group. The thread is "What about Australia's treatment of asylum seekers?"

These are all the posts made by Forum members, from earliest to most recent. (Note: names of participants blocked out)



← This screenshot is an example of posts by Forum members on the topic "What about asylum seekers?"

## 9. e-Polls and e-surveys

e-polls and e-surveys are the other main tools for e-consultation.

### 9.1 e-Polls

An online poll is a quick way to do an opinion survey. Websites of newspapers often run a poll of an issue. A key element of a poll is that they involve the use of closed questions. Many also provide immediate feedback to the participant on what the overall results to date are.

Example 1:

Do you think Darebin should run an annual Arts Festival? Yes / No

Example 2:

Do you think we should have a citizenship test? Yes / No

Be aware that if you conduct a vote at the end of a forum discussion you could be creating an expectation amongst the forum members that you might be treating the result as a vote.

### 9.2 e-Surveys

You can use online surveys as a tool to collect data just as a paper survey is used. A survey is longer than a poll and offers more options for the types of answers obtained.

You can use a poll or survey to kick start or complement a discussion on a forum.

#### **Example: Brisbane City Council, Your Say Online**

[http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC\\_76](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76)

Brisbane City Council has used a quick poll in addition to a long survey to support a forum discussion. The quick polls were up for a month before being changed while the long survey was up for the length of the discussion topic. The polls provide a path of increasing involvement with participants who have taken part more likely to revisit the website and contribute to longer surveys and discussion forums.

## Brisbane City Council's online consultation home page "Your Say Online"

The screenshot shows the 'Your Say Online' page with a table of current consultations. An arrow points from a text box on the right to the 'Brisbane Open Space Strategy' row in the table.

Current topics - Brisbane City Council	Dates	Organisation
<b>Brisbane Open Space Strategy</b> Help us to shape the Brisbane Open Space Strategy. Give us your feedback and share your opinions on what you see as key open space issues and opportunities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">New 60-second quick poll - December - January</a></li> <li><a href="#">Results for 60-second poll - November - December</a></li> <li><a href="#">Open Space survey</a></li> <li><a href="#">Open Space Strategy discussion forum</a></li> <li><a href="#">Opinion! Open Space - a signature Brisbane attribute discussion forum</a></li> </ul>	31 October - 19 January 2007	Brisbane City Council
<b>Neighbourhood Planning</b> Neighbourhood Planning has started another phase with local plans being developed for eight identified regions across Brisbane. Complete a survey or attend a workshop and have your say on the future of your local area. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">feedback so far</a></li> <li><a href="#">Neighbourhood Plan areas and engagement opportunities</a></li> </ul>	November - December 2006	Brisbane City Council

Each topic has a poll, an article and/or discussion paper and a forum. Topics on the Brisbane forum are linked to current policy consultation processes.

## Brisbane City Council Online Poll for "Open Space Strategy" topic

The screenshot shows a poll interface with the following questions:

- Walking routes**  
Research tells us that walking is our most popular outdoor recreation pursuit. Where do you walk mostly?  
 Local streets.  
 Cycle/walk ways.  
 Parks.
- Recreation Programs**  
Do you think you would participate in recreation programs in your park if you had better information on when and what activities were available?
- Veggie gardens**  
Does your household grow any local produce (eg vegetables, fruit, eggs) that you consume?
- Regional Open Space**  
While Brisbane has a relatively good network of protected open spaces, there are relatively little protected open space areas across South East Queensland. Would you be prepared to contribute financially to...

The poll uses a combination of yes/no and multiple choice questions. It provides another option for citizens to give their views online.

### 1. Brisbane City Council: Your Say Online: Surveys

Software used	www.zoomerang.com
Purpose of survey	To provide an online version of paper based surveys. Can create short quick polls and longer surveys using all standard question types.

	<p>To collect information in respect to the public's perceptions and opinions in relation to policy development and project planning.</p> <p>Quick polls and surveys not only collect valuable feedback it is anticipated they help participants to make the leap to become more active in other engagement activities including forums. The surveys can be set up to provide participants with immediate feedback by showing them the overall results to date once they complete the poll or survey.</p>
Resources required	<p>Site support: Set up for a survey is about 2 hr per topic  Oversight of survey: 1 hr a week  Additional costs of site: Annual license \$500</p>
Number of members	<p>Open to public and anyone can contribute.</p> <p>Do directly promote new surveys to Your City, Your Say community reference groups members who have supplied us with their emails (6,800).</p>
Site traffic (average volume)	<p>569 survey completions over a three-week period for consultation on redevelopment of riverfront site in City.</p>

For more information about using polls and surveys, go to

[http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/consultationendirect/text/publications/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Surveys-e.html](http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/consultationendirect/text/publications/Fact_Sheet_Surveys-e.html)

## 10. Resources necessary for e-consultation

The resources required for e-consultation vary. There is a surprising amount you can do for low cost. All forums require time invested in initial planning to map out your aims for your forum, choose the right Forum software, either open source or proprietary, to cater to your requirements, testing the software and getting Council support and community membership of the Forum.

### 10.1 Darebin eForum

<http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au>

This uses open source software, a volunteer site administrator and existing staff time amongst council staff to moderate the Forum.

#### Forum establishment

Darebin City Council spent \$2000 on print advertising the forum using bookmarks which were distributed in the area and in public spaces such as the local libraries. Staff time was drawn from the existing staff in the Social Policy, Strategy and Governance Department. Once staff gained permission to go ahead with the e-forum approximately 1-2 hours were required per week for a period of about 12 months to:

- project manage the technical site development
- development of an internal Council collaboration model and securing the input of all departments of Council
- developing the partnership with the Melbourne PC user group to secure volunteer site administration
- initial topic development
- scheduling and consultation with other Council areas to line up co-moderators for the first few topics.

The Darebin site administrator is a volunteer, Mr Richard Solly. He estimates that if you start with a functional set of files, raw set up takes two hours and customisation takes between 8 and 40 person hours.

#### Ongoing forum management:

Role	Duties	Staff time
Key moderator	Topic setting, moderation and monitoring of threads, approving posts (both moderators have permission to do this), advertising forum.	approx half a day per week.
Co-moderator	this involves emailing their networks, writing a media release, writing para for internal bulletin, following discussion, approving posts, contributing to discussions and writing summaries of discussion at	approx half hour a day during discussion period, which lasts for approx 2 weeks.

	the end of discussion which is posted on the e-forum and on the Council website.	
Site administrator	Oversee technical maintenance of site.	2 hours per week plus time to find and fix bugs. See below for comments.

Darebin's volunteer administrator Mr Richard Solly notes that whilst maintenance of a fully functioning system does not require a large amount of time, time to find and fix bugs in the software can take many hours. Both commercial and open source software have bugs, so time to fix them should be factored into the project plan for e-forum implementation. Ensuring a bug free installation is the key to avoiding having to spend too much time on fixing bugs once the forum is up and running. Therefore a fully tested set of files for installation is critical. Mr Solly notes that the current release of GroupServer is not fully tested and may therefore take additional time in the set up phase to iron out bugs before commencing.

## 10.2 Surf Coast Shire Council

<http://www.surfcoast.vic.gov.au>

Surf Coast Shire uses different software to Darebin. Surf Coast Shire has chosen to pay a website consultant to support the forum, with minimal additional internal Information Technology resources required.

### Forum establishment:

It cost Surf Coast Shire \$1,500 to establish its e-forum. With thanks to Darebin resources required to create the space, text and procedures were minimal due to Darebin sharing its resources.

### Ongoing forum management:

Role	Duties	Staff time
Key moderator	Topic setting, moderation and monitoring of threads, approving posts (both moderators have permission to do this), advertising forum.	approx half a day per week (this is an assumption based on Darebin's workload)
Co-moderator	this involves emailing their networks, writing a media release, writing para for internal bulletin, following discussion, approving posts, contributing to discussions and writing summaries of discussion at the end of discussion which is posted on the e-forum and on the Council website.	approx half hour a day during discussion period, which lasts for approx 2 weeks (this is an assumption based on Darebin's workload)
Site administrator	Oversee technical maintenance of site.	\$400 per year. The money will come from an IT or central budget as there is

		<p>recognition that this is a Council tool and not the property/cost of a single business unit.</p> <p>The contractor also supply surveys and polls at an additional cost on a needs basis and maintains the Shire's community &amp; business listing.</p>
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### 10.3 Brisbane City Council

[http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC\\_76](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76)

Brisbane City Council has a project officer whose role includes the management of the Your Say Online space and 12,000 member Your City, Your Say community reference group along with supporting work units from across Council in maximising the use of these engagement opportunities. Another team member provides support in regards to strategic directions. Members of the Council's corporate web team play a content development role bringing supporting information content together.

#### Forum establishment

The current discussion forum was produced in-house in 2000 and is currently being updated. The future solution will be sourced externally and will be produced and hosted for between \$5,000 - \$10,000.

#### Ongoing forum management

All forums established need to link in with Council initiated policy development or project planning. Topics will influence a resultant Council action, community input is valued and Council want to utilise the information given. The discussion forums and survey tools all rely on work units from across Council for their content. In establishing the forums we also seek to provide supporting background information to provide a level of context or to provide a point from which to respond.

Role	Duties	Staff time
Project officer	Topic setting, moderation and monitoring of discussions, liaising with work unit and web content producer, promoting discussion forum to community reference group email list, summarising discussion for website and work unit.	Approx 4 hours to liaise with work unit and get discussion content and supporting material written and up. 5 - 10 mins a day to monitor and moderate discussion comments. 2-3 hours to summarise forum content for and arrange posting on web.

Work unit contact	Supply topic information, monitoring of discussion, provide responses to participants as required via Project Officer.	Approx 8 hours to collect information required and scope discussion content. 1 hr per week to respond to comments. 1 hr to provide information on how feedback will be used.
Website content producer	Create supporting pages for discussion topics, interpreting supplied information, setting up links, loading documents.	Approx 8 hours to set up new page using raw information, establishing links, displaying imagery. 30 mins - 1 hour to update contents and links off current consultations page. 30 mins to update content with results.

## 11. e-Forums: Step by step guide

1. Set out your aims for e-consultation and decide which tool to use
2. Get support from the Council staff
3. Get Councillors' support
4. Get community support
5. Develop topics
6. Develop participation guidelines, a discussion charter and moderation rules
7. Set up the e-forum
8. Market your e-forum
9. Launch
10. Run the first discussion
11. Provide e-forum input to Council
12. Act on the outcomes of the e-forum
13. Provide feedback to e-forum members
14. Evaluate the e-forum
15. Enhance the e-forum using other online tools

### Step 1. Setting your aims for e-consultation

Before you decide the best combination of e-tools you want to use, ask yourself:

#### ***What is my aim for my e-consultation?***

For example, your aims might be:

- General citizen engagement
- Input on specific policy issues
- Consultation
- Feedback
- Direct democracy (eg polls)
- Community education
- Combination of the above

Your aim will determine which e-consultation tools you use. Forums, polls and surveys each achieve different aims and are best used in combination. This way you are giving people an option on how they get involved and you can use a poll to attract users to the forum or vice versa.

You might decide for one issue to just run a forum, whereas for another where you want more specific feedback you might use polls in addition to a forum.

Brisbane CC uses a combination of tools for each of its consultations. See Section 9.

In contrast Darebin does not use polls at all at present preferring to have general discussion about issues. See Section 8.

The below table is a rough guide matching your aims with e-consultation tools. You may want to consult with other areas of Council in determining your aims for the e-forum.

<b>Aim</b>	<b>e-Tools to use</b>	<b>Example</b>
I want to increase a general sense of citizen participation and community	<p>1. e-Forum which covers general issues of interest in the Council area not necessarily linked to a current policy in development.</p> <p>For example: local parks; bicycle lanes; youth services; community harmony</p> <p>2. Citizen-run or social e-forums which permit individuals to start up their own communities eg a book club, gardening group, local knitting society online</p>	<p>Darebin eForum discussion of community harmony at <a href="http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/">http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/</a></p> <p>Examples: ABC Communities; My connected community; Community Builders NSW; Fujisawa Japan (government-hosted open topic forum offers one column for government led topics and one column for citizen led discussions) See Appendix 3 for links.</p>
I want to engage in specific consultation on a policy that is being developed	<p>e-Forum</p> <p>Online polls and surveys</p>	<p>Brisbane CC <a href="http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76">http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76</a> Darebin: arts and leisure strategy <a href="http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/">http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/</a></p> <p>Brisbane CC <a href="http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76">http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76</a></p>
I want feedback from citizens on a policy but no actual discussion amongst them	<p>Online feedback form or forum / have your say form</p> <p>Online polls and surveys</p>	<p>La Trobe City Council Feedback Forum <a href="http://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/Feedback/Default.aspx?ForumTopicID=3">http://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/Feedback/Default.aspx?ForumTopicID=3</a></p>

## **Step 2: Get Council staff support**

You need Council staff support in order to run an e-forum. You are going to want other Departments to come up with topics and co-moderate discussions on the Forum, and spread the word about the Forum to their networks.

Ideas on how to engage other staff are listed below.

### **i. Inform your fellow Council workers about the new e-forum**

Work out what your e-forum might be able to offer the other staff or Councillors in their work and then take the idea to them via:

- face-to-face meetings
- Intranet article on "What is an e-forum"
- Article in staff newsletter
- presentations at various departments' team meetings
- memo to section heads
- Put on a community engagement showcase promote your own tool along with getting others to promote what they are doing

In your information and presentations to Council areas, you can use the Frequently Asked Questions factsheet at Appendix 2 to help staff understand the rationale for e-forums.

### **ii. Link the e-forum to Council's core business**

You can also present your e-forum as part of Council's core business as:

1. A consultation tool. All policy makers have to engage in consultation on their policies.
2. Part of councils' strategic direction in increasing community engagement and participation. In Darebin the e-forum was presented as means of actioning the Council's overall strategic plan which had as one of its goals greater community engagement and participation, making the e-forum an understandable part of core business.

### **iii. Get a champion amongst the Councillors or senior executive of the Council**

It helps any project to have a champion amongst Councillors or senior executive, or an advocate in the community to push the e-forum.

In Darebin the policy area which got the e-forum off the ground secured the support of a member of senior executive to push the Forum. The senior executive was educated by the policy area in the benefits and uses of the e-forum and its links into Darebin's overall strategic direction and hence core business. He then championed the forum with other Council departments and chairs the internal reference group for the Darebin eForum, lending the project weight and momentum.

#### **iv. Piggy-back on to existing Council consultations**

Find out which areas of Council are about to engage in public consultation and offer them the use of the e-forum.

#### **v. Set up an internal reference group for the establishment of the e-forum**

Example: Darebin eForum project reference group

Darebin established an internal project reference group for its e-forum when it was in its pilot phase. The internal reference group comprises a representative from each Council department and is chaired by a member of the senior executive. This group meets from time to time to set the topics for the forum and discuss forum issues. It has been a successful strategy in engaging Council staff.

### **Step 3. Engage Councillors**

A champion amongst the Councillors would be of benefit to the forum project. You could present a similar case as above to the Councillors, presenting the benefits for Councillors as follows:

- forum can be used to get community input on issues of Councillor interest
- forum can be used for ward-based surveys and dialogue
- Darebin has had the experience that the e-forum has attracted more members than any public ward meeting

Note: Councillors should be participants, not controllers of the forum. It has been found in experiences elsewhere of online consultations that the Council staff are best placed to run a discussion otherwise participants grow sceptical and believe the forum to be a political vehicle rather than a real means for public participation in policy making. Councillors could therefore be amongst forum members commenting on topics, they could contribute to topic development and could be quoted in topic introductions or invited to participate as special expert guests, but they should never moderate the discussion or be seen to be too closely controlling a discussion.

### **Step 4: Get community support**

You should also consider engaging community in the actual set up and design of your forum. They could be members of an external project reference group and be consulted on the first topics that should be discussed on the forum. This will help to ensure you have a ready group of forum members when your forum goes live.

### **Step 5: Develop topics**

Next you need to develop a list of initial topics. You can run topics one at a time or run several discussions at once, depending on your time and resources.

Topics should ultimately be related to a current Council policy process to ensure the relevance to Council work. However to begin with you might want to select topics of interest to your community that have been flagged by citizens, even if they are not related to any specific piece of Council work. This is a good way of getting people on to the forum so that when you begin to discuss topics related to current Council policy issues, you have a ready membership group that is already familiar and willing to participate. For example, if “dogs in local parks” is a topic that keeps coming up amongst community, you could start discussions with this and then move to something Council is working on more immediately, such as urban renewal policy or a new arts and leisure strategy.

The topics that you then move to should have the input from all areas of Council to ensure the forum’s relevance across Council. You could:

- set up a rotating timetable amongst Departments so each Department sets a topic every six months
- Provide a topic suggestion form for citizens and Council staff on the Intranet and Internet
- Link the topics on the forum to significant dates on the calendar such as World Environment Day, White Ribbon Day, Harmony Day, Reconciliation Week, local festivals
- Link your topics calendar with the topics calendar of other Councils. For example, several councils in the same area could decide to run the same e-forum topic at the same time, increasing a sense of momentum
- Do an initial survey of citizens for topics, as a way to get them involved and do some name recognition marketing of the forum

<b>Step 6: Develop participation guidelines, a discussion charter and moderation rules</b>
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See Section 13 on e-forum rules for details.

**Participation guidelines:**

You need a basic set of rules for forum members to adhere to. These are called “participation guidelines” and includes things like “be respectful of other people’s opinions” and “do not post offensive or libellous comments.”

Darebin’s participation guidelines are at Appendix 1.

Brisbane CC guidelines can be seen at [http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE:410773833:pc=PC\\_1621](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE:410773833:pc=PC_1621)

**Discussion charter:**

A discussion charter will set the parameters and timeframe for the topic and what will be the outcome of the discussion.

**Moderation rules:**

You should also decide on a few basic rules for moderators. For example, moderators:

- can refuse permission to comments that are offensive
- are to contribute to the discussion daily
- are to summarise the discussion at the end of every two days and encourage further comments, with a final summary at the end of the discussion period
- are to keep discussion moving
- are to use their expert knowledge to contribute and can draw on personal experience to support comments, but should bear in mind that they are commenting on the forum in the capacity of a Council officer.

See Section 12 on Moderator guidelines.

### **Step 7: Set up the e-forum**

Once you have a degree of internal and external support and a set of initial topics, you are ready to set up your forum. You should consider doing a pilot which you can use to test to ensure the general usability of the site.

Work with your IT department to choose a technical option which best suits your needs. Some basic requirements you should ask for in your forum are listed below.

***Things the site administrator (ie you or whoever is managing the forum) should be able to do:***

- moderate posts (this means that you can set the forum so that you have to approve a post before it goes on the site)
- edit and delete posts and threads
- confirm registrations
- archive discussion threads
- link to other webpages from within a post
- limit the word count of a post
- limit the user permissions of forum members (eg not permit users to upload images but administrator have permission to do so him/herself)
- check web statistics on site traffic
- send group emails to forum members

***Additional requirements you may wish to include are:***

- have a listserv capability so that people can email their posts and the posts go directly up on the forum (GroupServer permits this)
- allow for RSS feed
- ability to upload image files within a post
- ability to upload video content
- conduct polls and surveys
- collect further contact information on the users in the registration form in addition to email address - eg you might want to know the age, permanent suburb address, whether they live in the municipality or own a holiday home there. This requires modifiability of the registration form
- add announcements to the forum

When you choose your forum software you have a choice between proprietary and open source software. *e-democracy.org* uses open source software GroupServer and recommends this for e-democracy initiatives. However it does require technical expertise to get up and running and to maintain.

There are a number of other free, easy to use open source forum applications available for download from the Internet – see for example <http://onlinegroups.net/>. The advantage of GroupServer over these is that it has the capability for people to email their posts and the posts be directly uploaded on the forum website. However this advantage might be outweighed by the technical expertise required to run GroupServer.

Software type	Pros	Cons
Open source software	Available for free Large online open source community of support Adheres to principles of community sharing	Not supported by a specific provider. However you might be able to pay for its integration with your Council's existing content management system and you could probably find a web company that you would have to pay for on-call technical support.
Proprietary software	Can pay for support Can pay for integration with existing web content management system in use by Council	You have to pay.

### **Step 8: Market your e-forum**

Marketing your forum is a critical step to ensuring it gets used and is therefore useful to Council.

The following three points were drawn from Canadian Online Consultation Centre for Expertise <http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/>

#### ***Reach out regularly***

Online consultation activities require extensive promotion and ongoing support to reach and engage participants. Use email alerts, indices with relevant personal information and regular updates. You can promote the e-forum by website cross-linking, print ads, print newsletters and conferences.

#### ***Encourage online participation in advance of going live***

Client participation should be prepared in advance so you have at least a minimum of about 10 people who are more or less guaranteed to get discussion going. You might find that you need to get on the phone first to get participants online. Do not assume people will go online just because a discussion area has been created.

### ***Maintain a contacts database***

Your database of forum members must be in order. A good database is essential to enabling you to keep members interested and in touch.

Remember to use your existing online and off-line reach and marketing resources:

- Talk to your marketing department early to develop a communications strategy for your forum.
- If your Council already run a regular slot in a local paper, piggy back on this or other marketing arrangements.
- If you already have a functioning email list, send a notice to all the members.
- Use existing community noticeboards to get the word out.

Ways to market your forum include:

Online mechanisms:

- "viral marketing" eg via email lists, newsletters on related networks, media releases
- email newsletters
- contact all the people on your Council's various email lists - remember to check privacy and shared used policies
- post about the forum in other similar online forums and blogs
- put up a notice on the Council website homepage and establish cross links within the website
- offer training in the forum at the local library
- link the forum to current library Internet training on offer to citizens
- contact peak bodies who would have an interest and ask them to put a link in their next member e-mailout

Off-line mechanisms:

- put out print advertisements eg flyers, bookmarks, ad in local newspaper
- offer incentives eg be entered into random movie ticket prize draws for joining the forum mailing list
- advertise to your particular contacts, eg call your key community groups, offer to register key people over the phone for them (that way they get an email with the forum membership details but don't have to go to the hassle of registering themselves)
- notify people who will have a specific interest in the topics coming up, eg make contact with environmental groups if the topic is to do with recycling
- ensure online opportunities are promoted at all traditional community engagement activities
- attend community events and promote opportunity, showcase what can be done

The most effective tool in marketing is going to be having an interesting and engaging forum topic. Make sure your first topics are going to be ones that people want to say something about.

Remember to also market the forum internally:

- story on the Intranet about the forum launch

- story in the internal newsletter
- flyers, bookmarks and emails to Council staff

Advertising should be ongoing ie you should advertise each new topic as it commences.

### **Step 9: Launch**

The next step is to launch the e-forum. Your checklist before launching is as follows:

#### **Checklist**

1. Do I have my first few topics ready? Are they interesting?
2. Do I have an introduction written for the first topic?
3. Have I uploaded the first topic and introduction on the website?
4. Do I have a co-moderator for the topic from somewhere else in Council who can act as the subject matter expert?
5. Do I and the co-moderator know how to use the forum?
6. Have I given the co-moderator enough training and information?
7. Do I think I have enough people to move the forum discussion along so it is not a flop in the first topic? Have I enlisted a few community leaders and marketed my forum widely enough? Have I got the support of my Council's marketing department and is the forum being well advertised?
8. Is my forum software working? Have I done a test run internally with a few people and made sure that the software doesn't crash after a few posts?
9. Do I have a charter for the discussion and participation rules on the forum website?
10. Have I enlisted the support of my IT department to help me with technical issues if they arise, or do I have some other arrangements in place to provide me with technical support (eg a volunteer site administrator)?

You could hold an official launch of the forum to attract interest on the first day of the first discussion. Put out a media release and invite your Mayor to launch it and other community leaders to attend. This might also attract the attention of your Mayor and Councillors and other Council staff.

Make sure your e-forum website has the first topic loaded up and ready to go so that the launch is of something tangible.

### **Step 10: Run the first discussion**

Now you have started it is time to put everything into action. You have to keep discussion moving: start new and interesting discussion threads on the topic every few days and send out email updates to keep members coming to see what new posts have been added. Make sure your co-moderator is actively posting too. Try to ensure that at least one of you posts daily.

### **Step 11: Provide e-forum input to Council**

The e-forum is essentially a public consultation and so you should do a consultation report based on its discussions and provide this to the relevant staff. Provide the summary of comments on a particular topic to the relevant Council area and a brief to Councillors, highlighting the views presented and any key messages to come out of the discussion.

### **Step 12: Act on the outcomes of the e-forum**

Take away the key messages from the forum and act on them.

As with any public consultation the aim of the e-forum discussion is to gather views that you use in Council deliberations and act on in some way. It is essential that you act on the input on the forum, whether this be by funnelling the views into the appropriate policy area and policy development or commencing a body of work on an issue which forum members have flagged as a concern and which Council is not currently prioritising.

### **Step 13: Provide feedback to e-forum members**

It is crucial that your e-forum members feel like their input matters. If they provide input into a discussion and then never hear from you again about what has happened with their input, they will assume that it has been filed and forgotten and will not participate in future consultations. This is a real risk of any public consultation, not just e-consultations.

At the end of a discussion, you should let the e-forum members know what has happened with their input. For example if you have just had a discussion on "urban renewal," you could let forum members know that their input has been provided to the relevant department and being considered in the development of a new urban renewal policy. If they want further information on developments, you might offer them an option to sign up to a specific e-newsletter, the Council's general e-newsletter, or you might provide quarterly updates yourself to Forum members on how various policy issues that have been discussed on the forum are progressing.

### **Step 14: Evaluate the e-forum**

As with any project you will want to evaluate your forum after you have run its pilot stage or at another significant milestone, eg after six or twelve months. Darebin evaluated the forum pilot after four months and decided on the basis of the evaluation to continue running the forum and evaluate the forum after the first year. The one year evaluation uses four main methods:

1. Face-to-face interviews conducted with Council officers responsible for developing, maintaining and moderating the site about the challenges and benefits to Council and users.
2. Online surveys with users asking them to provide feedback on: their demographic backgrounds; motivations for using the eForum; the content of the forum; and usability of the site.
3. A content evaluation of posts to the site, including an analysis of the types of discussion and feedback provided directly within the forum. Analysis also looks

at the degree to which users are directing their discussion at Council officers, Council members and/or each other.

4. The automated generation of site statistics using AWStats, which is a free tool that generates web, streaming, ftp or mail server statistics.

Lessons learned, obstacles identified in evaluation:

- The main challenge in evaluating the forum is the collection of detailed information about users. The eForum currently requires its users to register using only a valid email address. This was a conscious decision by Darebin Council to avoid discouraging users who may be "time-poor" and who do not have time to provide a user-profile, or who are concerned about privacy issues and the potential abuse of personal information. Consequently, obtaining more detailed feedback from users relies on voluntary feedback which is difficult to obtain.
- Experience from the pilot evaluation demonstrated that inviting users to a face-to-face focus group or interviews is difficult, even when compensation or some form of incentive (such as vouchers) is offered.
- AWStats is an effective tool for evaluating site usage and offers relatively easy access to data in raw, percentage and graphical formats. The data can be summarised in hourly, daily, weekly and monthly averages. The software is also freely available.
- A summary of the evaluation will be made available in March / April 2007.

### **Step 15: Enhance the e-forum using other online tools**

Other tools which can be used in conjunction with the e-forum to market the e-forum and engage your citizens online include:

- E-newsletters/email subscription lists
- Information on your general Council websites
- Video content. This is a good way to engage and cover other forms of literacy
- Podcasts
- Mobile phone downloads of podcasts
- Email or mobile phone database for polls and surveys
- Forums for social and community use which can be community led, for example a local area online book club, gardening group, local restaurant reviews. These are ways to bring people to your e-forum website
- Invite experts to participate in a confined real-time discussion on your forum, and/or invite them to do a 2 minute interview which can be downloaded from the forum website
- Online articles in your newsletter and other online journals or websites (eg Online Opinion, Australian Forums, New Matilda) that link to your forum website
- Web-casting of Council meetings
- Mobile phone messages and linking with e-forum topics: reminders, free mobile phone downloads

## 12. e-Forums: Moderator guidelines

A simple set of guidelines for your moderators is necessary to assist them in their tasks. A few pointers on the following should be provided:

- How to moderate
- How to guide discussion
- How to handle offensive comments
- How to balance personal opinions with being a public servant

You could provide your moderators with the information below as a general guide to moderation. Also see Gilly Salmon's work on moderation in e-learning:

<http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/Articles/salmonmodel/index.htm>

### 12.1 How to moderate:

The basic steps in moderation are similar to the steps in facilitating a meeting. A good moderator will:

- start the discussion with an interesting and stimulating issue written up well and succinctly
- keep discussion on track by re-directing people's posts back on to topic
- keep discussion moving by regularly posting themselves and having topic related questions ready to post if discussion flags
- involve members who are not participating much by emailing them directly or targeting a question at their general interests
- regularly summarise discussion and post summaries with a follow-up question to move discussion further
- at the end of a discussion period, thank members and provide a final summary
- provide discussion members with feedback on what has happened to their comments (eg they were fed into policy development and the resultant policy is...)

#### Introduce the topic

The moderator will begin each new discussion with a short introductory paragraph or two outlining the issue and highlighting the key questions for discussion.

## Example: Darebin eForum "4 key environment issues" discussion group

Darebin eForum: email - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by City of Darebin

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help Links »

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Posted **05 Jun 2006 09:09** by [Kate Myers](#)

Darebin prides itself on its focus and success in the area of sustainable transport. Darebin has a Cycling Strategy, a Green Travel Plan, many targeted programs to reduce car use, a permanent Sustainable Transport Officer and Going Places, Darebins Travel Reward Scheme that rewards residents for leaving their cars at home more often.

What are your experiences of sustainable transport programs initiated by the City of Darebin?

More information:

Going Places  
[www.goingplaces.darebin.vic.gov.au](http://www.goingplaces.darebin.vic.gov.au)

Cycling Strategy  
[http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/page/Page.asp?Page\\_Id=2708&h=0](http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/page/Page.asp?Page_Id=2708&h=0)

Green Travel Plan  
[http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/page/page.asp?Page\\_Id=1809&h=0](http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/page/page.asp?Page_Id=1809&h=0)

Sustainable transport programs  
[http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/page/page.asp?Page\\_Id=1810&h=0](http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/page/page.asp?Page_Id=1810&h=0)

[top](#)

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Posted **06 Jun 2006 16:44** by [Neil Fahey](#)

Going Places looks like a fantastic program! Both for raising awareness and changing people's habits. I've just joined up (hopefully only once - I got two welcome messages) and filling out those forms makes me realise how disgraceful my travelling habits are! It is mainly due to work though I suppose... Anyway, I'll be trying to replace my car trips to the servo for munchies/milk and to the trainstation to pick up my partner, with walking or riding. That might be all I can change during the week but hopefully the weekends will be easier!

The thing you've got going on with council employees getting to work sustainably looks fantastic as well. My partner works at EPA and they've got similar stuff going on there but it doesn't sound as comprehensive! Got any

This is an introduction to a discussion thread on "sustainable transport programs" within the "4 key environment issues" discussion group. Note it is short, to the point, asks a question to get discussion moving and provides html links for further information.

### Keep discussion on track

The moderators of a forum should be firm but not too prohibitive. If you think someone is going off topic, it is important to be respectful of their comment but bring the discussion back on track by asking a question back on topic.

#### EXAMPLE:

**Discussion thread:** What are people's views of the use of bicycle lanes and other bicycle support programs?

**Comment:** I think that climate change is really overstated. The academics don't speak clearly and we don't really know for sure if what they say is true.

**Moderator:** Thanks for that comment. The topic of climate change is probably out of the scope of this discussion but perhaps you would like to discuss it in our off-topic forum or submit it as a future topic via our topic suggestion form.

Back to bicycle support programs, I saw that there were some interesting earlier comments about the possibility of limiting the hours of usage of bike lanes on busy roads. Other communities in Canada which have done this indicate that this can be prohibitive to bike usage at all, defeating the purpose somewhat. Other ideas are making protective fluoro gear compulsory, driver training, and a no-liability policy for bike riders in case of traffic accidents. What are your views?

In the above example the moderator has offered the forum member alternative forums for their comment and has restarted discussion on topic. If you do not have an off-topic forum or some other appropriate forum for the off-topic comment, simply thank the person for their comment and bring the discussion back on track.

The moderator is also the gatekeeper, checking comments either before they go on the site or once they are already up (Darebin checks posts before they get published, whereas Brisbane lets posts go up without being checked and checks comments once they are already up in case there are comments that should be taken down). There is no hard and fast rule about what comments not to permit on to a Forum, but anything rude, offensive or potentially libellous should be eliminated. Anything off-topic should be included but a moderator comment could follow immediately afterwards, bringing things back on track.

### **Consider involving citizens in topic creation**

You might want to allow your citizens to create discussion threads and start topics themselves. However it might be best in the first instance to start up just Council starting topics and go from there until you are really used to the Forum concept and how it works.

Instead of allowing citizens to start topics, you could:

- have an additional forum or topic area where citizens can start their own discussion threads, such as that used in Japan (Richards: 2002).
- Have an "off-topic forum" for topics that are not on the topic being discussed, providing a kind of overflow area for general discussion or issues of interest to Forum members.
- Have an online topic suggestion form where citizens can suggest topics for the Forum.
- Conduct research into what are hot topics
- Provide opportunity for participants to identify potential new topic areas as part of their e-forum evaluation

### **Develop participation rules and purpose of discussion**

Key Forum elements to support good moderation are:

- have Forum participation rules in place. Members are bound by the rules as soon as they participate.
- have a charter for each discussion. This sets out the aims of the discussion, giving members a sense of purpose.
- Define the community's purpose (using a mission statement, a strong site personality)

See Section 13 on forum rules.

### **Develop personal connections**

You may wish to use less formal language and a more conversational tone to draw out participants' experience and show that you have a personality. To balance this with being a Council representative, it might be best to have an elected official or a third party act as moderator on sensitive policy issues. Encouraging participants to introduce

themselves and making sure that everyone uses their actual names on the forum is a way to help connections being made.

### **Balance “personal connections” with representing your Council**

As a public servant you are representing your local council when participating on the forum. You can balance this with contributing your personal opinions as you would in any face-to-face consultation or meeting. If you are the co-moderator who is the subject matter expert on a topic and you want to contribute something from your personal experience to the discussion, you can do so as long as you are aware that to do this has the advantage of being seen to be “human” by the other participants, but that you should also be aware that you are still representing the Council on the forum and therefore should make it clear when a post by you is personal.

It may be easier in the first instance to remain relatively neutral until you are used to the online consultation environment and moderating discussions in that arena. It will also be helpful if you have an independent third party person in your subject matter area who you can call on to moderate sensitive issues and you can always deal with an especially tricky issue off-line, eg by emailing or calling a forum member if they have raised something which can't be discussed in an open forum, just as you might set up a separate face-to-face meeting with a community stakeholder or might take them aside to discuss a sensitive matter at a public meeting.

#### ***Example of balancing personal experience with Council representation: Darebin eForum***

An example of where a co-moderator used personal experience in a discussion and where it was subsequently well received and stimulated discussion was on the Darebin eForum in discussion of green transport. The moderator contributed her personal experience of riding her bike from Lilydale to Darebin for work. This gave her a greater level of credibility amongst the forum participants and stimulated discussion dramatically. By making a personal connection which was still in line with the Darebin local council's position on green transport, the subject matter co-moderator sparked a far more enthusiastic discussion.

See the below excerpt from Darebin eForum:

Posted **09 Jun 2006 09:26** by [Kate Myers](#) [NB: Kate was the subject matter co-moderator in the environment discussion as she works in the Environment Department of Darebin City Council)

The cross town trip is certainly a difficult one Justin and Paul, but not impossible. I moved to Lilydale seven months ago and work in Preston and my commute is up to four hours each day (bus, train, train or bus, train, carpool or cycle, train, cycle).

Having said this, on the days I cycle I'm incorporating my daily dose of exercise into the commute and don't have to have a run when I get home. On the days I'm on the train I get through some wonderful Darebin Library books and on the day I carpool I get to catch up with another Council employee who has a completely different role to me and we share news, stories and of course workplace gossip!!

Being Council's Sustainable Transport Officer my commute gives me great ammunition for those staff and community members who balk at a 20-30 minute

walk to work, a 15 minute cycle or having to change trains etc. The bottom line is, if you are want to take an alternative you can and if you want to reduce your footprint you can.

While I don't believe the state governments SmartBus orbital bus routes that will cut across the city

(<http://www.doi.vic.gov.au/Doi/Internet/planningprojects.nsf/AllDocs/B00232DF10927FFACA256F31001EA1B3?OpenDocument#network>

- scroll down to see a map of the routes) will significantly assist my cross town trip they may assist shorter cross town trips.

Admittedly I do not have onerous family commitments and so this amount of time out of my day is not effecting anyone but myself.

Is there anyone else who walks the talk and goes to great lengths to get around without a car? And back to the topic ... what are the key transport issues in Darebin?

Kate Myers  
Sustainable Transport Officer  
City of Darebin  
[top](#)

Posted **09 Jun 2006 09:50** by [REDACTED]

WOW...i applaud you Kate, Lilydale to Preston is a very difficult trip for easy commuting in anything but a car.

Your comment on family commitments is very pertinent, i have a 2 year old son and a 6 month old daughter, so couldn't bear the thought of spending 4 hours of time commuting when i could be spending it with my children. The main reason i work from my company's East Melbourne office 2-3 days a week is because it means 30 minutes on the road rather than 1.5 hours. That extra hour is spent with my family and makes me feel very lucky that i have an employer flexible enough to allow me that freedom.

Despite having free parking at my city office, i have been making the effort to catch the tram recently (and have just started logging this with the "Going Places" program). While i feel good about it, i must say it's such a pain catching the 112 tram home from St Vincents plaza any time between 5 and 6:30 each night. It is packed to the rafters and on numerous occassions it's been so full i've not been able to get on. and instead have been left standing in the cold for 5-10 minutes until the next tram arrives.

I know there's no easy solution to this, but surely if the government and councils are serious about moving cars off the road, something needs to be done about overcrowding? I realise it comes down to money, i.e. investment in more "rolling stock" or whatever it's called by the transport gurus. Perhaps all peak hour 112 trams could be run as those double-length trams instead of the single ones? That way you don't have to increase the number of services. Also, why do we still get the older, less roomy A1/B2 class trams on the northern suburb lines, whereas the Box Hill line gets the much more comfortable and roomy C or D class trams?

## **Get everyone involved**

As in face-to-face meetings it is up to you to draw out the people who are not saying much on the forum. You may even privately request that your more outspoken participants wait 4-5 posts before they re-post so everyone has a go. Perhaps also note that perfect grammar is not required, so that people with lower literacy skills do not feel intimidated.

## **Be responsive**

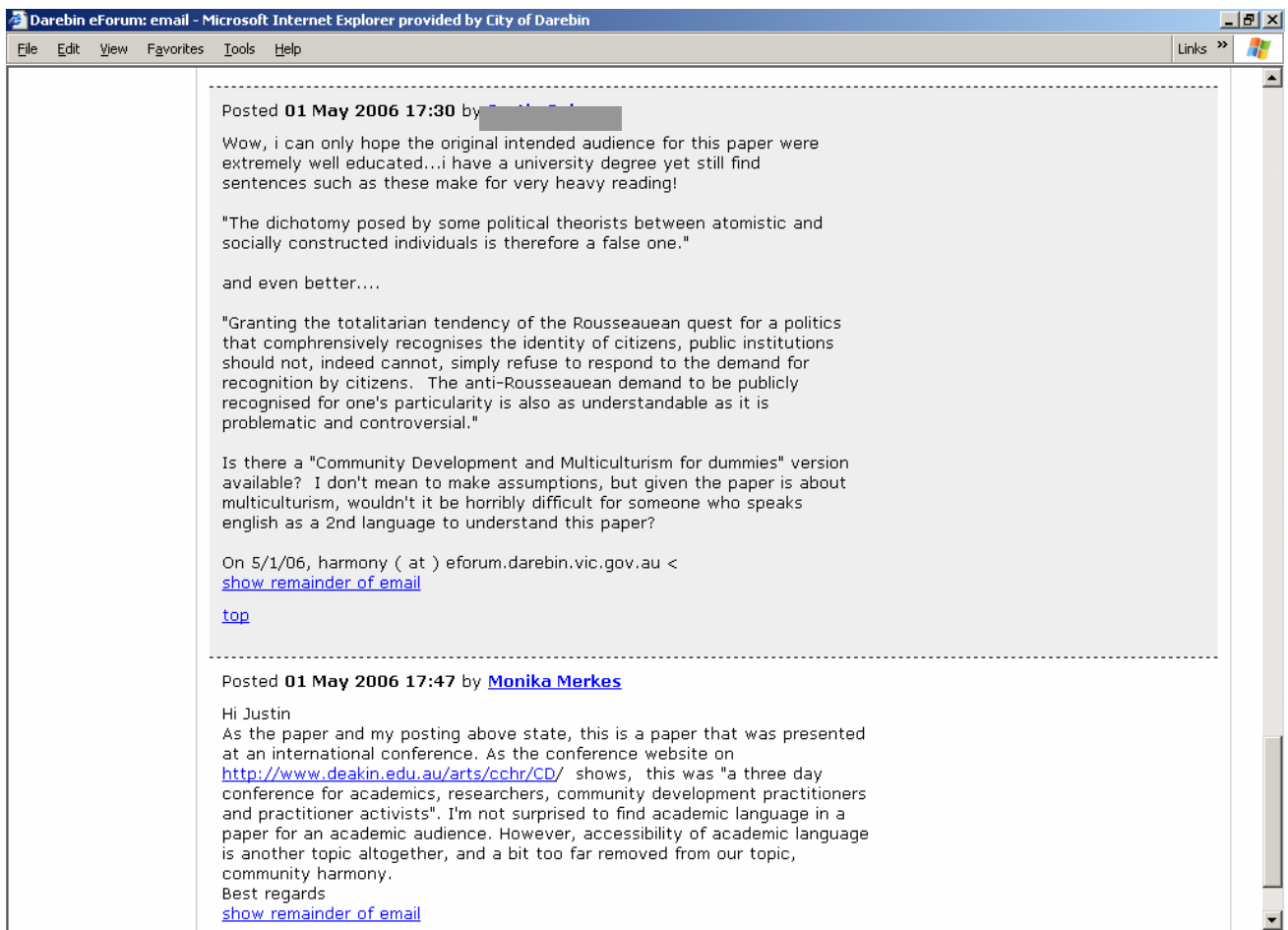
As a moderator you should “acknowledge and respond to participant input in a meaningful and timely manner.” Make sure that no comment goes unnoticed and each is addressed, even if the response is merely an acknowledgement.

Trusted facilitation is the basis for democratic mediation. Technology enables connections to be made between representatives and the represented, but technology on its own does not facilitate deliberative engagement. Facilitation is a cultural-democratic function. The facilitator's role is to provide discursive focus, stimulate groups into interacting constructively, build a sense of team spirit or community, referee, troubleshoot and keep time.

*Canada Office for Online Consultation Expertise*

## **An example of moderation on the Darebin eForum:**

In the below example, the forum moderator is Monika Merkes, who oversees all forum discussions on the Darebin eForum and works with a subject matter expert from one of the Council's departments who is a co-moderator on each discussion topic. In the example we see one of the forum participants going off track from the topic of the discussion. He begins to talk about the quality of the paper available rather than the issue of community harmony. Monika then politely but firmly begins him back on track.



## Troubleshoot problem posts

The moderator is responsible for making sure that posts comply with the participation rules eg not being offensive, being respectful of others etc.

A simple way to make sure that posts comply with your forum rules is to setup moderation so that every post is checked before it goes up on to the forum. However if you have a lot of forum traffic or you don't have the time to do this kind of moderating, you can permit posts to go straight up on to the forum and simply check them afterwards to remove or edit any posts that breach the rules. The latter course of moderation has the advantage of keeping the forum discussion flowing in the event that both you and the co-moderator are not at work one day but posts can still keep going up regardless Brisbane City Council is an example of this model of moderation and notes that there have been very few incidences over the last several years of operation in which posts had to be taken down.

It might be easier as a Council to set up your moderation so that every post is checked first, at least until you get the hang of moderating. That way you can avoid offensive posts going up on the site at all because you check all posts first. It might be more time consuming and slow discussion down but outweigh the potential negatives at the outset while you are still finding your feet as a moderator.

If you choose to allow posts to go straight up on the site and are going to troubleshoot them once they are already up, there are a number of basic troubleshooting techniques at [http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/best\\_practices-e.html](http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/best_practices-e.html)

For more information about moderation, go to

“Online Moderation Best Practices” Canada’s Centre for Online Consultation Expertise  
[http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/best\\_practices-e.html](http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/best_practices-e.html)  
[http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/publications/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Moderation-e.html](http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/publications/Fact_Sheet_Moderation-e.html)

Gilly Salmon’s model for e-learning and guidelines for moderation:  
<http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/Articles/salmonmodel/index.htm>

## 13. e-Forums: Rules

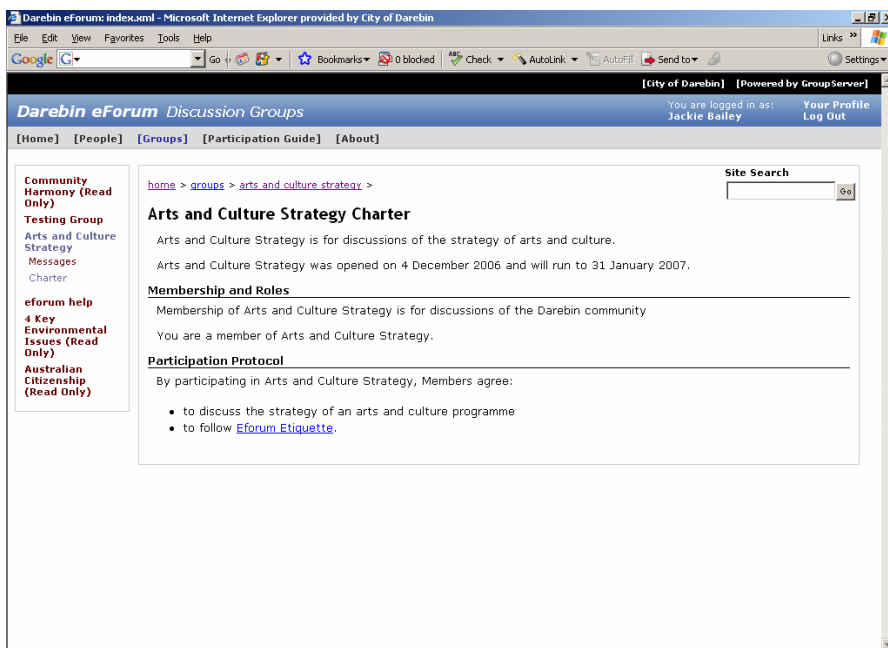
A forum requires parameters for each discussion in the form of a discussion charter and rules of conduct which cover all discussions on the forum. Sample rules are at Appendix 1 for your use.

### 13.1 Discussion Charter

Each discussion you start on your forum should have a simple charter, similar to a very basic terms of reference for a meeting or committee. It can be short – eg “this discussion will be about environment issues and will run from 1 January to 15 January 2007. Comments should be no longer than 200 words.”

The charter should also spell out what will happen with the comments received from participants, eg “comments will be used as feedback to the Council and summaries of discussion will be provided to Council and published on this website. Outcomes of policy issues which have been discussed on the Forum will be published in the Forum email newsletters/ group emails to Forum members.”

Example of a discussion charter: Darebin eForum “arts and leisure strategy” discussion charter



The charter is short and to the point, simply noting that you are bound to discuss the issues at hand, setting the timeframe for discussion and noting you are bound by the Forum Etiquette which are the rules of participation for the entire Forum.

### 13.2 Participation guidelines

Participation guidelines set out what is acceptable and not acceptable forum behaviour. Forum participants agree to the rules by participating on the forum.

Rules will include:

- statements about acceptable behaviour, for example:
  - o an expectation of politeness and respectfulness towards other people's opinions
  
- statements about unacceptable behaviour which will lead to banning from the forum, for example:
  - o prohibition of offensive language
  - o prohibition of advertising

Rules should also include information on the situations which will give rise to a moderator banning a member or editing a post, so as to provide some certainty for forum members that decisions will not be arbitrary but are following agreed guidelines. For example:

- the moderator has the right to exclude a member or delete a post
- posts will be deleted and members potentially banned if posts are offensive, defamatory or rude

Rules might also include textual parameters, for example:

- length of posts (eg maximum 200 words)
- admissibility of images, hyperlinks and attachments

## 14. e-Forums: Legal issues

As with all websites, your forum will require a disclaimer, privacy rules and copyright statement.

### 14.1 Disclaimer

As long as your site has the legal disclaimers on it your Council cannot be held liable if defamatory or offensive statements are posted on your site. Nevertheless if you are allowing statements to go straight up on to the site you should check them regularly to make sure there is nothing in breach of the rules up, and you should take down offensive posts swiftly to avoid offending other forum members or attracting negative publicity. You can also ban a forum member from the forum if the persistently post material in breach of the rules.

See Appendix 1 for a standard forum's disclaimer.

### 14.2 Privacy

You will be collecting information from people via their registration on the forum. You should comply with the usual privacy guidelines of your Council and the State and Federal governments. AGIMO has some information on its site about privacy rules <http://www.agimo.gov.au/practice/mws/privacy>.

See Appendix 1 for a standard forum's privacy statement.

### 14.3 Copyright

You will have to make a statement on your website noting that by posting on your forum, the forum participant is permitting you to reproduce their material within certain parameters.

See Appendix 1 for a standard forum's copyright statement.

# Appendix 1: Sample Forum Rules and Disclaimers

## Participation guidelines

[INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] eForum Participation Guide and Rules

Participants are responsible for reading and understanding these rules. By participating you agree to these rules.

Where did these rules come from? These participation rules are based on the rules developed by E-Democracy.Org

Use your Real Name

If it is determined with careful consideration by the Moderator that a participant's actual identity is in question, that person will be suspended until proof of identity is provided. If it appears that fraud, forgery, identity theft, or computer crime laws have been violated, [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] will notify the appropriate legal authorities. Experience in other online discussion forums has shown that the use of real names rather than pseudonyms is more likely to result in a polite and respectful discussion. However, a you may have a valid reason for not wanting to use your real name. In this case, an exception can be made and the Moderator can approve the use of an alias.

Keep to the Topic

Keep topics within the eForum purpose.

Be Civil

This is a public forum with real people. Please respect people with differing views. No insults, name calling or inflamed speech. Personal one-on-one arguments, disagreements or personality conflicts are not appropriate on a public discussion forum. Attempts at humour or sarcasm should be labelled ... ;-), :-), etc. No Attacks or Threats - This keeps the eForum safe. If content is illegal it will not be displayed. Personal attacks or public threats against the safety or security of participants are not allowed. If you receive private communication from another participant that causes you serious concern, you may communicate that to the Moderator, but no action should be taken by the Moderator to intervene in private disputes among individuals. If you feel you have privately received an illegal threat via email, you should contact the appropriate legal authorities. [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] is not responsible for any private behaviour.

Privacy

Private stays private. Don't forward private replies without permission of the original author.

No Rumours

Avoid false rumours. Rumours of a personal nature are not allowed. Asking for clarification of what you've heard in the community can be appropriate if issues-based. You alone are responsible for what you post.

### Right to Post and Reply

Sharing your knowledge and opinions with your fellow citizens is a democratic right. Only those who are registered eForum members may post. Any person or organisation that is publicly mentioned in an eForum post has a right to reply. In order to post a reply, the individual (or an individual representing the organisation) must become a registered member of the eForum.

### Items Not Allowed in Forums

No attachments. Send any files you wish to share to the Moderator, who will store them in the files section if they are relevant to the discussion. Commercial advertising and chain letters are prohibited from the eForum. Email based posts must be plain text without file attachments. Comments or complaints about forum management or complaints about member rule violations must not be posted to the main forum. Instead, direct such messages privately to the Moderator. Public event promotions and links to commercial, media, or non-profit online content related to the scope of the eForum are appropriate. Participant "signatures" providing links to the work or projects of an individual are acceptable, but the display of specific products for sale are not allowed. [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] may acknowledge eForum sponsors in messages or on the web site.

### Public Content and Use

You are sharing your content, but retain your copyright. By posting an original message, the message author agrees to allow [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] to distribute the message via email and the Internet and to include it in a publicly accessible online archive in perpetuity. While original message authors retain their personal copyright, they grant others the right to publicly quote portions of their message in any medium. Further, the full text of messages may be forwarded via email to others as long as the author's name and the eForum's name and web address are cited or linked. With copyrighted material like newspaper articles, you may post quotations from articles or web sites with the source URL. "Fair use" of excerpts (not the full text) is encouraged.

### Warnings and Suspension

[INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] eForum is moderated by Council officers. Moderators reserve the right not to publish postings that are deemed offensive, illegal or otherwise unsuitable. Should a posting to [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] eForum be deemed objectionable, the moderator will contact the author, explain the reasons and encourage the participant to revise the posting so that it is acceptable. You may lose your right to participate based on your behaviour in the eForum. You may also regain your rights. You may receive informal or official warnings from the Moderator if your postings violate the eForum rules. After two official warnings, you will be suspended from the eForum for the duration of the current topic discussion. You can register again for any of the following topics of discussion. Technical maintenance, full e-mail inboxes, or excessive bounced messages may cause a member to be

temporarily or technically removed from the eForum or result in a delayed distribution of their posts. In these cases, the member may rejoin the forum at any time.

#### Moderator Responsibilities

Moderators shall behave in a manner that models good participation skills to other participants. The Moderator accepts, rejects or holds messages for posting. The moderator may propose message changes by email to a registered member to conform to the participation guide and rules. The Moderator will respect your privacy. Any personal information given to [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] for your subscription to [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] eForum will be used only for the purpose for which it was intended. Should these rules be amended, the Moderator will announce the changes in the eForum.

#### eForum Sponsor and Publisher

[INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] as the sponsor and publisher of [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] eForum is legally liable for its content. To minimise the possibility of legal litigation, Moderators screen postings prior to publication. Postings are screened to ensure that the participation rules are respected. Postings are not screened to prohibit different views from those of Council.

Please provide feedback to the Moderator [LINK TO MODERATOR'S EMAIL ADDRESS].

## **Privacy Statement**

[LINK TO YOUR COUNCIL'S GENERAL PRIVACY POLICY]

### **eForum Privacy Statement**

This statement outlines [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] 's policies in line with its commitment to ensuring the privacy of your information.

This privacy statement applies to the entire website. Specific provisions may apply, however, to a particular part of the site. These specific provisions will override any general privacy provisions and will be posted on the site as it is further developed.

### **Information Collected**

You can access this site anonymously without disclosing personal information.

Statistical information is collected each time you visit the site to tally the number of times you visit the site, the time and duration of your visit, your use of specific pages and the address of the last site you visited (if you linked into the [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] site from another website).

This information is only used to evaluate the effectiveness of the site and is not used to identify individual web users.

Email addresses and other contact details you may have provided to request information will not be added to a mailing list or disclosed to a third party without your consent unless we are required to do so by law.

### **Cookies**

As a registered user, you can choose to set a cookie to avoid logging in each time. A cookie is a block of data that is shared between a web server and a user's browser. As an anonymous visitor, a cookie is not required.

As the site contains links to other web sites, however, [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] cannot be held responsible for these sites privacy practices or content. [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] advises web users to check the privacy statements of linked sites.

### **Security of Your Personal Data**

The [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] aims to protect the quality and integrity of your personal information and uses appropriate security and technology to maintain information, prevent unauthorised access and ensure the correct use of information.

This site does not provide facilities, however, that guarantee the security of information over the internet.

### **Access to Information**

The Information Privacy Act 2000 (Vic) and the Health Records Act 2001 stipulate that you are entitled to verify personal information that is kept about you, know why such information is being collected, and request correction if you believe the information is incorrect.

Requests for access and/or correction of personal and health information, should be made to Council's Privacy Officer on ([INSERT PRIVACY OFFICER'S PHONE NUMBER HERE]). The [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] Privacy Officer has the right to redirect your enquiry to the relevant department or to ask for your request in writing.

**Further Information**

Any enquiries about this Privacy Statement, should be directed to Council's Privacy Officer on (INSERT PRIVACY OFFICER'S PHONE NUMBER HERE).

## Copyright

### **Original Material**

All original material, including but not exclusively, text, images, logos, icons, designs, audio, video and documents on this site is protected by the Copyright Act 1968, Victoria, Australia, and International copyright laws. The logo image on the "Home" page is the property of the [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE].

### **Posted Messages**

Copyright of messages posted to this forum remain with the person posting them. By posting an original message, the message author agrees to allow [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] to distribute the message via email and the Internet and to include it in a publicly accessible online archive in perpetuity. While original message authors retain their personal copyright, they grant others the right to publicly quote portions of their message in any medium. Further, the full text of messages may be forwarded via email to others as long as the author's name and the eForum's name and web address are cited or linked.

### **Content Reproduction**

Reproduction of material that appears on this website is permitted on the following conditions:

- The use is of a personal or non-commercial nature (e.g. private study or research)
- The copyright owner is acknowledged on the reproduced material
- The material is provided free of charge
- The material is not modified to result in inaccurate or misleading information and
- The material is not depicted in a derogatory manner.

### **Requests for Reproduction**

Should you need to reproduce material that appears on this website for any other purpose, you must contact the [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] for expressed written permission. Requests for reproduction from this web site should be directed to the Moderator [INSERT LINK TO MODERATOR'S EMAIL HERE].

## Disclaimer

### **Discussion Web Site**

This is a discussion web site and opinions put forward in posted messages are those of author and formally independent of those of the [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE]

### **Site Information and Opinions**

Information published on this web site is subject to variation without notification, as may be required for technical or other reasons. The [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] does not accept any liability for any loss or damages resulting from information or opinions put forward on this web site.

### **Links to External Websites**

Any website address links provided from the this website are provided for convenience purposes only. The [INSERT COUNCIL'S NAME HERE] accepts no responsibility for the information or opinions contained within external websites.

## **Appendix 2: e-Forums: Frequently asked questions (for council staff)**

### ***a. What is an e-forum?***

An e-forum is a consultation tool which uses the Internet to connect community with each other and with Council, making for a more engaged community which feels listened to and more positive about their local Council.

An e-forum is not just providing information on a website to people, or an online form for feedback. It is also not a stand-alone consultation tool and would be used in conjunction with your existing tools, such as public meetings and surveys. However e-forums can and do attract more members of the community and deeper, more constructive dialogue over a period of time, allowing people to get into the crux of an issue in ways that meetings and more traditional forms of consultation do not always permit.

### ***b. What's in it for me and my area of Council?***

Use of the e-forum will help you engage your sector, get constructive feedback on policies and improve the level of trust in your community for Council staff and Councillors. It is an easy and cheap way of conducting part of your consultation phase of policy development and will provide real insights into the way people are thinking on an issue.

e-Forums are part of a wave of e-democracy. Australian governments are on board with the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) running an e-democracy newsgroup, WA and Qld having dedicated units to e-consultation and local councils setting up e-forums as part of their suite of consultation tools.

### ***c. What are the incentives for doing e-consultation?***

- e-Government awards
- helps you with your consultation work
- it's easy to do
- it's the latest thing and you have to get involved or you'll miss out
- it's got the support of senior Council executive
- there are internal staff incentives eg free movie pass random draws amongst e-consultation co-moderators

### ***d. How much time, work and money will it cost me?***

You will have to provide a co-moderator who will spend approximately half an hour a day for the period of your discussion topic running on the e-forum. You don't have to provide any money unless you want to provide, for example, giveaway movie tickets or other enticements to community to participate in the discussion.

### ***e. Have other councils used this before? What have been the benefits?***

Yes. Darebin City Council has an e-forum which has run topics from its environment, arts and leisure and multicultural areas of Council. They have done an evaluation and found that the e-forum has more members than regular ward public meetings and has more constructive dialogue than most public meetings allow time for. Forum participants enjoy their participation and feel more positive about their local Council's interest in their views.

Other benefits of e-consultation include engagement of people with disabilities who find it difficult to attend meetings, parents with young children, young people and time poor professionals who do not have time to make it or participate in other forms of consultation by Council. e-consultation can also be used to increase citizens' feeling of ownership and responsibility for ultimate policies.

Other councils also use e-consultation, including Brisbane CC, Manningham CC and La Trobe CC. Kingston and Surf Coast Shire are developing e-forums. Internationally e-forums are used regularly.

***f. How do I use it? Is it hard?***

The e-forum is not hard to use. It is like a combination of email and website, where you type in comments to a website instead of into your email program and you can read all the comments before yours.

## Appendix 3: References and useful links

Chen, Peter, Geiselhart, Karin, Gibson, Rachel , *Report No. 6: Electronic Democracy? The Impact of New Communications Technology on Australian Democracy*  
<http://arts.anu.edu.au/democraticaudit/focus.htm>

Coleman, Stephen and Goetze, John, *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*, <http://www.bowlingtogether.net/>, 2001.

OECD, "Citizens as partners. Information, consultation and public participation in policy-making, Paris, 2001. At <http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/4201131E.pdf>

Parliament of Victoria, Australia, Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, *Inquiry into Electronic Democracy, Final Report*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, May 2005.

Richard, Elisabeth, "Online Consultation: New Roles for Public Servants," *International Colloquium, Communication and Democracy: Technology and Citizen Engagement*, Sept 21 2004.

Salmon, Gilly, *E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, Taylor and Francis, London, 2004.

Trinitas, *Inquiry into Electronic Democracy, Final Report*, Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, State of Victoria, Melbourne, 2002.

Walsh, Lucas, "The use of technology to extend e-government and citizen participation in Australia". In *Encyclopaedia of Digital Government*, Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko & Matti Malkia (eds). Hershey: Idea Group, Inc. pp. 812-818, 2006.

### Useful Links

#### Australia

ABC Communities <http://www2b.abc.net.au/communities/>

Australian Government Information Management Office  
<http://www.agimo.gov.au/resources/cop/e-democracy>

Brisbane City Council Your Say Online  
[http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC\\_76](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_76)

Community Builders NSW <http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au>

Darebin City Council eForum <http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au/>

My Connected Community <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/>

Queensland Government e-Democracy Unit  
<http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/community/edemocracy.html>

Western Australia Citizenscape and ConsultWA <http://www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/>

## **International**

BBC Action Network <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork>

Democracies Online <http://dowire.org/>

e.The People <http://www.e-thepeople.org/>

e.democracy <http://www.e-democracy.org/>

International Centre of Excellence for Local e-Democracy <http://www.icele.org/>

Online Consultation Centre of Expertise  
<http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/onlineconsultation/text/index-e.html>

Online Groups <http://onlinegroups.net/>

Salmon's Model of E-Learning <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/Articles/salmonmodel/index.htm>

The Local Council e-consultation Guide is a practical, step-by-step instruction book for local councils on how to set up e-consultation mechanisms. It explains the benefits of e-consultation, how to set up an e-forum and using the outcomes of online discussions in policy development.

### **Italian**

La Guida per i Comuni sulla consultazione elettronica è un pratico manuale che spiega agli enti locali, passo dopo passo, come mettere a punto meccanismi di consultazione elettronica. Illustra i benefici delle consultazioni online, spiega come creare un e-forum ed utilizzare i risultati delle discussioni online per lo sviluppo delle politiche locali.

### **Greek**

Ο Οδηγός ε-διαβουλεύσεων (ηλεκτρονικών διαβουλεύσεων) του Δημοτικού Συμβουλίου είναι ένα πρακτικό, βήμα προς βήμα βιβλίο οδηγιών για δημοτικά συμβούλια σχετικά με το πώς να οργανώσουν τους μηχανισμούς των ε-διαβουλεύσεων. Εξηγεί τα οφέλη των ε-διαβουλεύσεων, πώς να οργανώσεις ένα ε-φόρουμ (ηλεκτρονικό συνέδριο) και πως να χρησιμοποιείς τα αποτελέσματα των ηλεκτρονικών συζητήσεων στη χάραξη πολιτικής.

### **Chinese**

地方市議會電子諮詢指南是協助地方市議會成立電子諮詢機制的實用、按步就班指南書。該書解釋電子諮詢的好處、如何設立電子論壇及如何就政策制訂使用線上討論的結果。

### **Arabic**

أن الدليل للتشاور الإلكتروني للمجالس المحلية هو كتيب إرشادات عملي مبسط للمجالس المحلية حول كيفية وضع آليات التشاور على الإنترنت. وهو يشرح فوائد التشاور الإلكتروني وكيفية تجهيز المنتديات على الإنترنت واستخدام نتائج المناقشات التي تتم على الإنترنت في تطوير سياسات المجلس.

### **Macedonian**

e-Consultation Guide на локалната општина е практична, чекор-по-чекор книга со упатства за локалните општини за тоа како да основаат механизми за е-консултации. Ги објаснува предностите на е-консултација, како да се основа е-форум и користење на резултатите од дискусиите на линија при развивањето на политиките.

### **Vietnamese**

Tập e-Consultation Hội Đồng Thành Phố Địa Phương là tập hướng dẫn từng bước thiết thực dành cho các hội đồng thành phố địa phương về cách thành lập các cơ chế e-Consultation. Tập hướng dẫn này trình bày những lợi ích của e-Consultation, cách thành lập e-forum và sử dụng những kết quả thu thập được từ những thảo luận qua mạng Internet về việc biên soạn chủ trương.