



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Finance and Administration**

# Australian Government Consultation Blog



**September 2007**

Discussion Paper



# Australian Government Consultation Blog



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Discussion Paper

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# Foreword



It is with great pleasure and anticipation that I invite you to provide feedback on this discussion paper regarding the possible functionality and operation of an Australian Government Consultation Blog.

Changes in the way people communicate online have provided opportunities to the government to improve the ways in which people can contribute to and influence government policy and how the government delivers services.

The possible future establishment of a consultation blog could make it easier for people to find, be informed about and to provide feedback on issues on which the government is consulting.

This discussion paper on the provision of the consultation blog sets out to balance the opportunities provided by the new online environment against the challenges and very real threats emerging to the identity and privacy of individuals.

As the success of this initiative requires participation by citizens, this paper asks for your opinion on some important issues that will affect the ways you can contribute to and participate in the consultation blog.

Feedback received from you will be used to shape the services provided through the Australian Government Consultation Blog and will be important in ensuring the success of this endeavour.

I look forward to your response.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gary Nairn'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

THE HON. GARY NAIRN MP  
Special Minister of the State  
September 2007



## one About this consultation



one

# About this consultation

## ***What is this consultation about?***

The Australian government is inviting community feedback on how the government can utilise new internet technologies, such as blogs, to better consult with people.

## ***Who is the consultation for?***

This consultation process will seek to identify whether citizens would like to provide feedback to government via a consultation website and what features they would like the website to include.

The aim of such a website would be to increase the number of citizens who participate in the government's policy and service delivery development process by providing their views on a range of topics and issues.

The government also welcomes the views of business and other organisations who may wish to respond.

## ***When can responses to this consultation be submitted?***

Responses can be submitted up to 1 December 2007.

Late responses may be considered if time permits.

## ***How can responses be submitted?***

Email responses to: [consultationblog@finance.gov.au](mailto:consultationblog@finance.gov.au)

Or

Mail to:

Australian Government Consultation Blog  
Australian Government Information Management Office  
Department of Finance and Administration  
John Gorton Building, King Edward Terrace  
PARKES ACT 2600 AUSTRALIA

## ***How will responses to this consultation be used?***

Unless responses are made in confidence they will be published online at [www.agimo.gov.au/consultationblog](http://www.agimo.gov.au/consultationblog). Respondents may request to remain anonymous.

Following consultation, the information gathered during the consultation will be used to identify the requirements for a new Australian Government consultation website.

## ***Who is managing this consultation?***

The Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), a business group of the Department of Finance and Administration is managing this consultation.

***When will the Government report on this consultation?***

AGIMO will publish a report of this consultation by early 2008 at [www.agimo.gov.au/consultationblog](http://www.agimo.gov.au/consultationblog).

***Who can I contact if I have questions?***

If you have any queries regarding this consultation please:

Visit [www.agimo.gov.au/consultationblog](http://www.agimo.gov.au/consultationblog).

Or contact: [consultationblog@finance.gov.au](mailto:consultationblog@finance.gov.au).

Or write to the postal address above.



# two Introduction



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# Introduction

The Australian government frequently publishes discussion and issues papers and invites interested people and organisations to respond. Many of these consultations are made available, online through government departmental websites. The online entry point to the Australian government, [australia.gov.au](http://australia.gov.au), provides links to consultation pages on Departmental websites.

AGIMO has published the *Principles for ICT-enabled Citizen Engagement*<sup>1</sup> which provide guidance to agencies engaging with citizens using information communications technology (ICT).

This Australian government consultation blog (consultation blog) discussion paper explores how all Australian government consultations could be made accessible and be promoted online via a single website.

A blog is a website which provides a list of text articles, videos or opinion pieces and allows people visiting the website to post their own comments on the articles.

Extending the blog concept to government consultations, the consultation blog is envisaged as a website that lists consultations and allows people to post responses, comments and feedback against each consultation. This paper also discusses a number of enhancements to the blog concept which have been proven in other internet contexts to encourage participation by people.

The final shape of the consultation blog will depend on feedback received to this discussion document, the cost to implement proposed features not available in existing software and the budget and resource allocations that may be made available for the project.

The implementation of the consultation blog will also consider the relevant government legislation and standards as summarised at [www.webpublishing.agimo.gov.au](http://www.webpublishing.agimo.gov.au) and includes consideration of, but not limited to, *The Privacy Act 1988* and *The Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

## The new internet environment

People are using the internet to communicate with each other in new and unprecedented ways. They can communicate instantly with their circle of friends or publicly with anyone willing to spend the time to listen. Individuals can produce and publish content relatively inexpensively, which may reach and influence thousands of others.

This evolution in the way people communicate is supported by an array of simple technologies and ideas, that when brought together create unanticipated benefits for people. Technology makes it easy to create content but also empowers others to say whether the content is interesting or not. This includes simple ideas like encouraging

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<sup>1</sup> The principle for ICT-enabled Citizen Engagement: see [http://www.agimo.gov.au/practice/delivery/checklists/citizen\\_engage\\_principles](http://www.agimo.gov.au/practice/delivery/checklists/citizen_engage_principles)

people to recommend content, post their own comments, tell their friends or to promote content on their own websites.

The interest that people demonstrate in content by either viewing it or searching for it can be used to inform other people about the potential worth of that content, for example by displaying a list of the most viewed content or the most popular search terms.

People may use their real identity when communicating online, but many do not. They may publish content and communicate using an alias that is well known, with an established persona, whilst keeping their real identity secret. They may also communicate completely anonymously, perhaps using a one off alias established temporarily for that purpose.

The rapid advance in communication has not been without its challenges. People may say things they would not normally say, be offensive to others, or commit crimes when they normally would not. They may also reveal personal information allowing their identity to be stolen, or allowing their behaviour and relationships to be tracked. The ramifications of many of these drawbacks are yet to be fully understood and the resulting impact on how people utilise these services is yet to be demonstrated.

The government is assessing the possible development of a consultation blog that takes advantage of new technologies to better engage with people. The initiative offers new ways for the government and people to engage with each other.

The challenge for government is to leverage the positive advances in the ways people communicate, whilst managing the associated challenges, to encourage broader participation in the policy and service delivery development process.



**three** Australian Government Consultation Blog



**three**

# Australian Government Consultation Blog

The consultation blog is envisaged as a website that lists consultations and allows people to post responses, comments and feedback against each consultation. All Australian Government consultations could be accessible and promoted through this single Australian Government Consultation Blog.

The blog would ensure that people are able to easily find, be informed about and contribute to government consultations. The ease of use and features of the blog would encourage people to seek out and participate in government consultations.

The blog could provide a mechanism for government to announce and publish consultations.

At the end of each consultation the government may publish a report, where appropriate, of the consultation including a summary of the responses received. Accessibility for people with disabilities would be a priority for the blog.

## Features of the Australian Government Consultation Blog

A number of possible features are proposed for the consultation blog.

The proposed features are discussed in the following groupings:

- providing information about a consultation;
- responding to a consultation;
- people telling others about the consultation;
- finding a consultation.

The proposed features for the consultation blog are shaped by the challenges discussed in the section, *Challenges for the Australian Government Consultation Blog*.

### ***Providing information about a consultation***

The blog would publish information describing and supporting each consultation. The information could be published as documents and as sound or video recordings.

Each consultation could feature an invitation to people to participate. The invitation could be made by a minister, the head of a government department or by a department. The invitation would be accessible to all users and could be made using text and other types of rich web media such as sound or video. It could be made easy for others to link to the consultation and embed the invitation on their websites. The government could also place the invitation to participate on other websites as relevant.

### ***Responding to a consultation***

People would be able to respond to a consultation either publicly or privately by posting comments and views to an online discussion forum.

The consultation blog would also support people responding to the consultation in other ways including by:

- completing an online survey;
- email; or
- post;

### **Discussion forum**

Each consultation could have an associated discussion forum where people could discuss and respond to the consultation.

People would not be required to register to post comments in the forum. However, people who do register could have access to more features of the forum than people who do not.

People who participate in the forum could be able to request additional information related to the consultation such as the consultation report or to be contacted if clarification of their views is needed. People who do not register could be invited to provide contact details at the time they submit their comments, so that they could also select these options.

Forum administrators could moderate the forum by either preventing or removing posts to the discussion forum if they contain inappropriate content. Draft moderation guidelines are included at Appendix A – Draft consultation blog moderation guidelines.

People who register and perhaps have established a reputation by previous participation in the forum, could post to some consultations without moderation by a forum administrator.

People who register could recommend a consultation to others. The total number of times a consultation is recommended or the most recommended consultations could be displayed to people using the blog to help them find consultations of potential interest to them.

People who register could recommend other people's posts to the forum, if they support the included points of view. The total number of times a post is recommended or the most recommended posts could be displayed to other people to help them see how interesting or representative of people's opinions a post may be.

People could notify the forum administrators of inappropriate posts to the discussion forum.

### **Other ways to respond to a consultation**

People could also be able to respond to a consultation via an online survey, by email or in writing and would be able to control whether their comments were made publicly available.

People who do not register to use the forum would be able to respond to consultations using these methods.

**Questions to consider**

Would you respond to a government online consultation of interest to you, if you were aware of it?

Would you read the views of people published in the public discussion forum?

Would you post your views in a public discussion associated with an online consultation?

What proposed features of the discussion forum do you like or dislike?

Would you participate in a notification system that allowed you to be informed when reports and policies developed as part of the consultation process were made available?

What other features for the discussion forum would you like to see?

***Expectations about responding to a government online consultation***

People participating in a government online consultation may have a range of expectations about what will happen with their comments and how their comments might be used by the government to influence or develop policies or ideas. The development of some government policies can take a considerable amount of time and additional rounds of consultations with various communities. The final reports and outcomes of a consultation may not be available for sometime.

**Questions to consider**

Would you expect to see other responses (submitted via email, post, or survey) published on the consultation blog website?

Would you expect to see other responses published in full in a consultation report?

If your response to an online consultation affected the policy outcome would you expect to be recognised?

What other expectations would you have in contributing to a government consultation online?

### ***People telling others***

People could ‘tell a friend’ about an interesting consultation, or comment posted to a consultation, by sending an email to their friend.

People could be able to easily embed information about consultations on their own websites. This may include information such as:

- the invitation to participate in the consultation;
- a list of the most recent consultations;
- a list of the most recommended consultations;
- a list of the most recommended posts to a consultation forum; and
- a list of the most recent posts to a consultation forum.

#### **Questions to consider**

Would you ‘tell a friend’ about consultations or comments posted to an online consultation forum of interest to you?

### ***Finding a consultation***

Each consultation could be classified, labelled or tagged according to the subject areas of the consultation. These labels could be used to assist people finding consultations of interest to them, (for example by searching for all consultations related to health).

People could add their own classification, labels or tags to consultations using descriptive words that are meaningful to them. These public labels could also be used to assist other people to find that consultation.

People could be able to find or discover consultations by browsing and/or searching for consultations in a variety of ways, including by:

- most recently published;
- most popular as determined by the amount of visits;
- most highly recommended based on the number of recommendations for the consultation;
- most public responses to the forum;
- subject label;
- public label; and
- publishing government department or agency.

The discovery service could be supported by RSS<sup>2</sup> document and email subscriptions which allow people to be notified of consultations in their areas of interest.

### **Questions to consider**

Would you add your own classification, labels or tags to online consultations using descriptive words that are meaningful to you?

## **Challenges for the Australian Government Consultation Blog**

### ***Who is posting and registering to use the consultation blog?***

Should registration be required to use the consultation blog? This is a complex question; registration potentially helps ensure that the views expressed in the forum are representative; however it is also likely to discourage usage of the consultation blog.

When reporting on a consultation it may be useful for the provider of the service managing the consultation to gauge how representative a particular view is. That is, if a similar view is posted a number of times, that the response is a representative view of a number of people and not just of a single person.

Similarly, the interactive features of the forum should support the expression of the community voice. For example, one person should not be able to recommend a single post a 1000 times, thus skewing the community voice in favour of their opinion.

Asking people to register to participate in the forum could increase the confidence in how representative a view is; however registration could also discourage participation in the forum.

A registration process might not stop people registering more than once, however it may discourage people from doing so.

Registration to participate in the forum could offer other advantages such as helping to self-moderate posts and encourage thoughtful comment.

To encourage the maximum participation in the blog, registration would not be required to post comments to the forum.

To ensure the interactive features of the forum reflect the community voice, registration could be required to use them.

The registration process could ask people to supply an email address, a password and optionally, an alias name, a name and contact details. An email would be sent to the email address to confirm that the person intended to register to use the blog.

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2 An RSS or 'Rich Site Summary' or 'Really Simple Syndication' document summarises frequently updated content such as blog entries for people who wish to read or subscribe to the RSS document.

If all posts were published anonymously it would protect peoples privacy, however, it could also discourage discussion in the forum as it could be difficult to follow the posts related to a discussion.

People could be able to choose to publish an alias name with their post. The alias name could be the person's real name or not. If an alias name was used it could offer some protection to a person's privacy whilst supporting conversations in the forum.

### **Questions to consider**

Would you register to participate in the consultation blog forum?

If you registered, would you provide your real contact information?

Should people be required to register to recommend consultations and posts to the consultation blog forum?

What content would you consider to be inappropriate if posted to the consultation blog forum?

Is the ability to discuss the consultation in the forum a feature you would use?

### ***Moderation of public postings***

Moderation is the process of removing or preventing inappropriate public posts to the forum.

Moderation in some form is likely to be necessary as some people may choose to post inappropriate content to the discussion forum. This can have the effect of discouraging others from participating in the forum and also expose the operators of the forum to legal liability.

The moderation of posts to the forum may attract accusations of censorship or bias. This concern may be lessened if moderation of posts were to be performed according to publicly available guidelines and the moderation process subject to periodic independent review. Draft moderation guidelines are included in Appendix A.

There are many ways in which the forum could be moderated, two options which may be used, depending on the nature of the consultation, are:

#### **Moderation of posts before they are published**

Consultation blog administrators could moderate all posts before they are published. This would ensure that people viewing the blog would not be subjected to inappropriate and offensive content.

However, this type of moderation would necessarily result in a delay between when a response is submitted and when it is published. This delay could interfere with the flow of discussion in the forum.

### **Moderation of some posts after they are published**

People who have registered to use the forum could post comments to some consultations without prior moderation. This could be further limited to people who have established a reputation on the forum by prior postings.

People viewing the posts to the forum could notify the blog administrators of inappropriate posts to the forum. Administrators could then remove that content after verifying that the posts did in fact contain inappropriate content.

Administrators could scan the forum and remove inappropriate posts as they become aware of them.

People who register, and who demonstrate their interest by their participation in the forum, could be invited to help moderate the forum.

Technology could be adopted that would scan posts for suspicious or inappropriate content before they are published, and would divert the suspicious posts to an administrator for moderation.

This option has the advantage that posts are published immediately; however people viewing the forum may be exposed to inappropriate content before it is removed by the forum administrators.

#### **Questions to consider**

Should posts to the consultation blog discussion forum be moderated before they are published?

Would you accept posts being automatically scanned for malicious or inappropriate content?

Is it important that posts to the discussion forum are published as quickly as possible?

Should people who register, and who demonstrate their interest by their participation in the forum, be invited to help moderate the forum?

Are the moderation guidelines at Appendix A suitable to use to moderate the forum?

Should other ways to moderate the forum be considered?

## **Privacy**

Information about a person, including their response to a consultation, would only be published with their consent. It could be assumed that people posting to the public forum wish their response to be made public, so this may be an 'opt out' option, the publishing of other information could be on an 'opt in' basis.

Others might choose to track how a person has responded to government online consultations. People could choose to control this risk by electing only to publish their response and to not publish their alias name.

The government, as part of each consultation, could ask people for permission to contact them with additional information related to the consultation. This could be the consultation report, additional consultation information or material that addresses issues raised by people responding to the consultation.

The consultation blog website will record your visit and log the following information for statistical purposes - your server's address; the name of the top-level domain from which you access the Internet (for example, .gov, .com, .au, .nz etc); the type of browser you use; the date and time you access the site; the pages you have accessed and the documents downloaded and the previous Internet address from which you linked directly to the site.

It will not identify users or their browsing activities, except where a law enforcement agency may inspect the service provider's logs.

Any implementation of the consultation blog will consider the Information Privacy Principles as set out in section 14 of *The Privacy Act 1988*, (see [www.privacy.gov.au/publications/ipps.html](http://www.privacy.gov.au/publications/ipps.html)). The Information Privacy Principles deal with all stages of the processing of personal information - setting out standards for the collection, use, disclosure, quality and security of personal information.

### **Questions to consider**

Would concerns about your privacy prevent you from using the consultation blog discussion forum?

What other privacy concerns regarding the consultation blog do you have?

## **Security**

The safe keeping of private information provided by people participating in the consultation blog would be necessary to ensure that people have sufficient trust to participate in the online consultation process.

There have been instances in other public forums where people have included malicious content in their postings that attempted to compromise the computers of people reading the posts. The technologies used to support the consultation blog should, as far as is possible, prevent malicious posts from being published. This may require that all posts are scanned for malicious content before they are published.

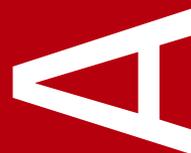
### **Questions to consider**

Would concerns about security prevent you from using the consultation blog discussion forum?

What other security concerns regarding the consultation blog do you have?

# Appendix A

## Draft consultation blog moderation guidelines



# Draft consultation blog moderation guidelines

Posts to the consultation blog may be moderated according to the Acceptable Use Policy.

Where a post does not comply with the Acceptable Use Policy it will be removed from the forum. If the person making the post has provided contact details, they could be contacted and informed of the reasons for the removal and invited to resubmit the post after editing so that it complies with the policy.

## Acceptable Use Policy

The intent of the Acceptable Use Policy is to create a positive environment where people are able to publicly contribute their views to the consultation blog forum, in the spirit of improving government policy, without fear of abuse or harassment or exposure to offensive or otherwise inappropriate content and protecting the operators of the consultation blog from legal liability.

When contributing your views to this consultation blog forum, please ensure that you:

- do protect your personal privacy and that of others by not including personal information of either yourself or of others in your posts to the forum, (such as names, email addresses, private addresses or phone numbers);
- do post material to the forum that is relevant to the issues currently being consulted on;
- do represent your own views and not impersonate or falsely represent any other person;
- do not be abusive, harass or threaten others;
- do not make defamatory or libellous comments;
- do not use insulting, provocative or hateful language;
- do not use obscene or offensive language;
- do not post material to the forum that infringes the intellectual property rights of others;
- do not post multiple versions of the same view to the forum;
- do not promote commercial interests in your posts to the forum; and
- do not include internet addresses or links to websites, or any email addresses, in your contribution.



