

.au Licensing Rules Review Public Consultation Listening Report

A summary of what ThinkPlace heard
through the Independent Panel consultation
process

April 2026





Image: Synergy Group Australia's Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan Artwork. Artist: Lynnice Church

Acknowledgement of country

ThinkPlace^x acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Australians and recognises their cultures, histories, diversity, and skilful custodianship of the environment that is central to telling the story of Australia's history and identity.

ThinkPlace^x operates on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people; the Bunurong Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation; the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation; and the Turrbal people.

We pay our respect to Elders past and present, and their continuing culture and contribution they make to the life of the cities of Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Conversation Summaries	9
• Domain Name Monetisation	
• Allocation Rules	
• Contested Names	
Recurring Themes	16
Diverging Views	19
Pulse Checks	22



Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The intent of the review

An external Policy Advisory Panel (the Panel) was appointed by the auDA Board to undertake a review of the .au Licensing Rules to ensure they remain contemporary, effective, and aligned with the needs of the Australian community.

The Panel published a 2025 Issues Paper which explained the key issues and sought feedback on these issues and other matters relating to the .au Licensing Rules.

The public consultation process

ThinkPlace^x facilitated a series of in person workshops and virtual town halls with the Panel to support a multi stakeholder approach that facilitates meaningful and diverse stakeholder contributions.

Consultation roundtables with stakeholders took place in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Canberra and online.

Key insights from participant feedback

Domain Name Monetisation

- Diverging views on monetisation as being either 'legitimate' or 'harmful'.
- Monetisation practices are viewed by many as harmful to the community, while concentrating benefit to a few, sophisticated actors.
- Risks of changing rules were identified that would need careful consideration
- Concerns about 'drop-catching' and fairness

Allocation Rules for com.au and net.au

- Current allocation rules seen as complex and misaligned with their intent in practice
- Support for maintaining and strengthening .com.au rules and for building a stronger value proposition for other domains such as net.au or .au direct

.au direct Contested Domain Names

- The current system for contested .au Direct domain names should be changed to deliver lower-burden processes and faster resolution, noting the risk that changing rules after an extended period of the current arrangement could create fairness issues and legal risk
- Fairness and equity concerns with gov.au registrants contesting .au direct names
- Suggestions for improved models of resolution alongside the question of whether it is fair to change the rules half way through

Introduction

Context

The auDA Policy Advisory Panel is undertaking a multi-stakeholder review of the .au Licensing Rules to ensure they remain relevant, trusted, and aligned to community expectations. As part of this review, auDA arranged a series of consultation roundtables conducted by ThinkPlace for the Panel with stakeholders, in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Canberra and online.

Participants included registrars, domain name investors, small business owners and representatives, registrars, government agencies, industry and academic experts, domain name holders and consumer stakeholders.

Discussions focused on three core topics:

- Domain name monetisation in .com.au and .net.au
- Allocation rules for .com.au and .net.au namespaces
- Contested .au direct domain names

Participants were provided with access to the review's [2025 Issues Paper](#) for optional pre-reading. During each consultation, a subject matter expert provided participants with context about each key issue, and participants were given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and provide feedback through a facilitated conversation.

This report synthesises the diverse views gathered across all sessions, highlighting recurring themes and perspectives and identifying areas of divergence.

The report is intended both for public release and for consideration by the Policy Advisory Panel when they develop their draft report.



Consultations in brief

6 sessions*,
including 4 in-person
and 2 online

114 total participants

Panel attendance
at all sessions

Panel attendance
at all sessions

CANBERRA

Date: 25th February 2026

Attendees included:

Commonwealth
government, academia,
technical, business and
consumer stakeholders

SYDNEY

Date: 19th March 2026

Attendees included:

Business, consumer,
industry and internet
governance stakeholders

BRISBANE

Date: 23rd March 2026

Attendees included:

Business, registrars and
technical stakeholders

MELBOURNE

Date: 25th March 2026

Attendees included:

Internet governance,
industry, registrars, ,
business, consumer, and
academia

VIRTUAL

Dates: 2nd and 3rd March
2026

Wide range of attendees
from a variety of cohorts.

**auDA hosted two virtual town halls in November and December 2025, attended by 81 people*

Conversation Summaries

01 Domain Name Monetisation in .com.au and .net.au

Key insights from participant feedback

1.1 Monetisation practices are viewed by many as harmful to the community, while concentrating benefit to a few, sophisticated actors.

Monetisation of **.com.au** and **.net.au** domains, and domain names in general, was typically viewed as inconsistent with the intent of the namespace and principles of community interest and trust.

Many participants linked monetisation (e.g. acquisition of domain names purely for resale and/or to host links pages) to concepts that had a negative effect on the community such as squatting, 'digital landlords'.

The overall sentiment was that:

- Monetisation tended to concentrate value in the hands of a few, well-organised actors, while denying businesses (including small business) legitimate access to relevant names, potentially creating harm in terms of lost traffic, lost trust, and lost marketing opportunities.
- Domain investors were often well-organised and fast-moving, creating a non-level playing field for the re-registration of recently expired domain names favouring domain investors over (for example) small businesses.
- Monetisation encouraged the stand-up of link aggregator pages that added low value and in some cases, created risk of inadvertently linking users to harmful websites (e.g. scams).

These views were expressed across most cohorts, including small business owners, industry experts and researchers. The notable exception were investors or representatives or companies involved in monetisation, who asserted that it was a legitimate business model, and that in some cases offered value that made a contribution aligned with namespace management principles (see insight 1.2).

01 Domain Name Monetisation in .com.au and .net.au

Key insights from participant feedback – *continued*

1.2 There was differentiation between monetisation seen as 'legitimate' vs 'harmful'

Some participants noted that there are **legitimate models** for earning revenue from a domain (e.g., blogs, affiliate advertising, temporary holding during business development, defensive holding to stop others from using a similar domain name that 'piggybacked' on the primary domain licensee's brand).

When these sentiments were asserted, there was generally a differentiation made between (1) monetising based on brand- or 'real'-use, vs (2) monetising the domain itself (e.g., pay-per-click parking or 'domain flipping' – holding a domain with only an intent to resell at a profit).

Those supporting the first set of use noted that it would be important to ensure that changes to rules discouraged the latter while still enabling the former to occur without disruption.

1.3 Risks of changing rules were identified that would need careful consideration

Stakeholders warned that reversing long-standing monetisation practices could:

- create legal risks, such as complaints by those asserting that they were harmed by domain monetisation seeking restitution, or by domain name monetisers seeking compensation over lost revenue.
- undermine (sometimes substantial) registrant investment.
- create practical implementation challenges in areas such as transition to new rules or differentiating between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' activity.

These legal risks would need careful consideration should changes to rules affecting monetisation be pursued by the panel.

1.4 Concerns about 'drop-catching' and fairness

Multiple participants highlighted issues with domains being lost due to issues such as expired credit cards, missed emails, or operational oversights – despite registrants having an intent to renew which they would have exercised had the issue not prevented or delayed this.

After the domain name becomes available for re-registration (or 'drops') as a result of such an issue, domain investors use a registrar who use sophisticated registration software to rapidly acquire ('or catch') them.

Suggestions from participants to address this issue included extending renewal grace periods beyond the current 30 days or creating a "quarantine" period similar to that applied to phone numbers that give domain name licensees additional opportunity to re-secure their domain name.

02 Allocation Rules for .com.au and .net.au

Key insights from participant feedback

2.1 Current allocation rules seen as complex and misaligned with their intent in practice

Many registrars and small business representatives noted that allocation rules are difficult to explain, and that loopholes exist that allow registrations that, while complying with rules in a technical sense, feel illegitimate or misaligned with namespace allocation principles.

Some examples that came under discussion in this respect included:

- The ability to set up a monetisation website based on a business name registration, where the business was limited largely or fully to pass-through online advertising

2.2 Support for strengthening .com.au rules and for building a stronger value proposition for other domains such as net.au or .au direct

The .com.au namespace is widely viewed as a trusted signal that a business is Australian, authentic and trustworthy. This was perceived as making it distinct from other domains (including .net.au and .au direct) which do not have the same perceived value (trust, familiarity, brand awareness) or clarity of purpose in the Australian community generally, or in the domain name licensee community.

Given the perceived primacy of .com.au several ideas were proposed by participants. These included:

- Creating a clearer set of requirements and a clearer articulation of these requirements, so that people desiring to purchase a .com.au domain name could more clearly understand what they need (for example, an ABN and a business name closely related to their domain name as mandatory). In some cases, this

position was disputed because of the reduction in flexibility that this could create, and because of the current environment where a more liberal approach had already been widely adopted.

- Investing in building greater awareness and trust of .com.au alternatives (e.g. .net.au, .au direct) so that they are seen as viable alternatives to the .com.au (noting that businesses may wish to own the full 'package' of .com.au, .net.au and .au direct to safeguard their web presence, and this would need consideration)

02 Allocation Rules for .com.au and .net.au

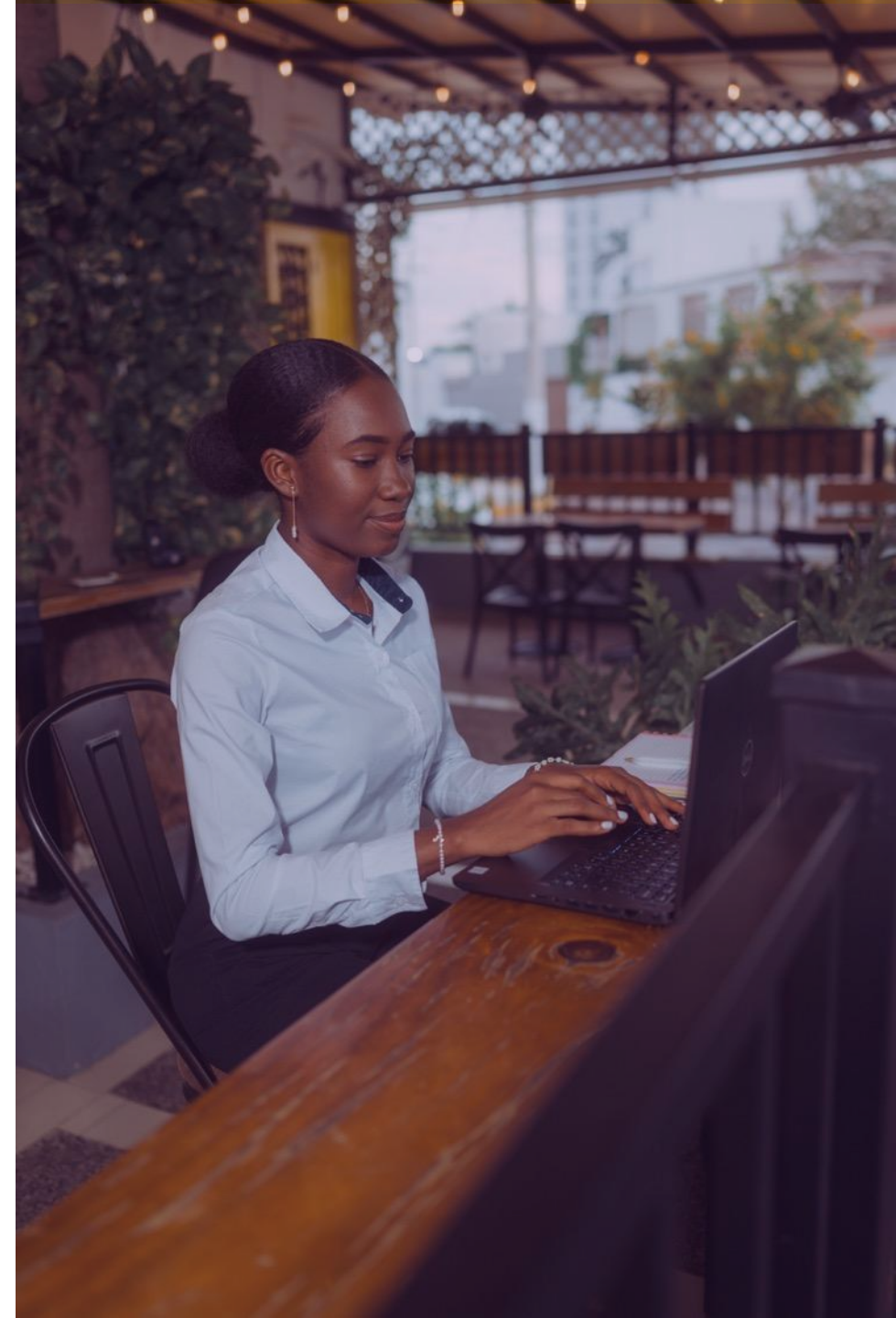
Key insights from participant feedback – *continued*

2.3 Identity and privacy concerns

Several participants reflected lived experiences where they had been unable to purchase their individual, personal names because they had either been allocated to another party, or were under contest. (for more on contestation, see theme 3).

Such participants, as well as others considering such a situation, felt that this raised risks:

- Having a personal name and wishing to assert it online may not be influential in allocation rules
- Having one's personal name registered by another entity could create a circumstance where one's name was used in a way posing reputational harm or as part of a scam. It is not clear that this was a resolvable issue (given many names legitimately overlap and many have the same name), however it does demonstrate the complexity and sometimes personal effects of domain name allocation.



03 Contested .au Direct Domain Names

Key insights from participant feedback

3.1 The current system for contested .au Direct domain names should deliver lower-burden processes and faster resolution

Across the roundtables, many participants felt that the current system of contested domain names was operating in a way that delivered a consistent, satisfactory outcome.

Several participants reported lengthy and unresolved experiences of contesting a domain, which included long-term stalemates, prolonged disputes, and a lack of viable alternative mechanisms to resolve long-running contentions.

In some cases, disputes may be unresolved because no mutual point of negotiation can be reached. In others – and reportedly

more commonly, participants in a dispute simply are not willing to communicate or may not be contactable.

We heard from many participants across the roundtable series that the system for contested names should be changed to deliver a better outcome for contesting parties. There were a number of different resolution avenues suggested, with no consensus on one preferred method.

3.2 Fairness and equity concerns with government registrations

Several participants suggested that government agencies at all tiers, and particularly at the Commonwealth or local government levels, were unreasonably contesting the right to the corresponding .au direct name using their registrations in gov.au.

Perceived reasons for this included government defensively registering to prevent scams/piggybacking of governmental initiatives, or as part of brand protection strategies.

When such a domain name is subject to a contest involving a low resource actor such as an individual or a small business owner, it was viewed as difficult to compete (because government entities may not wish to

negotiate and are unlikely to voluntarily surrender the domain name).

It was also noted that government entities had access to their own namespace (gov.au).

An alternate view expressed was that government ownership prevented piggybacking by unassociated entities seeking legitimacy by association with government actions or entities. This is therefore an important protective measure for the community.

Participants felt a rules change should be considered to address these issues, or at least result in faster resolution in such cases.

03 Contested .au Direct Domain Names

Key insights from participant feedback – *continued*

3.3 Suggestions for reform

Participants proposed a range of potential improvements to address issues such as those described above:

- In a contest, allow parties with existing registrations to ‘win’ a contest provided their eligible domain registration was ‘first’ – i.e. the party with the longest pre-existing registration in another namespace was the default winner should a contest occur
- Introduce automatic forfeiture if a party does not respond or engage with the contest after a fixed period of time
- Establish time limits on consultation and arbitration, after which the process shifts to a new set of parameters
- Implement application fees scaled to entity size to reduce the propensity for larger entities to compile large catalogues of contested domain names

- Define clear criteria, adjudication approaches and escalation pathways that allow for intervention by auDA
- Consider auctions, with proceeds returned to the losing party or parties. This may include a traditional auction, or a reverse auction (where a high initial bid floor is set, that then reduces over time until one party exercises the option)
- Add contested names to the reserve list should a resolution not be reached in a set period
- Allow participants to see status information including where they sit in allocation priority more transparently.

No potential reform was seen as an obvious solution, and generally, participants identified risks with many of those that had conversational support.

Many participants acknowledged the complexity of multi-party contention and that satisfying all parties consistently and with consistent alignment with accepted principles of fairness was unlikely to be achieved. Of those with this view, some felt that the system should remain as-is, given no perfect solution was possible and there was already investment in navigating the current system.

There was a sense from parties who were present in the room with unresolved contests that were the current system “doesn’t work,” for them, and that reform to the rules was needed.

Recurring Themes

Recurring Themes

Cutting across specific issues, the roundtables elicited consistent themes that could guide reform:

Strong concern for integrity and trust of .au

Changes should not be deteriorative, and rules should continue to meaningfully support the integrity and trust of .au.

Widespread concern for monetisation practices

Monetisation was largely seen as harmful to 'more legitimate' licencing, and as adding little value to the community. There was a strong majority sense that monetisation should be reduced in scope or prohibited.

Complexity and opacity of rules

Allocation rules in particular, but also rules relating to contested domains, were often viewed as overly complex. Some expressed that processes lack clarity and user-friendliness. Participants sought simpler rules that are easy to explain and understand.

Indicative quote

I think .au means something for Australian consumers, shouldn't need to squat on the .au

Indicative quote

We need to keep an eye out for digital landlords... it can create aggressive, unethical, bad faith actors.

Indicative quote

I don't have a resolution for this but currently it is convoluted and difficult to explain in an email to a client.

Recurring Themes – *continued*

Cutting across specific issues, the roundtables elicited consistent themes that could guide reform:

Desire for fairness, transparency and predictability

Whether for allocation or contention, stakeholders want:

- clear criteria
- consistent processes
- transparent market signals
- time-bound decision-making

Recognition that different namespaces serve different purposes

.com.au is generally perceived as the most 'sacred' commercial space.

.net.au and .au direct are seen as more flexible, with room for rule differentiation.

Caution about unintended reform consequences

There was broad recognition that policy changes must be carefully designed to avoid legal risk, disruption and loss of confidence.

“ Indicative quote

There has to be rules, you can have rules without killing the market.

“ Indicative quote

com.au is a little more sacred because of the allocation rules and I don't mind the allocation rules there.

“ Indicative quote

It can open up a risk of being sued or taken to the supreme court where a precedent can be set.

Diverging Views

Diverging Views

Despite alignment in some areas, stakeholders differed on several key issues:

Domain name monetisation in .com.au and .net.au

Participants had mixed views on domain name monetisation and whether it should be permitted, restricted or prohibited. Some expressed concerns for legitimate business owners and some thought it best to align with global best practice.

“ I support continued monetisation, aligned with global practice. ”

“ This model leads to financial gain by the wrong people... it goes against the principles. ”

“ It should be allowed, perhaps with a dash of restrictions reintroduced. ”

Allocation rules for .com.au and .net.au namespaces

There was no clear consensus on what should happen to the current allocation approach going forward. Some participants believed the rules were sufficient, others thought they needed to be stricter, and others believed they should be softened. There was a general feeling that they are too complex for ordinary consumers to understand.

“ Allocation requirements are useful, but they should be stricter. ”

“ In my view, there is no good reason to go more restrictive. ”

“ Might be useful to define why these rules are in place. What do they set out to achieve? ”

Contested .au direct domain names

Various perspectives were presented relating to contested domain names. Some participants saw the current process as unfair and improvable, while others felt that the system was already well-embedded and didn't feel genuine, non-disruptive improvement was needed.

“ What we have today doesn't work and it hasn't worked. ”

“ I don't believe it is fair to change the terms of an established process, in particular one that people have paid for. ”

“ It should continue as is. ”

Diverging Views – continued

Despite alignment in some areas, stakeholders differed on several key issues:

How should monetisation be better controlled?

Responding to concerns that monetisation undermines the purpose of .au domains and encourages harmful behaviour, suggestions included:

- Creating rules that disallow monetisation (for example, by adopting the same model as .com.au).
- Examining the process and rules for monetisation, to identify ways of distinguishing legitimate business owners from those engaging in the domain name registration system to speculate on domain name value and treating them in a differentiated manner.
- auDA take a stronger role in monitoring and vetting.

How to resolve contested .au direct domain names?

Recommendations were numerous, again without clear consensus of an 'optimal' solution. They included:

- Market-based solutions (auctions).
- Merit-based solutions (closest match to brand or commercial use).
- Chronological priority (first registration of the eligible domain).
- Reserving names permanently to prevent conflict.
- Bundling entire domain families to prevent contestation in the future.

Should government agencies have different rules?

Some felt government entities should not participate in contention the same way as private entities, recognising the need to create greater equity and recognising the presence of the .gov.au domain gave government a uniquely branded option.

Others believed they should be treated no differently from any other registrant, and that governments undertaking defensive registrations could be in the community interest to prevent exploitation or scams.

Should auDA intervene more strongly?

Some participants want significant intervention by auDA to prevent misuse and resolve disputes.

Others caution that excessive intervention risks legal challenges or unintended consequences; and that a rules-based system with little discretion has a greater level of viability.

Pulse Checks – other issues in the review

Other Issues in the Review

Participants were asked about other issues in the review using a digital polling tool during the Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and online workshops.

The aggregated results can be found in the following pages. Note that responses were not compulsory and results are statistically indicative and qualitative only.

Other issues in the review include:

Fraudulent and bad faith registrations and reserved names.

- *Should the requirement that auDA publish a list of the domain names it reserves to stop bad faith and scam registrations be removed, to prevent copycat registrations by bad actors?*

Complaint processes for domain name audits.

- *Who should be able to escalate a complaint about an auDA decision to an internal review or external review panel?*
- *Do the complaint processes in the Rules adequately address complaints initiated by auDA's registrations / renewals audits?*

Alignment of selected rules in .au with equivalent rules in generic top-level domains.

- *Should we align domain name lifecycle rules with equivalent global best practice?*



Pulse Checks

Do the complaint processes in the Rules adequately address complaints initiated by auDA's registrations / renewals audits?

Yes



No



Not sure



Who should be able to escalate a complaint about an auDA decision to an internal review or external review panel?

Any member of the public



Only someone directly affected (e.g. the domain name registrant)



Not sure



Pulse Checks

Should the requirement that auDA publish a list of the domain names it reserves to stop bad faith and scam registrations be removed, to prevent copycat registrations by bad actors?

No, keep the requirement for auDA to publish the list



Yes, end the requirement for auDA to publish the list



Not sure



Should we align domain name lifecycle rules with equivalent global best practice?

Yes



No



Not sure



Let's design a future that works for all

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