ThinkPlace
Part of Synergy Group

. au Licensing Rules Review: Draft Report Public Consultation, Listening Report

A summary of what we heard through the second wave of consultation by the Independent Panel

July 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.

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The intent of the review

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

The Panel published a 2025 Issues Paper and sought feedback through a first round of consultation (February to March 2026), which directly informed its Draft Report.

The Draft Report, released 4 June 2026, set out the Panel's proposed recommendations, which this second round of consultation invited the public to comment on.

The public consultation process

This second round of consultation comprised an online submissions process, two online roundtables in June 2026 and two in-person workshops in Melbourne and Sydney in July 2026. Workshops were facilitated by ThinkPlaceX on behalf of the Panel.

At each session, the Panel and ThinkPlace presented the draft recommendations and listened directly to stakeholder feedback.

Key insights from participant feedback

Domain name monetisation

- Draft recommendations were well-received by a small sample of domain name investors. Other cohorts that were present did not raise significant support or concerns in the workshop conversations.

Allocation rules for com.au and net.au

- Option 1 (increasing compliance checks) broadly seen as an acceptable, low-risk default; Option 2 (Clarifying the definition of 'Services') read as the incremental middle option, and responses were neutral.
- Option 3 (removing the rule permitting allocation based on name match to a service, good, event, activity or premise) was the subject of significant debate, with a majority wanting the rule retained to allow for industry and community flexibility, and some participants arguing the rule is not needed and invites speculation or undesirable monetisation patterns.

Contested .au direct domain dames

- Many participants noted that resolutions of residual contests remains slow and desired a faster resolution mechanism.
- No consensus on what alternative model would be fairer: first-come-first-serve was the most proposed model, but was contested on the basis that a domain name registration date didn't represent a fair basis for contest resolution.
- Some consider the current approach the fairest available, despite its problems in achieving a resolution where no party is willing to 'bow out'.

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 with community expectations.

This report provides a summary of what we heard through the second round of conversation-based consultation, following a first round (February to March 2026) that gathered open stakeholder input on the review's core issues.

This second round sought responses to the Panel's Draft Report recommendations, including three new issues that emerged through the consultation’s first phase, relating to combatting scams, registrant communication, and holding domain name once eligibility ceases (for example, in the case of a business wind-up or retirement).

ThinkPlaceX facilitated all virtual and in-person sessions with participants that included registrars, domain investors, small business owners and domain holders and others. Each session opened with the Panel's guiding principles: community benefit, trust, security and integrity, and competition, fair trading and consumer protection.

The three core topics were:

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

Participants had access to the Draft Report's Summary of Recommendations ahead of each session, where the facilitator provided context before opening the floor for questions and feedback.

This report synthesises insights from the conversations, highlighting recurring themes and areas of divergence. It is intended for public release and for consideration by the Policy Advisory Panel.

Phase 2 consultations in brief

4 sessions, including 2 in-person and 2 online

35 total participants

Panel attendance at all sessions

auDA attendance at all sessions

MELBOURNE

Date: 6 July 2026

Attendees included:
Registrar and sole trader stakeholders

SYDNEY

Date: 7 July 2026

Attendees included:
Attendees included: domain investors, small business and sole trader stakeholders, and an industry consultant

VIRTUAL

Dates: 17 and 18 June 2026

Attendees included:
registrars, internet industry, and small business stakeholders.

Conversation Summaries – core issues

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

Draft recommendation: keep the current approach permitting domain monetisation across com.au, net.au and .au direct, alongside increased audits and compliance checks on monetised sites to prevent DNS abuse.

1.1 We heard support for retaining the current approach, although cohorts representing strong contrasting opinions from the previous consultation did not voice a position and it is unclear if they participated.

Keeping the current monetisation approach was received positively by the small sample of the domain investment cohort attending, who felt that monetisation was a legitimate speculative investment, that there was no evidence it undermines trust, and that it is in line with normal commercial activity and expectations, particularly in the .com.au namespace.

It was also noted that domain name licences may be sold for a variety of reasons (e.g. a business sale), and this mechanism was needed for such cases and should therefore continue.

No opposing view was raised in any of the consultations. This is a distinct change from the first consultation process, where monetisation drew concern from a number of cohorts (small business owners, industry experts and researchers) over the concentration of value and costs/barriers created for businesses to acquire matched domains organically. It is unclear whether this perspective was represented in the sessions in this consultation wave.

02 **Allocation rules for .com.au and .net.au**

Draft recommendation: seeking further views on three options: increase compliance checks under current rules; clarify the services and pay-per-click definitions; or remove the rule allowing allocation based on a matching service, good, event, activity or premise.

2.1 Option 1 was broadly seen as an acceptable, low-risk default

Several participants considered Option 1 an appropriate direction, effectively preserving the status quo while increasing compliance checks, without disrupting existing arrangements (in particular, without the need to activate one or both of the other options that would restrict allocation).

A dissenting view was expressed that while acceptable, it would be inadequate on its own and would leave the underlying concerns (use of domains inconsistent with the needs or expectations of the community such as monetisation, domain hoarding and pay-per-click models) unaddressed.

There were no objections to Option 1 being progressed.

2.2 Option 2 received a mixed response, with out strong support or opposition and a sense that it carried mild benefits and costs.

Some participants, including online respondents, expressed a preference for Option 2 over the alternatives, as offering clearer criteria than the status quo.

One suggestion went further, proposing it should include a ban on parking pages.

Others were unconvinced: a domain investor argued it would create unnecessary administrative burden for registrars and a barrier for startups who would need to navigate a tighter definition, without a clear sense of what problem was being addressed.

On balance, Option 2 read as the incremental middle option, neither strongly opposed nor supported.

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

– continued

2.3 Option 3 was the most strongly debated point of the consultation, with most participants wanting to retain the current allocation rules

A majority of voices across the workshops and in particular in the in-person events, argued against Option 3 as a viable strategy, warning it would significantly disrupt established and legitimate uses that don't map 'cleanly' onto a registered business name (for example community events).

A domain investor added that the change would potentially encourage better-resourced organisations to 'collect' names by registering business names or trademarks for the purpose of securing a license, at the expense of a functioning secondary market making these more accessible.

A minority view across the workshops was that a name without a genuine trademark or business connection has a comparatively weak claim to a domain, and that Option 3 would have the benefit of preventing generic words being claimed by a single organisation on a first-come, first-serve basis.

A frequently-raised question concerned what specific harm Option 3 is meant to prevent, and what evidence supported this position.

Other practical questions included:

- Would existing arrangements be grandfathered or the change applied retroactively?
- How would removal be enforced?
- Would responsibility for identifying and cancelling non-compliant domains sit with auDA or with registrars?
- Would auDA's board approve a change likely to reduce the number of registered domains, given the resulting cut to registration revenue?

In some conversations, context emerged relating to the scale of option 3's effect should it be accepted, with a potentially high volume of domains potentially at risk of cancellation/unable to be renewed.

03 **Contested .au direct domain names**

Draft recommendation: continue the current process, resolved only when a contesting party withdraws or doesn't renew.

3.1 There was frustration that resolution of domain name contests remains slow, but no consensus on a preferred alternative mechanism.

auDA confirmed that under 3,000 domain names remain contested, representing just over half of all contested domain names since .au direct was introduced in 2022. Contests have been resolved tat a rate of roughly 20% per year, almost entirely through one party not renewing rather than by direct negotiation.

Several participants, including a Melbourne registrar who has held a contested name for three decades, expressed frustration about the lack of a suggested mechanism to resolve long-running contests.

Several participants suggested an 'oldest-registration' rule was desirable for expediting resolutions. One participant suggested that an oldest-registration approach conflicted with auDA's principle that there should be no hierarchy of rights, while another suggested that 'oldest registration' unfairly benefited early domain namespace adopters, whereas a pre-existing domain name in another name space may predate the name under contest.

3.2 Government contests for .gov.au domain equivalents was raised, generally was viewed at least in some cases as a legitimate approach to safeguarding against scams.

The issue of Government domains was raised with respect to Government contesting .au direct domain name equivalents to established .gov.au domain names.

There was acknowledgement that there could be legitimate reasons for government holding or contesting domain equivalents such as 'ato.au', to reduce their exposure to scam schemes.

3.3 Fairness and equity concerns with government registrations

Not every voice favoured change: one online participant explicitly called the current approach the fairest solution available, and a Sydney participant summed up the room's ambivalence as better no new process than the wrong process.

Other issues in or emerging from the review

Beyond the three core topics, the Draft Report contains **six further recommendations, including:**

Three identified as having **high apparent consensus:**

- Draft recommendation 4: fraudulent and bad faith registrations and reserved names
- Draft recommendation 5: complaints process for domain name audits
- Draft recommendation 6: domain name licence lifecycle settings

Three identified as having **emerged through the consultation process:**

- Draft recommendation 7: The .au Licensing Rules and scams
- Draft recommendation 8: Adequate communication to registrants regarding renewals or cancellation of domain name licences
- Draft recommendation 9: Eligibility rules to retain com.au after retirement

The following feedback was heard through the consultation process:

Draft recommendation 4: fraudulent and bad faith registrations and reserved names

There was broad agreement that reserved names should not be made available to avoid inadvertently assisting bad actors seeking to operate scams or other domain abuses; and that aggregate reporting was desirable under this arrangement.

However, registrars also suggested there would be value for them in maintaining access to the Reserved List for operational purposes..

Draft recommendation 5: complaints process for domain name audits

There was general agreement that formalising the complaints process for domain audits was desirable. Some participants noted that broadening who can complain might create volume management issues because of the likelihood of bulk AI-generated complaints being lodged by bad-faith actors (which could become costly for auDA and 'bury' genuine complaints).

Draft recommendation 6: domain name licence lifecycle settings

There was broad support for aligning with international norms, including a new WHOIS provision. One practical gap was raised around how change-of-registrant should be managed.

Other issues in or emerging from the review

– *continued*

Draft recommendation 7: The .au Licensing Rules and scams

Across the workshops, participants supported the recommendation, including collaboration with the NASC.

Draft recommendation 8: Adequate communication to registrants regarding renewals or cancellation of domain name licences

Across the workshops, participants supported the recommendation for increasing communication frequency ahead of suspensions/cancellations to improve the likelihood that domain name licence holders did not miss the opportunity to act ahead of these events.

Draft recommendation 9: Eligibility rules to allow retention of com.au or .net.au domain name licences after retirement

This recommendation triggered significant discussion.

A majority of participants who commented on the matter recognised that this was a significant issue that deserved attention. Points made included:

- **In support of changing eligibility rules:** Domain name holders with a long-standing domain would potentially be using the email addresses 'hanging off' the domain as a point of contact. In some cases, this might constitute decades of communication history and a contact point for a wide network that may otherwise lose connection. This places people who lose eligibility to retain the domain license (e.g. because they are winding up a business as part of retirement) in a position where they cannot wind up the entity (even though this may impose cost or risk) or have to lose a significant, personally meaningful asset.
- **In support of retaining eligibility rules as-is:** Domains like .com.au and .net.au are meant to facilitate commercial presence and interests, and holding them for a previously eligible, but currently ineligible domain name license holder 'locks them up' rather than allowing them to flow and cycle in line with the intent of the namespace.

Most participants were sympathetic with domain name licence holders where they had held the domain for a substantial period. No model to solve the problem was put forward, other than to explore rule change possibilities.

Shifting a user to an alternative but similar domain was not indicated as a solution to the core problem described above.

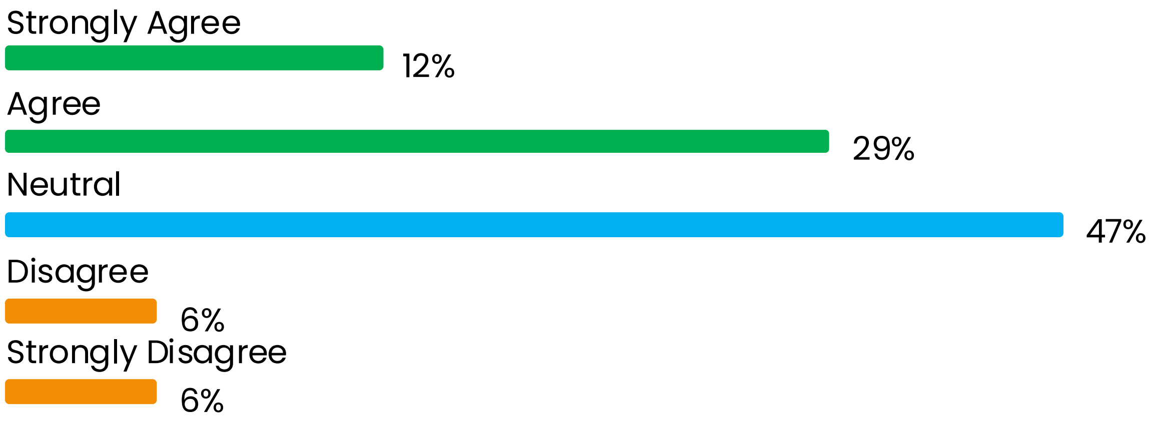
Pulse Checks

ThinkPlaceX conducted a survey about participants’ satisfaction with the review process

Pulse Check results

I have had opportunity to contribute my views to the Review

Regardless of the Review outcomes, I am satisfied that my perspectives were heard and understood



Let’s design a future that works for all

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