

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS ON MARRIAGE CELEBRANTS PROGRAM REFORMS

In the Budget delivered on 10 May 2011, the Government announced a measure to make improvements to the Marriage Celebrants Program, including a move to cost recovery with the introduction of an annual registration fee. This aims to improve the services delivered to Commonwealth-registered marriage celebrants including increased access to the Marriage Law and Celebrants Section, new technology and enhanced information. It will also allow the Commonwealth to effectively regulate Commonwealth-registered marriage celebrants through strengthened application, performance review and complaints handling mechanisms.

Before the implementation of the fee, the Attorney-General's Department committed to extensive consultation on its details with marriage celebrants and the broader community. National consultations have recently concluded. This paper provides a summary of the feedback provided through this consultation. The Department would like to thank those who attended the face-to-face meetings and/or provided written feedback for their constructive and valuable input. The views expressed are being closely considered by the Department as it develops the measures.

Overview of consultations

Face-to-face meetings

17 face-to-face consultation meetings took place in October and November 2011 in Melbourne (2), Sydney, Parramatta, Orange (via telephone), Newcastle, Hobart, Canberra, Albury-Wodonga, Perth, Bunbury, Adelaide, Brisbane (2), Tweed Heads, Cairns, Darwin (via video-conference).

Of the approximately 10,300 marriage celebrants invited to attend a meeting, over 1,300 people responded that they would attend one of the above sessions and approximately 700 attended a meeting.

The Department provided detailed information regarding the proposed package of reforms, and sought input and identified key issues for marriage celebrants. As requested at a number of the meetings, this presentation can now be found on the Department's website. The presentation discussed the purpose of the reforms including the current functions and roles of the Marriage Law and Celebrants Section of this Department; and the proposed strengthening of the program including the fee and other important improvements.

Written submissions

Written submissions were also invited by 9 December 2011, regardless of attendance at a face-to-face meeting. Over 280 submissions were received from individuals and associations via email, mail or hand delivered during the consultation meetings.

Overview of feedback

The attached table captures the key issues that were raised regularly throughout the meetings and written submissions. It does not attempt to respond to specific issues.

The marriage celebrant peak representative body, the Coalition of Celebrant Associations (CoCA), also provided a detailed written submission that was the result of its own considerable consultation process and incorporates views, thoughts and suggestions on the program from long-term and new celebrants. The submission makes a number of valuable recommendations as to how the fee might be applied in practice. The full submission is on the CoCA website at <http://www.coalitionofcelebrantassociations.org.au/response-to-government-cost-recovery-plan/>.

Overall, the consultations have allowed AGD to identify the issues that are most important to marriage celebrants. The issues in the table, as well as many additional issues raised throughout the consultations, will be considered by AGD in developing the reforms.

Significant Issues (raised in all or most meetings and submissions)
Many celebrants stated that there are too many registered marriage celebrants.
Many celebrants stated that the proposed fee [up to \$600] is too high.
Many celebrants requested that ministers of religion of recognised denominations be subjected to the same fee and regulation.
Most celebrants suggested the introduction of a separate application fee (in addition to annual registration fee).
Many celebrants raised concerns about the quality of training and OPD.
Many celebrants requested that the application process be strengthened.
Some celebrants suggested the introduction of a fee based on a sliding scale, including exemptions. However, there was no majority view.
Some celebrants supported a flat fee. However, there was no majority view.
Most celebrants requested improved AGD service delivery to celebrants.
Less significant issues (raised in some meetings or submissions)
Some celebrants suggested we implement a moratorium until 2013.
Concern was expressed about the impact of the fee on rural celebrants.
Concern was expressed about the impact of the fee on independent ministers of religion.
There was interest in better information and education for marrying couples about the important role of marriage celebrants.
Some celebrants asked for value for money.

Next steps

AGD has commenced work to ensure program service delivery will be improved when the annual registration fee commences on 1 July 2013. This will include improved processes for assessing applications, handling enquiries, conducting performance reviews and handling complaints. The new database will provide celebrants with an online portal to access and update their information. AGD is considering other potential improvements to the Program as a result of feedback during the consultations.

The structure and details of the fee will be announced when the feedback received to date has been reviewed, options assessed and final costings of the services under the Program are completed. The next steps in the process are as follows:

- AGD is currently assessing the options for implementing Program improvements and these will soon be fully costed.
- AGD will release a consultation paper to allow marriage celebrants further opportunity to comment on the reforms in mid-late 2012.
- Once this feedback is considered, a Cost Recovery Impact Statement detailing the reforms and final costs will be placed on the AGD website.

Throughout this process, AGD will continue to work to improve Program processes and systems to ensure efficient service delivery when the fee comes into effect on 1 July 2013.

AGD will continue to update its website to inform marriage celebrants of the progress of the reforms.