



## Best practice guidelines for the development and maintenance of online community legal information in Victoria<sup>1</sup>

### About these guidelines

These guidelines have been developed by the VLAF Online Legal Information Working Group to assist people who produce or maintain online community legal information. The guidelines aim to raise the standard of online community legal information by providing guidance on how to produce and maintain high-quality community legal information that makes the best use of resources.

### How to use these guidelines

These guidelines have been developed for anyone producing community legal information, from the smallest community legal centre to the largest government department. Whatever the size of your organisation, we encourage you to consider the guidelines before you start a new online resource or assess any existing products.

If you already have an existing website or other online resources, we encourage you to use these guidelines as a 'check up' on their quality, and then to develop strategies to address any issues highlighted.

These guidelines have been developed so that they can be used effectively by organisations with limited resources.

Go to [www.vlaf.org.au](http://www.vlaf.org.au) for recommended resources that will help you implement these guidelines.

### The guidelines

#### Guideline 1 – Conduct research before undertaking a new project

All new online legal information projects should be thoroughly researched to determine if similar resources already exist and if there is a real need for the project. Resources such as the CLEAR database and Everyday-law.org.au are a good place to research what is available.

#### Guideline 2 – Online legal information should be audience-focussed

All online legal information projects should have a clearly identified audience and the project should be tailored to their knowledge and skills. Consultation with members of the intended audience should take place to determine this information, and representatives of the target audience should be involved in the development of the project through reference groups and evaluation.

Information should be presented to 'lead' the audience from introductory material to more complex material to take account of the audience's legal knowledge.

All online legal information should be written in plain language. Research shows that almost half of the Australian population struggles with literacy. For

online material to be effective, those producing it need to consider users' literacy levels and cultural backgrounds and provide them with the contextual information they need to better understand it.

### **Guideline 3 – Websites and other digital formats must meet appropriate usability and accessibility guidelines**

In order to be effective, online legal information must be easy to use for all users. Issues to consider:

- If designing a new website or assessing the effectiveness of an existing one, evaluation of how well the site works for the user should be conducted through all stages of development, not just at the end of the process. See the best practice usability examples at [www.vlaf.org.au](http://www.vlaf.org.au)
- Website design should be accessible to users with a wide range of disabilities (WCAG 2.0 Level AA standards)
- Websites should be easy to navigate and to find information through clear menus and search functions
- Websites should be supported across all browsers, such as Firefox, Safari and Chrome
- Online formats should be able to be viewed effectively on all delivery platforms, including mobile formats
- If developing new electronic resources or publications, where possible they should be produced in HTML formats, rather than PDFs, that are searchable by users through external search engines.

### **Guideline 4 – Ensure that information is accurate**

It is critical that both legal and non-legal information contained in online community legal information is accurate.

Reference groups made up of relevant experts should be used in the development of the legal content to ensure that it is accurate and an appropriate scope of material is covered.

Legal content should be checked by a suitably qualified lawyer and other content should be checked for accuracy (for example, information on a particular legal service should be checked with that legal service).

### **Guideline 5 – The currency of the information should be clearly noted**

Users should be able to check the currency of the legal information provided. Clearly providing a date that the legal information is accurate will address this.

### **Guideline 6 – Maintain your material**

At least every 12 months, content should be reviewed to ensure its continued accuracy.

Where possible, the review cycle should be included with the content.

Tools such as web analytics should be used to analyse how your site or product is used and what you can do to improve its effectiveness.

### **Guideline 7 – The jurisdiction of the legal information should be clear**

Searching for legal information through search engines can reveal searches across a number of jurisdictions, much of which will not be relevant to the user. Many members of the public are unaware of the concept of jurisdiction and do not realise that law can differ from state to state. A statement that clearly states the relevant jurisdiction of the site or particular information helps address this issue.

### **Guideline 8 – Link to other relevant resources**

Websites containing legal information should seek to provide access to relevant online legal information produced by other legal organisations. Providing links to other material reduces the need for an organisation to produce duplicate material and is the best way of ensuring that the user has access to the range of information that they need.

If links are provided to primary sources such as case law and legislation, information on researching legal information should be provided to assist the user to understand the context in which this material can be used. These sources should be cited using standard legal citation.

#### **Guideline 9 – Provide access to a legal glossary**

Websites that provide community legal information should consider including access to a plain language legal glossary. If possible links to the glossary should be included in the content. The Victoria Law Foundation produces a user-tested legal glossary that can be used by other organisations for this purpose.

#### **Guideline 10 – Use standard terms where possible**

Using standard terms across a website will assist the user in understanding complex legal information. Websites should adopt a controlled vocabulary with the same terms used consistently across the site, e.g. avoid using car and motor vehicle interchangeably. An internal thesaurus could also be adopted to support the fact that individuals use more than one term.

#### **Guideline 11 – Websites that contain community legal information should include information on how to obtain further advice and support**

Community legal information does not aim to replace legal advice. Websites that contain community legal information should provide information on the 'next steps to take' and how to obtain further assistance, from a range of services not just private lawyers. Contact details should be provided if possible.

#### **Guideline 12 – Raise awareness of new online legal information resources**

One of the major reasons for duplication of legal information is a lack of awareness of available resources. Listing in-progress or new online legal information projects on the CLEAR database and making completed resources available through the Everyday-law website gives members of the sector the greatest chance of finding out about projects in development or that have been completed recently.

Websites and online products should pay attention to search engine optimisation, SEO, through the use of metadata and key words. This is important to ensure that your website appears in search results.

The use of appropriate marketing and participation in information sharing forums such as those run by VLAF and the Victoria Law Foundation also helps to raise awareness of new projects, to improve their effectiveness and to reduce the chance of unnecessary duplication.

Organisations should work cooperatively to promote new services to the sector and community. This can be achieved through activities such as cross-referencing of material on websites and the inclusion of new projects in internal and external newsletters.

These guidelines were produced by the VLAF Online Working Group. Feedback on these guidelines is encouraged. Please contact:

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<sup>1</sup> These guidelines were developed with reference to a range of material prepared by the American Association of Law Libraries and *Best Practice Guidelines for Australian Legal Websites* prepared by the Legal Information Standards Council.