

SUBMISSION BY
FREE TV AUSTRALIA

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Update to modernise and harmonise classification guidelines 2025

Department of Infrastructure,
Transport, Regional Development,
Communications, Sport and the Arts

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1. Executive Summary

- Commercial free TV broadcasters provide trusted, predictable classification information and consumer advice for the professionally produced content they provide across platforms.
- These arrangements have been operating effectively for many years.
- The TV Guidelines used by commercial broadcasters to classify content are set out in the Free TV Code which is registered and enforced by the Australian Communications and Media Authority.
- The TV Guidelines are highly consistent with the Classification Scheme Guidelines and provide more detail on specific subject matter and program genres shown on television.
- Free TV's comments in this submission are made on the basis that while the Classification Scheme Guidelines are not applied directly to television broadcasting classification, the objective of maintaining consistency between the systems is such that changes to the Classification Scheme Guidelines may have flow-on effects to the Television Guidelines in the future.
- Free TV supports a number of the recommendations in the Consultation Paper that would support the modernisation of the system in line with changing community standards, efficient technological processes, and clarity for audiences.
- However, some of the recommendations made in the paper go further than a 'practical renewal' of the Scheme and are unwarranted, such as significant changes to the classification categories, to the display of consumer advice, and to the management of community input to classification decisions.
- In particular, Free TV does not support the introduction of the classification category PG-13 and the transition of the MA15+ category to MA16+ as there is no convincing evidence that these changes would have tangible benefits to Australian audiences, or that there are deficiencies in the current system.
- Such changes would be resource intensive and inconsistent with the principle set out in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* that regulation should enable public interest considerations to be addressed in a way that does not impose unnecessary financial and administrative burdens.

Recommendations

- A PG-13 classification category should not be introduced.
- The MA15+ classification category should not transition to MA16+.
- Classifiable element icons should not be introduced.
- There is no need to change consumer advice for 'themes' given amendments have recently been made to consumer advice under the National Classification Scheme.
- Careful consideration should be given to a number of proposals relating to changes to the classification website which could have the unintended consequence of increasing regulatory burden without commensurate benefit.
- Any Classification Advisory Council should complement rather than duplicate the existing Classification Board and must include both industry and expert representation.

2. Introduction

Free TV Australia (**Free TV**) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts in response to the March 2026 *Update to modernise and harmonise classification guidelines 2025* consultation paper (the **Consultation Paper**).

Free TV is the peak industry body for Australia's commercial television broadcasters. Information about Free TV and its members is at **Attachment A**.

Free TV has been an active participant in consultations on stage 1 and 2 reforms to Australia's National Classification Scheme and earlier review processes such as the 2012 National Classification Scheme Review conducted by the Australian Law Reform Commission, and the more recent 2020 Review of Australian Classification Regulation undertaken by Mr Neville Stevens AO (the **Stevens Review**).

The Consultation Paper is seeking views on Australia's guidelines made under the National Classification Scheme (the **Scheme Guidelines**) and related matters. This submission is structured in the following way:

- **Section 3** deals with the relationship between the Scheme Guidelines, and the separate but related Television Classification Guidelines (**Television Guidelines**) in the *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice* (**Free TV Code**).¹
- **Section 4** responds to proposals in the Consultation Paper in relation to the Scheme Guidelines and related matters.
- **Appendix B** sets out Free TV's comments on all recommendations in the Consultation Paper.

3. Relationship between the Scheme Guidelines and the Television Guidelines

Commercial free TV broadcasters provide trusted, predictable classification information and consumer advice for the professionally produced content they provide across platforms. These arrangements have been operating effectively for many years.

The TV Guidelines used by commercial broadcasters to classify content are set out in Appendix 1 of the Free TV Code. The Free TV Code is developed by Free TV and registered and enforced by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (**ACMA**). The ACMA can only register the Free TV Code if it is, among other things, satisfied that the Code provides appropriate community safeguards for the matters it covers, including classification.²

The TV Guidelines are highly consistent with the Scheme Guidelines and provide more detail on specific subject matter and program genres shown on television. The value of this additional detail was recognised in the Stevens Review:

The Films Guidelines [referred to in this submission as the Scheme Guidelines] use an impact hierarchy for classification, which is inherently subjective and relies heavily on the capacity of the Board to interpret in a consistent manner. The guidelines used by television broadcasters, by comparison, are

¹ Available at <https://www.freetv.com.au/resources/code-of-practice/>.

² See section 123 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (**BSA**).

more detailed in their description of what is allowable in each category. As classification increasingly becomes the responsibility of industry, there is a need for guidelines to be as detailed and as specific as possible to enable the provision of consistent classification decisions and information.³

The classification provisions in the Free TV Code have provided effective community safeguards for decades under the co-regulatory model. Any further reform to the Scheme Guidelines should recognise the stability of this approach and provide for its continuation in relation to content provided by broadcasters across platforms.

Free TV's comments in this submission are made on the basis that while the Scheme Guidelines are not applied directly to television broadcasting classification, the objective of maintaining consistency between the systems is such that changes to the Scheme Guidelines may have flow-on effects to the Television Guidelines in the future.

4. Proposed reforms to the Classification Guidelines

Recommendations

- A PG-13 classification category should not be introduced.
- The MA15+ classification category should not transition to MA16+.
- Classifiable element icons should not be introduced.
- There is no need to change consumer advice for 'themes' given amendments have recently been made to consumer advice under the National Classification Scheme.
- Careful consideration should be given to a number of proposals relating to changes to the classification website which could have the unintended consequence of increasing regulatory burden without commensurate benefit.
- Any Classification Advisory Council should complement rather than duplicate the existing Classification Board and must include both industry and expert representation.

4.1 Free TV comments on recommendations

Many of the recommendations in the Consultation Paper would support the modernisation of the system in line with changing community standards, efficient technological processes, and clarity for audiences. Free TV supports a number of these proposals, and comments on each of them are at **Appendix B**.

For example, while there is no evidence of systemic misunderstanding of the classification system among Australian audiences, Free TV would support a targeted education campaign (C22) to reinforce public awareness. Such a campaign should remind audiences of how the classification system works, what content is subject to classification, and how individuals and families can make informed viewing choices.

³ Neville Stevens AO, *Review of Australian classification regulation Report* (the **Stevens Review**), page 12 – available at <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/review-of-australian-classification-regulation--may2020.pdf>.

Any education campaign should prioritise the elements that are consistent across all platforms, including television, in order to build clarity and confidence for consumers rather than adding to fragmentation or confusion.

Some of the recommendations made in the paper, however, go further than a ‘practical renewal’, as suggested in the Foreword, by recommending significant changes to the classification categories, to the display of consumer advice, and to the management of community input to classification decisions. Together, these proposals would create a classification system that is quite different to that to which Australian audiences are accustomed. If implemented, they would place heavy compliance costs on broadcasters and would require extensive community education.

If the cost to broadcasters to implement such changes outweighed the benefit to consumers, this would conflict with the regulatory policy in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* that provides that regulation should not place unnecessary financial or administrative burdens on broadcasters.⁴

Free TV’s comments on these recommendations are in the following sections.

4.2 Changes to classification categories

The Consultation Paper proposes two significant changes to the classification categories – the introduction of PG-13 (C01), and the transition of MA15+ to MA16+ (C05). There is no convincing evidence that these changes would have tangible benefits to Australian audiences, or that there are deficiencies in the current system.

The Stevens Review in 2020 found that:

On balance, I do not consider that a compelling case has been made for an additional category in isolation of a more fundamental look at all the categories. The current system, while it may not be ideal, is well known and accepted by the community. The community research and my consultations have found no obvious alternative to the current categories or any overwhelming consensus for changes to categories. This being the case, I do not consider it desirable to recommend we either ‘start from scratch’ in creating an entirely new set of categories, or make more modest changes, such as adding a PG13 category. Instead, I recommend that further work be undertaken on this matter.⁵

This is consistent with research over the last decade about audience familiarity with existing categories, such as:

- Research for the Attorney-General’s Department in 2015, which found that there was high awareness of the National Classification Scheme and categories/ markings amongst the Australian public.⁶
- Research for the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts in 2023, which found that there was ‘...widespread familiarity and awareness of the Classification Scheme amongst participants...’.⁷

⁴ See the regulatory policy set out in section 4 of the BSA.

⁵ Stevens Review, page 66.

⁶ Attorney-General’s Department, *Classification ratings: Research with the general public*, page 8, July 2015 – available at <https://www.classification.gov.au/about-us/research-and-publications/classification-ratings-research-general-public>.

⁷ Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, *Report on classifications and community standards research*, August 2023, page v – available at https://www.classification.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/5537_ditrdc_classification_and_community_standards_research_report-publication_version_2024.pdf.

While this is recognised in the Consultation Paper, which states that ‘Australia’s classification symbols...are widely recognised and trusted...’,⁸ it goes on to recommend two significant changes to classification categories.

Introduction of PG-13

The Consultation Paper recommends that ‘[t]he guidelines could be updated with a new classification rating – PG13’.⁹ There is no evidence that introducing a PG-13 classification category would benefit viewers. While the Consultation Paper notes that a new age rating such as ‘PG-13’ or ‘12+’ could help consumers assess whether content is appropriate for their age,¹⁰ the existing Consumer Advice system and the Free TV Code already serve this purpose more effectively.

The Television Guidelines set out classifiable elements for each classification category, providing detailed guidance to consumers about what they can expect from a program. This existing framework is well understood by audiences and does not require supplementation through an additional classification tier.

The introduction of a PG-13 category would also necessitate a reassessment of how existing classifiable elements are applied across all categories. Although some overseas jurisdictions have adopted a comparable rating, these systems are not directly aligned with Australia’s system. The United States, for example, has a PG-13 category but no equivalent to Australia’s M classification, making direct comparison difficult.

In practical terms, a PG-13 category would likely result in one or more of the following outcomes:

- material currently classified M being re-classified to PG-13;
- material currently classified PG being re-classified to PG-13; or
- a combination of both.

Any of these outcomes would be confusing for viewers and would have flow-on consequences for all existing classification categories.

The introduction of this category would also raise questions about broadcast scheduling. PG content can currently be broadcast at any time on commercial television channels. If PG-13 were introduced, consideration would need to be given to whether such content should be subject to time restrictions. If content currently classified PG became more restricted, broadcasters would lose the ability to screen it to the same audiences, with a corresponding impact on their ability to monetise that content through advertising.

A PG-13 category would further be inconsistent with Australia’s descriptive, rather than prescriptive, classification model. That model encourages parents to assess whether content within a given category is suitable for their child, having regard to the child’s maturity and the specific themes involved, such as violence, sexual content, nudity, or drug use.

Free TV understands it is not intended that any change apply retrospectively. However, if that position were to change, re-classifying extensive libraries of existing content would involve significant resources. Should the Government proceed with introducing this category, notwithstanding Free TV’s opposition to

⁸ Consultation Paper, page 2.
⁹ Consultation Paper, page 4.

¹⁰ Consultation Paper, page 16.

it, regard should be had to the time and resources required to update systems, processes, and consumer-facing information.

MA16+

As with the PG-13 proposal, there is no evidence that changing the MA15+ classification is necessary or beneficial. Free TV understands that the proposal involves a name change only from MA15+ to MA16+ with no amendment to the underlying classifiable elements.

While such a change may appear administratively straightforward, it carries real risks of confusion for audiences, and implementation cost for broadcasters. As noted in the Stevens Review, and the introduction to the Consultation Paper, Australians have a well-established and broadly consistent understanding of the existing classification system. There is no evidence that content currently classified MA15+ is inappropriate for 15- to 16-year-olds, nor that audiences are experiencing confusion about the existing rating.

Renaming the classification would therefore introduce unnecessary disruption for little or no discernible benefit.

4.3 Element icons

Free TV does not support the introduction of element icons as proposed in the Consultation Paper (C20). As with proposed changes to classification ratings, audiences already demonstrate a strong understanding of existing ratings and consumer advice, and there is no evidence that visual icons would meaningfully increase comprehension.

On the contrary, a comprehensive public education campaign would be required before audiences could reliably associate icons with the classifiable elements they represent – an investment of time and resources that is difficult to justify in the absence of demonstrated need.

There are also practical implementation challenges that would need to be resolved, including technical constraints on displaying visual consumer advice on screen, limitations on available screen real estate, and the presentation of classification information within electronic programme guides.

4.4 Classifiable element ‘Themes’

The Consultation Paper proposes an ‘Overhaul of classifiable element ‘Themes’’ (C02).

In December 2025, the Classification Board issued the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) (Consumer Advice Terms) Determination 2025* (the **Determination**), which sets out the approved words and phrases to be used as consumer advice in respect of films and computer games. The Determination was intended to ‘make it easier for consumers to understand and interpret consumer advice labelling for content they watch or play’.¹¹

The Consumer Advice Terms introduced by the Determination represented a significant narrowing of previously used terminology, refocusing ‘Themes’ on key areas of community concern – consistent with the approach proposed in this Consultation Paper. The Determination also removed genre descriptors for ratings up to MA15+, which likewise aligns with the Consultation Paper’s proposals.¹²

¹¹ Explanatory Statement, *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) (Consumer Advice Terms) Determination 2025*, released 12 December 2025.

¹² Consultation Paper, page 14

Given that these changes have only recently been made, Free TV does not support any further amendments to consumer advice at this time. The industry should be given adequate opportunity to implement and entrench the existing changes before additional reforms are introduced.

Free TV Classifiers should remain at liberty to use their own consumer advice, which is familiar to their viewers, while at the same time having the option to adopt any new and useful thematic labels that will help to inform the public.¹³

4.5 Amendments to the classification website

Recommendations C15–C19 of the Consultation Paper propose a number of changes to the classification website. Free TV has significant concerns about several of these proposals, which are addressed in turn below.

Uniform matrix (C15)

The introduction of a uniform classification matrix would have considerable time and financial resource implications for classifiers, particularly television classifiers. Unlike film classification, where a single work typically runs for two to three hours, television classifiers assess content by episode, meaning they routinely classify individual programs of between 20 and 40 minutes in duration. The volume of content involved is therefore substantially greater, and any requirement to apply a uniform matrix across all platforms would impose a disproportionate regulatory burden on commercial broadcasters. Free TV considers that the resource implications of this proposal would outweigh any corresponding benefit to audiences and does not support its application to commercial broadcasters.

Transparent decisions and community input (C18–C19)

Recommendation C18 proposes that the classification website display a log of the questions, concerns and decisions raised or made by the Classification Board or Review Board, particularly in relation to contentious classifications, with a view to demonstrating the rigour of the classification process. Recommendation C19 proposes that the website display a summarised dashboard of community input from consultation groups, together with links to relevant external organisations such as eSafety.

Taken together, these proposals raise significant concerns regarding regulatory burden. Publishing a comprehensive public record of all considerations and input received in relation to a classification decision risks materially increasing the volume of complaints and requests for review. It may also provide a vehicle for advocacy groups with particular interests to amplify their positions by reference to the published record in a way that is not consistent with a broader level of community concern.

Free TV acknowledges that community input and the thorough consideration of questions and concerns are essential elements of sound classification decisions and well-designed classification policy. However, the publication of this deliberative information goes beyond what is necessary to assist consumers in making informed decisions about the content they choose to view.

Free TV does not support recommendations C18 or C19.

¹³ For example, Free TV classifiers from time to time use a broader range of consumer advice descriptions to give greater information to viewers (such as 'Hunting Violence', 'Injury Detail' and 'Religious Themes'). They are also cognisant of the Classification Board's consumer advice for movies and other programs it has classified.

4.7 Classification Advisory Council

Free TV supports the development of a Classification Advisory Council (**Council**, C09) to provide input and feedback on classification policy. Such a Council should complement, rather than duplicate, the existing Classification Board, which plays a vital role in advising Government on classification matters, including by:

- contributing to the Government-led review of the Classification Guidelines;
- contributing to classification policy reform to better protect and inform viewers;
- actively engaging with complaints to inform Board practice; and
- engaging with industry stakeholders to improve shared understanding of the classification ecosystem.

However, should a Council be introduced, it must include both industry and expert representation. Importantly, membership should include current industry classification practitioners, not merely individuals with prior industry experience, so that contemporary industry trends and evolving community standards are properly reflected in the Council's advice.

The Council's work should be grounded in robust empirical evidence, community research, and international best practice. Industry members would play an important role in commissioning relevant research, and Free TV recommends that the Council adopt a structured review process to interrogate and, where appropriate, challenge research findings before they inform policy recommendations.

The Government may also wish to consider complementary mechanisms for broader community engagement. Public consultation processes, for example, allow for extensive input from audiences, advocacy bodies, and other stakeholders, and ensure that a wider range of views can be heard beyond those represented on the Council itself.

5. Attachment A

About Free TV

Free TV Australia is the peak industry body for Australia's commercial television broadcasters. We advance the interests of our members in national policy debates, position the industry for the future in technology and innovation and highlight the important contribution commercial free television makes to Australia's culture and economy. We proudly represent all of Australia's commercial free-to-air television broadcasters in metropolitan, regional and remote licence areas.



Free TV brings Australians together, supporting Australian culture and democracy. The commercial television industry creates these benefits by delivering content across a wide range of genres, including news and current affairs, sport, entertainment, lifestyle and Australian drama. At no cost to the public, our members provide a wide array of channels across a range of genres, as well as rich online and mobile offerings.

Commercial television networks:

- Reach 19.3 million Australians every week, including 11.4 million who watch trusted news every week, and 9.5 million who watch live and free sport each week
- Provide 25,285 hours of Australian content a year
- Spend more than \$1.625 billion on Australian content every year, dedicating over 88% of their content expenditure to local programming
- Spend more than \$400 million a year on trusted news, including on 390 local news bulletins every week across the country (plus updates and community service announcements)

A report released in September 2022 by Deloitte Access Economics, *Everybody Gets It: Revaluing the economic and social benefits of commercial television in Australia*, highlighted that in 2021, the commercial TV industry supported over 16,000 full-time equivalent jobs and contributed a total of \$2.5 billion into the local economy. Further, advertising on commercial TV contributed \$161 billion in brand value.

The commercial television industry creates these benefits by delivering content across a wide range of genres, including news and current affairs, sport, entertainment, lifestyle and Australian drama. At no cost to the public, our members provide a wide array of channels across a range of genres, as well as rich online and mobile offerings.

A strong commercial broadcasting industry delivers important public policy outcomes for all Australians and is key to a healthy local production ecosystem. This in turn sustains Australian storytelling and local voices and is critical to maintaining and developing our national identity.

6. Attachment B

Free TV comments on proposals

Proposal	Element	Free TV comments
CO1	PG13 Rating	Free TV does not support this recommendation.
CO2	Overhaul of classifiable element 'Themes'*	There is no need for further change to the classifiable element 'Themes', following amendments made by the Classification Board in December 2025.
CO3	Improved reliance on evidence over morality	Free TV supports this recommendation. Evidence-based research on actual harms removes a level of subjectivity from classification decisions and provides a shared understanding of community expectations.
CO4	Interactivity classifications focus on replication	This recommendation is not applicable to commercial broadcasters.
CO5	MA15+→ MA16+	Free TV does not support this change.
CO6	Publications to adopt the rest of the classification system	This recommendation is not applicable to commercial broadcasters.
CO7	Clarify definitions	Free TV seeks further detail on this recommendation and considers that definitions should not become overly prescriptive. Television programs are distinct from the content genres classified by the Classification Board (i.e. films).
CO8	Reconsideration of sexual content	Free TV broadly supports this recommendation to modernise the guidelines in line with community standards. Network Classifiers already respect, recognise and treat with equality depiction of all sexual behaviour, identity and orientation. There is no differential treatment of non-heterosexual intimacy portrayed as demonstrated by years of classification decisions made for a wide range of diverse programs screened by broadcasters. From time-to-time Free TV classifiers use more specific consumer advice such as 'Sexual Violence' and 'Sexual Violence References' to better inform the viewer of such content.

rainbowCO9	Classification Advisory Council	Free TV supports the introduction of a Classification Advisory Council only if membership includes professional industry representatives, experts, and its activities are evidence-based.
C10	Single touch Classification	Free TV supports this recommendation in-principle, as it provides efficiencies for classifiers and clarity for audiences. Consideration would need to be given to the threshold for a content change to require re-classification.
C11	Permit updates to classifications	Free TV supports this recommendation in-principle. As with C10, consideration would need to be given to the threshold for a content change to require re-classification.
C12	Self-classification as default	All content for television is self-classified, by classifiers employed at commercial television broadcasters.
C13	Modernise the classification database	Free TV supports this recommendation to improve the user experience of the database and ensure that different versions of content can be considered together.
C14	Expand use of automated classification tools	In-principle support. Free TV broadcasters do not currently use automated classification tools. All classification is undertaken by highly trained and experienced classifiers who have particular experience in accurately classifying locally made content taking account of local cultural norms. Early trials of these AI tools have highlighted accuracy issues that may create compliance risks for broadcasters. Furthermore, these tools currently do not meet the tight and demanding time-frame requirements demanded by free to air broadcasters. However, Free TV does not object to further exploration of self-classification tools to support trained classifiers. Transparency about the parameters within which these tools operate would be important to give confidence as to their use.
C15	Classification website – uniform matrix	Free TV does not support this recommendation.
C16	Classification website – personalised preferences	Free TV supports this recommendation.
C17	Classification website - unify listings	Free TV supports this recommendation.
C18	Classification website – transparent decisions	Free TV does not support this recommendation.

C19	Classification website – addition of extra community information	Free TV does not support this recommendation.
C20	Element icons	Free TV does not support the introduction of element icons.
C21	Quick links to classification listings	In-principle support. While providing audiences with an easy point of access to further information, the implementation of this on television would present significant technical challenges. This proposal may be more appropriate for hard copy materials, such as DVDs.
C22	Generational education campaign	In principle support. While there is little evidence of a systemic issue with misunderstandings around classification by Australian audiences, Free TV would support an education campaign which reminds audiences of the system; what material is classified; and, how audiences can make appropriate choices for themselves and children. In any education campaign, it would be important to focus on those elements which are standard across all platforms, including television, so as to create clarity for consumers.