



Legislative Council
Environment and
Planning Committee

Community consultation practices

Inquiry

March 2026

Published by order, or
under the authority, of the
Parliament of Victoria
March 2026

ISBN 978 0 908262 56 4 (print version)
ISBN 978 0 908262 57 1 (PDF version)

This report is available on the Committee's website:
parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc

Committee membership



CHAIR
Ryan Batchelor
Southern Metropolitan



DEPUTY CHAIR
David Ettershank
Western Metropolitan



Melina Bath
Eastern Victoria



Gaelle Broad
Northern Victoria



Jacinta Ermacora
Western Victoria



Wendy Lovell
Northern Victoria



Dr Sarah Mansfield
Western Victoria
(From 27 August 2024)



Rikkie-Lee Tyrell
Northern Victoria



Sheena Watt
Northern Metropolitan

Former Committee members

Samantha Ratnam, Northern Metropolitan (until 27 August 2024)

Sonja Terpstra, North-Eastern Metropolitan (until 28 November 2024)

Participating members

John Berger, Southern Metropolitan

Ann-Marie Hermans, South-Eastern Metropolitan

Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria (from 2 December 2025)

Evan Mulholland, Northern Metropolitan

Rachel Payne, South-Eastern Metropolitan

Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan (from 30 October 2024)

Richard Welch, Northern Metropolitan

About the Committee

Functions

The Environment and Planning Standing Committee will inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with the arts, coordination of government, environment, and planning the use, development and protection of land.

Secretariat

Lilian Topic, Committee Manager (until 5 September 2025)

Kieran Crowe, Committee Manager (from 8 September 2025)

Jessica Summers, Inquiry Officer

Adeel Siddiqi, Research Assistant (until 25 September 2025)

Sylvette Bassy, Administrative Officer (until 25 April 2025)

Monique Riordan-Hill, Administrative Officer (from 28 April 2025)

Contact details

Address Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne Victoria 3002

Phone +61 3 8682 2869

Email ICCP@parliament.vic.gov.au

Web parliament.vic.gov.au/consultationinquiry

Contents

Preliminaries

Committee membership	ii
About the Committee	iv
Terms of reference	vii
Chair’s foreword	ix
Findings and recommendations	xi
What happens next?	xxiii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 The inquiry process	1
1.1.1 Community roundtable events	1
1.2 What is engagement?	2
1.3 Why is engagement important?	3
1.4 The regulatory framework for engagement in Victoria	3
1.4.1 The Public Engagement Framework	4
1.5 The scope of this report	7
1.6 Engage Victoria	8
2 Defining the purpose of engagement	11
2.1 The terminology around public participation and engagement	11
2.1.1 Sharing information is a form of engagement – but some in the community expect more	13
2.2 Making sure language matches the level of involvement offered	15
2.3 Only ask for feedback if it will be used	16
2.4 Let people know what’s on the table	18
2.5 Unclear or misaligned engagement feels like box ticking	20
3 Identifying who to engage and when	23
3.1 Reaching relevant stakeholders	23
3.1.1 Engaging a wide range of stakeholders	26
3.1.2 ‘Opt-in’ engagement processes	27
3.1.3 Alternatives to opt-in engagement methods	29
3.2 Coordination of engagement processes	31
3.3 Incorporating existing knowledge	34
3.4 Sufficient timeframes for engagement	35

4	Participation that works for everyone	39
4.1	Participation should be well-informed	39
4.2	Being heard matters	42
4.3	Listening to each other in shared forums builds understanding	44
4.4	Engagement should be accessible	46
4.4.1	Regional and rural Victorians	47
4.4.2	Young Victorians	49
4.4.3	Multicultural Victorians	52
4.4.4	First Nations Victorians	54
4.4.5	Victorians with a disability	58
4.4.6	Victorians with low digital literacy	60
4.5	Use of external consultants	62
4.6	Confidentiality requirements	64
4.7	Engage Victoria	67
4.7.1	Not yet consistently used by all departments	67
4.7.2	Familiar within the sector, but largely unknown in the community	68
4.7.3	Makes some engagement superficial	68
4.7.4	Room to improve the design of platform	69
4.7.5	Not a replacement for other engagement methods	70
5	Engagement feedback	73
5.1	Feedback is important	73
5.2	Examples of a lack of feedback	75
5.2.1	A lack of information about the impact of participation	75
5.2.2	A lack of information about how input is considered	76
5.2.3	A lack of open communication with participants	76
5.3	The impact of a lack of feedback	78
5.3.1	A loss of trust leading to disengagement	78
5.3.2	Poorer outcomes	79
5.4	What feedback should look like	79
	Appendix	
A	About the Inquiry	83
	Extract of proceedings	87

Terms of reference

Inquiry into community consultation practices

On 31 July 2024, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Environment and Planning Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 28 February 2026, on —

- (a) community consultation practices done by, and on behalf of, state and local government and statutory authorities, and providers of essential services such as utilities, in Victoria;
- (b) the use of non-government providers to do consultations on behalf of government agencies;
- (c) standards of conduct, including preparedness, to be expected in community consultations;
- (d) groups or regions who are underrepresented by existing consultation practices, and options to improve their engagement;
- (e) the Engage Victoria platform, its use and effectiveness, and areas for improvement; and
- (f) best practice community consultation in other jurisdictions in Australia and other comparable countries.

Chair's foreword

Decisions informed by the experience, insights and expertise of the public are often better decisions, and all levels of public sector decision making can benefit from improved engagement with the community.

Consultation should not be a 'tick box' exercise, it is an integral part of the policy making process that strengthens public trust and helps build more cohesive communities.

As our communities become more connected, information is available in ways that have never before been possible. As governments respond to community expectations for improved infrastructure, the need for an energy transition, and reforms to enable more housing to be built, Victorians have shown an enthusiasm for their voice to be heard and for input into decision making.

The Victorian Government has already taken important steps to strengthen public engagement. The *Public Engagement Framework 2021-25* provides guidance and principles for engagement practice across the public sector. The Engage Victoria platform provides a centralised, accessible 'one stop shop' to have your say on Victorian Government policies and projects. These efforts reflect a commitment to embedding engagement in the everyday practice of government.

However, we heard throughout this Inquiry that the principles articulated in the Public Engagement Framework and other guidance documents must be consistently translated into practice. The Committee was provided examples of thoughtful and inclusive engagement. However, we also heard that when engagement is rushed, narrowly framed or poorly communicated, it can undermine trust and lead to disengagement. We must strengthen the practical application of the Public Engagement Framework and ensure that engagement is undertaken early, transparently and with clear purpose. With renewed focus and consistent application, we can support a genuine partnership between the government and community.

I would like to thank the community members, advocacy organisations, local governments, academics and departmental representatives who shared their experiences with us. Their insights demonstrated a belief that when government listens, everyone benefits.

I thank my fellow Committee Members for their thoughtful contributions, diligent work and collaborative spirit during this Inquiry.

Chair's foreword

I would also like to thank the Secretariat for its support, which was instrumental in helping us to hear the views of stakeholders and translate their experiences into recommendations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Batchelor', with a large, stylized loop at the bottom.

Ryan Batchelor MLC
Chair

Findings and recommendations

1 Introduction

FINDING 1: The principles outlined in the Public Engagement Framework are in line with best practice principles for engagement outlined by the International Association for Public Participation.

7

FINDING 2: The Public Engagement Framework is not consistently applied to all engagements conducted by Victorian Government departments and agencies.

7

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government mandate the application of the Public Engagement Framework for all departments, agencies and their consultants/contractors when conducting engagement and require them to publicly report on their adherence to the framework when conducting engagement.

7

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet provide training for Department staff undertaking community consultation to ensure that they are aware of the principles of the Public Engagement Framework to work more closely with communities to make better decisions.

7

2 Defining the purpose of engagement

FINDING 3: In the context of public participation in decision making, the term engagement means different things to different people.

13

FINDING 4: When the terminology of engagement and consultation are used without specific meaning, expectations clash and trust erodes.

13

FINDING 5: Some in the community do not consider the provision of information a form of engagement, they expect an opportunity to be consulted and to influence decisions.

14

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require engagements to involve consultation with participants, rather than to simply inform. Information should be clearly labelled as that and not presented as consultation. **14**

FINDING 6: Accurate language is essential to align community expectations with the real scope of engagement. **16**

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to develop standardised language guidelines for engagement processes. **16**

FINDING 7: Engagement processes should be designed to seek community input at a point when it can and will be meaningfully utilised. **17**

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to state that the input of participants should be sought at a point when it can be meaningfully used. **17**

FINDING 8: When seeking public participation on a decision, it is important to be clear on what can and what can't be changed. **19**

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to outline the boundaries with participants of what aspects of a policy or project are within the scope of an engagement. **19**

FINDING 9: Aligned purpose, language and design makes engagement processes feel genuine. Without this clarity, it can look like 'box ticking' and 'tokenistic' to the community. **21**

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require alignment between the purpose, language and design of an engagement to contribute to more effective community consultation. **21**

3 Identifying who to engage and when

FINDING 10: Not everyone will want to take part in engagement processes, but it is important that those who do want to be involved know about the opportunity and can access it easily. 25

FINDING 11: Wherever possible, engagement opportunities should be promoted through a range of channels, recognising that people access information in different ways. 25

FINDING 12: Stakeholders said they prefer clear, direct notification of engagement opportunities, as learning about them informally can feel disrespectful and undermine confidence in the process. 25

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require informing relevant stakeholders through diverse channels to ensure engagement opportunities are accessible and widely known. 25

FINDING 13: Engagement processes should be open to the wider community, as relying on a narrow group of professional stakeholders can exclude important perspectives. 27

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to show how their engagement approach has reached, or attempted to reach, a broad and diverse cross-section of stakeholders. 27

FINDING 14: Some engagement processes don't attract a diversity of community perspectives. 29

FINDING 15: When opt-in engagement attracts only a limited demographic, the feedback gathered may not represent the broader community, especially groups such as younger people, renters and time-poor participants. 29

FINDING 16: Sharing demographic breakdowns of engagement participants can strengthen trust in the process by demonstrating openness about who provided feedback. 29

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure engagement processes attract a diversity of community perspectives.

29

FINDING 17: Random lottery selection and deliberative engagement models can create a more balanced process by minimising the dominance of vocal interest groups.

31

FINDING 18: Although random lottery selection and deliberative engagement models can be more resource intensive, they generally produce more representative input than opt-in methods and are often viewed as more credible and transparent.

31

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to specify methods of reaching engagement participants in addition to the traditional opt-in approach. This may include random lottery selection or deliberative engagement models.

31

FINDING 19: Siloed consultation process can overload communities with multiple complex issues at once. This is a particular issue in regional and rural Victoria and can cause engagement fatigue.

33

FINDING 20: Poorly coordinated engagement can damage trust in engagement processes, as people can perceive them as being rushed, unclear or unfair.

33

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet create a centralised engagement calendar to track consultations and assess cumulative community engagement loads to avoid duplication and reduce the pressure on local communities.

33

FINDING 21: Engagement practitioners can fail to check if a community has recently been consulted on the same or similar topic.

34

FINDING 22: Engagement practitioners may fail to incorporate the findings of previous engagements into their work.

34

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to review and report on recent engagement findings in affected communities, explain their incorporation into current decisions and ensure new processes build on prior feedback. **35**

FINDING 23: Engagement works best when it is built in from the beginning of the decision-making process, not treated as an afterthought. **37**

FINDING 24: Understanding the community is essential for choosing engagement times that people can realistically participate in. **37**

FINDING 25: When engagement is rushed or inaccessible to key stakeholders, valuable perspectives can be missed. This can lead to decisions that are less informed, less trusted and more likely to face concern or pushback. **37**

RECOMMENDATION 14: Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require:

- holding engagements at appropriate times to allow for the participation of relevant stakeholders.
- allowing sufficient time for participant input so engagements don't feel rushed and insincere or undermine the integrity of engagement. **38**

4 Participation that works for everyone

FINDING 26: Meaningful engagement is strengthened when communities are provided with clear and sufficient information. **42**

FINDING 27: What matters is not the volume of information, but whether it is clear, accessible and useful to communities. **42**

FINDING 28: Information provided during some engagement processes can be vague, incomplete or poor-quality — sometimes selectively or misleadingly presented through unclear maps or glossy, low-detail brochures. **42**

FINDING 29: Providing timely and accurate information is one of the strongest defences against mis- and disinformation taking hold. **42**

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require clear, sufficient, and timely information about the subject of the engagement to participants. **42**

FINDING 30: Engagement improves when the process allows people to delve deeply into issues and actively participate. **43**

FINDING 31: Stakeholders seek survey designs which offer broader response options and more space for sharing the complexity of lived experience. **44**

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement framework to require departments to:

- Provide multiple formats for engagement, including surveys with open-ended questions and opportunities for in-depth discussions.
- Include sufficient time for participants to ask questions and receive answers. **44**

FINDING 32: Effective engagement gives people an open forum where they can hear perspectives beyond their own. **45**

FINDING 33: Separating participants into small groups or one-on-one sessions restricts community dialogue and may be perceived as deliberately divisive. **46**

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to specify that:

- Wherever possible, engagement processes should create inclusive forums that enable the open exchange of views within the community.
- Engagement processes should be transparent and enable participants to share and engage with a diversity of views, online and in person. **46**

FINDING 34: Some regional and rural Victorians are excluded from engagement processes due to distance, geographical isolation, poor digital access and limited local opportunities. **48**

FINDING 35: Good engagement means meeting people where they are, holding local in-person opportunities and working through established community networks. **48**

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require local, in-person engagement in the communities that will be impacted, addressing barriers like distance and digital exclusion, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. **49**

FINDING 36: Young people are underrepresented in engagement processes. **51**

FINDING 37: Some young people reported feeling that engagement processes are tokenistic or inaccessible due to limited opportunities, narrow representation or sessions held during school hours. **51**

FINDING 38: Good engagement meets young people in their spaces, explains why their input counts, avoids stuffy formats, and adapts to the ways young people want to take part. **51**

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require appropriate engagement with young people using appropriate times, formats and venues. **51**

FINDING 39: Culturally responsive practice is inconsistently applied in practice. **53**

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require consistent application of culturally responsive practice to engagement processes. **53**

FINDING 40: The *Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Vic)* establishes that advancing First Peoples' self-determination is paramount, setting a clear expectation that engagement must be led by First Peoples' priorities and give them real influence over decisions that affect them. **58**

FINDING 41: Government departments will need to develop clear guidelines for consulting the First Peoples' Assembly when creating laws or policies affecting First Peoples. **58**

FINDING 42: Prior to the passing of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* (Vic) inconsistent practice, tokenistic one-off engagements, over-reliance on Aboriginal public servants, consultation fatigue, and a lack of cultural knowledge within government could undermine engagement of First Nations peoples. 58

FINDING 43: Effective engagement with First Nations peoples requires adequate resourcing, culturally safe and tailored practices, and early involvement which gives communities real influence over decisions. 58

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to reflect the principles of engagement of First Peoples articulated by the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* (Vic). The Department should also ensure engagement with First Nations communities is culturally safe, tailored, and undertaken early, with meaningful opportunities for First Nations peoples to influence decisions. Engagement should prioritise respectful listening, collaboration with appropriate representatives, and incorporation of cultural knowledge. 58

FINDING 44: Despite existing guidance and commitment to genuine co-design, some stakeholders reported that engagement processes still feel exclusionary for Victorians with a disability, with decisions being made without their input or being limited to advisory groups bound by non-disclosure agreements. 60

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure that engagement with people with a disability is accessible and inclusive. 60

FINDING 45: As engagement increasingly shifts online, stakeholders stressed that some community members lack the digital literacy need to participate effectively in online processes. Face-to-face sessions remain important to some stakeholders, particularly older Victorians. 61

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure engagement processes are accessible to people with low digital literacy. 62

FINDING 46: The use of external consultants can be seen as a way for government to avoid accountability for engagement processes. 64

FINDING 47: Stakeholders reported that inadequate oversight of consultant-run engagement processes left them unable to challenge poor practice, leading to significant frustration. 64

FINDING 48: Overreliance on external consultants erodes government capability, weakens engagement quality, and creates a cycle of dependence that stakeholders say must be broken by rebuilding in-house skills. 64

FINDING 49: Trust grows through consistent, relationship-based engagement — so brief, disconnected external consultant visits make communities view the process as temporary and not worth their time. 64

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to summarise the benefits of conducting engagements in house. 64

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to:

- Justify and publish the rationale for using external consultants in engagement processes and ensure consultants meet the same transparency and accountability standards as government staff.
 - Ensure that where an external consultant is used, a departmental or agency representative is present at all consultations to both oversee the process and answer any questions from participants.
- 64

FINDING 50: The use of non-disclosure agreements in engagement processes can create division, shut down informed dialogue and erode community trust in decision making processes. 66

FINDING 51: When engagement participants are bound by non-disclosure agreements, they cannot fully inform their communities, which can lead to frustration and mistrust. 66

FINDING 52: Non-disclosure agreements that oblige the recipient to not disclose the existence of the non-disclosure agreement are entirely antithetical to a genuine consultation process. 66

FINDING 53: The Victorian Government imposing a non-disclosure agreement on the Municipal Association of Victoria obstructed them from fulfilling their duties as a statutory body.

66

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require that non-disclosure agreements should not be used, except in circumstances where confidentiality is genuinely required or requested by participants. The Framework should:

- clearly define when non-disclosure agreements are appropriate
- require transparency about their purpose and scope
- not prevent recipients disclosing that they are subject to a non-disclosure agreement
- ensure they do not prevent recipients from sharing general information with their communities
- reaffirm that open, transparent engagement is the standard practice.

67

FINDING 54: Inconsistent departmental uptake of the Engage Victoria platform prevents it from functioning as a fully comprehensive, whole-of-government resource.

70

FINDING 55: While the Engage Victoria platform has good uptake amongst professional users in the engagement sector, it has low visibility in the community.

71

FINDING 56: Exclusively conducting engagement processes on a digital platform like Engage Victoria excludes some Victorians, including some older Victorians, multicultural Victorians, regional and rural Victorians and Victorians with limited digital literacy.

71

FINDING 57: The Engage Victoria platform can sometimes oversimplify complex issues and lead to superficial engagement processes that collect lower-quality community feedback.

71

FINDING 58: Some design aspects of the Engage Victoria platform fall short of best practice, with accessibility gaps and confusing, text-heavy navigation that makes the platform difficult to use — especially for people with low digital literacy, disabilities or language barriers.

71

FINDING 59: Stakeholders emphasised that Engage Victoria should supplement, not replace, community-based, face-to-face engagement. Relying on a solely digital platform risks excluding people and diminishing the depth of input.

71

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Government Services jointly develop and implement a mandatory guide for departments using the Engage Victoria Platform to ensure that:

- Engage Victoria is sufficiently publicised to attract input from wider sections of the community
- engagements offer people with barriers to using Engage Victoria other ways to participate
- Engage Victoria apply functionality that allows nuanced input
- a style guide be produced to ensure that users have, as much as possible, a common user experience when responding to Engage Victoria surveys
- the accessibility of Engage Victoria is improved through increased use of plain language, multiple languages and text for people with vision impairment
- the Engage Victoria platform provides greater transparency and publishes de-identified community consultation feedback.

71

5 Engagement feedback

FINDING 60: Receiving feedback on the outcome of an engagement is important for participants to feel valued for their time, effort, experience and expertise.

74

FINDING 61: Engagement participants do not always receive information about how their input is considered and the impact their input had on the outcome of a decision, and there can be a lack of open communication with engagement practitioners.

77

FINDING 62: A lack of feedback to engagement participants on the outcome of engagements and the impact of their input can lead to a loss of trust and disengagement from future engagement processes.

78

FINDING 63: Disengagement from engagement processes due to a lack of feedback can lead to a loss of experience and diverse views in engagement processes. This can lead to poorer outcomes and weaken community trust.

79

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to provide feedback to engagement participants about the outcome of the engagement. Where an engagement has asked for the input of participants regarding a decision, such feedback should include, but not be limited to:

- The decision made;
- The impact of participant input on the decision; and
- Clear explanations for decisions made contrary to a major theme of participant input, and the feedback should explain why that input was not taken up.

81

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary inquiry.

The Committee conducts the inquiry

This report on the Inquiry into community consultation practices is the result of extensive research and consultation by the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee.

The Committee received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, government representatives and individuals expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A parliamentary committee is not part of the Government. The Committee is a group of members of different political parties (including independent members). Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement in issues.

You can learn more about the Committee's work at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc>.

The report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-community-consultation-practices/reports>.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations made in this report.

The response is public and put on the inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-community-consultation-practices/reports>.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The inquiry process

The Committee received the Terms of Reference for this inquiry on 31 July 2024. Due to its work on its previous inquiry, the *Inquiry into climate resilience*, evidence gathering did not begin until April 2025.

The Committee called for submissions on 14 April 2025, advertising the call for submissions on the Parliament website and across social media.

Submissions closed on Friday 6 June 2025 and the Committee accepted 133 submissions in total from organisations and the general public.

The Committee held three days of public hearings in Melbourne on:

- Friday 22 August 2025
- Friday 5 September 2025
- Monday 15 September 2025.

At the public hearings the Committee heard from experts in engagement and public participation, the Department of Government Services, as well as organisations and individuals who participate in engagement.

1.1.1 Community roundtable events

On Friday 1 September 2025, the Committee held two online community roundtable sessions to talk to 14 individuals about how engagement practices could be improved. The roundtables were informal proceedings intended to prompt open discussion on a range of topics including:

- barriers to participating in consultation processes
- improving awareness of consultations
- feedback on how participant information impacts decisions
- how consultation could be improved.

A de-identified summary of the issues raised by the participants at the community roundtable can be found on the inquiry webpage: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-community-consultation-practices/other-documents>.

The Committee thanks all those who took the time to write a submission, attend a public hearing or a community roundtable session.

1.2 What is engagement?

While the Inquiry is framed in the language of ‘consultation’, the Committee have adopted the broader term ‘engagement’ throughout this report to reflect its focus on the full spectrum of interactions between Government and the public. These are shown in the International Association for Public Participation’s (IAP2) Public Participation Spectrum (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

© Federation of International Association for Public Participation 2024. All rights reserved. This work was created with contributions from Lewis Michaelson, Martha Rozelle and Doug Sarno.

Source: International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), *Core Values, Ethics, Spectrum – The 3 Pillars of Public Participation*, <<https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars>> accessed 7 January 2025.

Federation of International Association for Public Participation 2024. All rights reserved. This work was created with contributions from Lewis Michaelson, Martha Rozelle, and Doug Sarno. www.iap2.org.

The IAP2 Spectrum ranges from engagement processes that have the least public impact on a decision, to the most impact. It progresses from informing to consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering. The term engagement refers to all of these practices.

The Victorian Government’s *Public Engagement Framework 2021–25* (the Public Engagement Framework) which is a guideline for how departments and agencies should conduct engagement, is informed by the values and standards used by the International Association for Public Participation.¹ It similarly uses the term engagement to refer to a wide range of public participation from informing to feedback and collaboration.² The Public Engagement Framework is discussed further in Section 1.4.2.

1 Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, 2021, p. 8.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

Consultation is the term that has arisen most often in the evidence to describe the engagement process. However, consultation – where the public is asked for their feedback on an issue and the input influences decision making – is just one aspect of the public participation spectrum. The expectations of the public when participating in engagements is discussed further in Chapter 2.

1.3 Why is engagement important?

Engagement with communities about government policies or projects contributes to better outcomes. It gives the Government the insight of diverse voices and the views of those who may be affected by a project or policy.

The Public Engagement Framework sets out why it considers engagement with the public is important:

Inclusive engagement supports better decisions for all parts of government. Infrastructure, regulation, policy, services, disaster prevention and recovery, benefit from engagement. Engagement helps to build more resilient communities.³

Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead at the Engagement Institute echoed the sentiment that engagement supports better decisions by government. She said engagement adds ‘to the government’s pool of evidence before they make decisions.’⁴ She also noted that it allows the government to hear from a diverse range of voices that might not otherwise have input into the policymaking process:

it is about hearing from all corners of the communities that may be impacted or may be interested in a project, not just those that might be more resourced or more connected, who may dominate that conversation.⁵

Connecting with and hearing the views of those who may be impacted by policies and projects is another important aspect of engagement.⁶ This can help to minimise impacts for people who may be affected.⁷

1.4 The regulatory framework for engagement in Victoria

The importance of public participation in the work of government has long been recognised, with requirements for engagement embedded in a number of pieces of Victorian legislation.⁸ During this inquiry the Committee was informed about

³ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 5.

⁴ Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Professor Carolyn Hendricks, ARC Future Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

⁷ Donna Groves, Member, Advocacy Committee, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁸ This includes the *Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 (Vic)*, the *Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990 (Vic)*, the *Environment Protection Act 2017 (Vic)* and the *Environment Effects Act 1978 (Vic)*, among others.

engagement processes under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the *Local Government Act 2020*. Information about the engagement requirements under these acts is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Details of mandated engagement in the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the *Local Government Act 2020*

Legislation	Details of mandated engagement
<i>Planning and Environment Act 1987</i> ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the objectives of the Act is to foster community participation in the planning framework by allowing for public participation in amending planning schemes and ensuring those affected by proposals for the use of land are notified. s.4 (2) (h)(i). • Planning scheme amendments which apply to the use of land in a particular area (which are typically administered by local councils) must go through a public exhibition and submission process. If objections cannot be resolved, a planning panel may be appointed which hears issues from all parties during a public hearing process and makes recommendations. (Part 3). • Planning permits for a specified parcel of land are also subject to consultation. This includes the views of relevant agencies and the adjoining properties, who may object to the permit. The relevant authority, usually a local council, will then make a decision whether to grant the permit. (Part 4)
<i>Local Government Act 2020</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Act requires local councils to consult the local community on the adoption of a Community Engagement Policy (s.55 (2) (g)), which specifies councils must carry out deliberative engagement practices that can be applied to the development of a council's Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan.

a. The Committee notes that consultation requirements of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* (Vic) will be amended with the passing of the Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Bill 2025, which at the time of writing was still under consideration by the Parliament.

At a sub-legislative level, there are guidance documents for how engagement should be carried out. The most significant of these is the previously mentioned Public Engagement Framework, which provides public sector-wide guidance on how engagement should be conducted. The Public Engagement Framework is discussed in detail in the following section.

Sitting below the Public Engagement Framework are other guidelines for consultation produced by departments and agencies. This includes, for example, The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action's *Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria, A guide for renewable energy developers*. This guideline underpins some of the engagement for renewable energy projects raised by submitters in this inquiry.

1.4.1 The Public Engagement Framework

The Public Engagement Framework is produced by the Department of Premier and Cabinet and applies to all Victorian Government departments and agencies. It sets out how the government should conduct meaningful public engagement to make better decisions.

The Public Engagement Framework was developed following a 2017 Auditor-General's report, *Public Participation in Government Decision-Making*. The report noted there was no 'whole-of-government strategic public participation framework or statement to help establish a consistent understanding of public participation responsibilities and priorities.'⁹ The report recommended that the Department of Premier and Cabinet 'develop a whole-of-government framework to provide the Victorian public sector with guidance and parameters for public participation'.¹⁰

As a result, the scope of the framework is intended to influence the engagement efforts, policies and guidance documents produced by other departments. This will be discussed in Section 1.5.

Like the IAP2 Spectrum, the Public Engagement Framework defines engagement in a broad sense. This includes:

- Educating people about a topic.
- Obtaining feedback on a project.
- Working with stakeholders to address local issues.¹¹

According to the framework, ways to facilitate engagement may include:

- Workshops, forums, reference groups or consultative committees.
- Deliberative, participatory budgeting and co-design processes.
- Online discussion forums, surveys, mapping tools or social media commentary.
- Submissions, feedback forms or questionnaires.
- Communications materials like fact sheets, newsletters, displays or letters.
- Focus groups, interviews, phone surveys or door-knocks.¹²

The framework outlines six key principles for good engagement. It should be:

- Meaningful: the engagement is genuine and informs the final decision.
- Inclusive: the engagement is respectful, inclusive and accessible.
- Transparent: engagement is clear and open about what the public can and cannot influence.
- Informed: the engagement provides relevant and timely information to the public.
- Accountable: the engagement is high quality and responsive to the public.
- Valuable: the engagement creates value for the community and government.¹³

⁹ Victorian Auditor-General, *Public Participation in Government Decision-Making*, 2017, p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

The framework also includes a step-by-step guide for public servants on how to run effective engagement. This includes:

- Defining the purpose of the engagement.
- Understanding community needs and opportunities for engagement.
- Designing an appropriate engagement process.
- Delivering genuine, inclusive and respectful engagement.
- Reviewing and interpreting the engagement data.
- Applying the results to the decision making process.
- Reporting the feedback to the public.
- Evaluating the success of the engagement.¹⁴

The Victorian Government's performance against the practices and principles of the engagement framework will be discussed throughout this report.

The Department of Premier and Cabinet have responsibility for the framework, however the department did not make a submission to the inquiry and declined an invitation to attend a public hearing. The Committee also asked the Department questions on notice regarding the public engagement framework, however, a response was not provided at the time of the report's production.

Implementation of the Public Engagement Framework

The Public Engagement Framework lays out principles and procedures for engagement in line with the best practice principles developed by the International Association of Public Participation.¹⁵ Professor Sara Bice, Co-founder and Director, Next Generation observed that the Framework does not necessarily need to be completely overhauled, but rather, be better used:

We do not need to lay the groundwork or build new tools and frameworks; what we need to do is make better use of the existing standards, frameworks, tools and assessment approaches available to us already.¹⁶

Yvonne Bowyer agreed, noting the principles of the framework were sound, but her experiences of engagement did not match the framework's aims:

I wholeheartedly agree with the aims and underlying principles of this framework, but sadly this has not been the experience of many in the Surrey Hills and Mont Albert communities, and communities across Victoria.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶ Professor Sara Bice, Director, Institute for Infrastructure in Society; Co-Founder and Director, Next Generation Engagement, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Yvonne Bowyer, *Submission 66*, p. 14.

Much of the evidence received by the inquiry illustrates that government engagement does not always meet the principles outlined by the Public Engagement Framework. The Committee heard that best practice guidance is generally not being adopted 'in the field'.¹⁸ Amy Hubbard said that because there is no 'oversight of our public engagement processes in Victoria', 'different organisations go about [engagement processes] in a different ways'.¹⁹

It is unclear from the framework itself whether its application is mandatory for government departments and agencies conducting engagement. More focus needs to be put into ensuring the valuable principles of the framework are applied.

FINDING 1: The principles outlined in the Public Engagement Framework are in line with best practice principles for engagement outlined by the International Association for Public Participation.

FINDING 2: The Public Engagement Framework is not consistently applied to all engagements conducted by Victorian Government departments and agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government mandate the application of the Public Engagement Framework for all departments, agencies and their consultants/contractors when conducting engagement and require them to publicly report on their adherence to the framework when conducting engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet provide training for Department staff undertaking community consultation to ensure that they are aware of the principles of the Public Engagement Framework to work more closely with communities to make better decisions.

1.5 The scope of this report

The Terms of Reference for this Inquiry ask the Committee to report on community consultation practices by Victorian Government departments and agencies, local governments and essential service providers. The majority of evidence received focussed on the engagement efforts of Victorian Government departments and agencies, rather than local government or essential service suppliers. For example, (although it can be difficult to disentangle state and local government responsibilities) of the 72 submissions from individuals who raised policy issues, 63 were in relation to state government matters.²⁰

¹⁸ Donna Groves, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Amy Hubbard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

²⁰ For example, 25 submissions addressed renewable energy projects, 12 discussed planning reforms around activity centres and 5 looked at rock climbing bans at Mount Arapiles (Dyurrite).

The Committee did receive evidence that addressed consultation on local government matters, including submissions from local councils, the MAV and ratepayers associations. The Committee also received some input about submissions relating to essential service suppliers. 25 submissions were in relation to renewable energy infrastructure.²¹

As noted in the section above, there are aspects of consultation undertaken by Victorian state and local government that is governed by separate pieces of legislation. In particular, the *Local Government Act 2020* and the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. The Committee felt it did not receive enough evidence to justify recommendations to change the engagement requirements outlined in those specialised pieces of legislation.

Instead, the focus of this report will be on the government's performance against the principles outlined in the Public Engagement Framework, and how the processes and principles can be improved.

As the Public Engagement Framework is a public sector-wide guidance document, it will feed through to other engagement materials used by departments and agencies. This includes those which relate to essential service providers.²²

This report will also not address the merits of the policy issues mentioned by stakeholders in evidence. The Terms of Reference ask the Committee to consider how engagement is carried out, not the issues that are the subject of engagement. As a result, this report is silent on the merits of such policies or projects. Only the quality of the engagement itself is assessed.

1.6 Engage Victoria

Engage Victoria is an online consultation platform administered by the Department of Government Services. It provides a centralised 'one-stop-shop' for the community to provide feedback on all active Victorian Government consultation processes.

The platform provides an overview of each project open for engagement and invites participation. At the time of writing, the projects on the Engage Victoria website invited participation in the following ways:

- Filling out a survey (tick-box and filling out fields).
- Ranking statements and questions (least important to most important).
- Uploading a written submission.
- Attending information sessions.
- Interactive maps that invite comments.

²¹ See submissions 13–17, 21, 25, 32, 33, 36, 41, 44, 47, 54, 67, 76, 97, 99, 104, 106, 108, 109, 115, 118 and 119.

²² Such as the *Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria, A guide for renewable energy developers*.

Some of the projects provided information and engagement in different languages. All projects had information about the project timeline, including the date of implementation or completion.

The Department of Government Services advised the Committee that it plays a technical role in the management and functionality of the platform. The content, design, collection and analysis of data is undertaken by the relevant department leading the consultation.

The Engage Victoria Platform is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2

Defining the purpose of engagement

Engagement isn't just one thing, it's a spectrum of ways to involve the public in decision making. This can range from keeping the community informed of a decision, to giving them the power to make a final decision. But many in the community don't think about engagement in the same way.

The Committee heard that some expect engagement to go beyond keeping them informed. They expect to be asked for their input and for it to be applied in decision-making. To them, anything less than that, is not true engagement.

A shared understanding of what engagement means is essential. Without it, expectations diverge and trust suffers. To make sure everyone is on the same page, it is important that the purpose of an engagement process is very clearly defined.

Using accurate language to describe an engagement process is key to setting realistic expectations and helping communities understand what's really up for discussion. Engagements should also only ask for feedback that can be meaningfully considered and acted upon. If the purpose, language and design of the engagement process match, it feels genuine. If not, it can come across as 'box ticking'.

The Committee heard that more can be done to improve the transparency of engagement processes. People want more clear and honest information about the purpose and scope – they don't want to be left guessing.

2.1 The terminology around public participation and engagement

As discussed in Chapter 1, the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Public Participation Spectrum characterises various levels of participation – from informing to empowering – as 'legitimate'¹ forms of public participation in decision making. Engagement is an umbrella term that captures varying levels of community involvement in decision making. The *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025* (The Public Engagement Framework) which is influenced by the International Association of Public Participation,² uses the term engagement in a similarly broad fashion to describe public participation from informing to feedback and collaboration.³

1 Engagement Institute, *IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum*, <<https://engagementinstitute.org.au/resources/iap2-public-participation-spectrum>> accessed 7 January 2025.

2 Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, 2021, p. 8.

3 Ibid., p. 6.

During this Inquiry, it became apparent that many in the community do not define engagement in the same way as the IAP2 Spectrum, or the Public Engagement Framework.⁴ Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead at the Engagement Institute, spoke about how misaligned understandings of what ‘engagement’ is can lead to tensions in the community:

It is problematic, and we use it as an umbrella term, but engagement means different things to different people. If you are a person that has been part of an engagement process where there are very clear negotiables and the community ultimately are making decisions, something that might be deliberative engagement – more intensive – we call that engagement. But then some people, where there is a predetermined outcome and they write a fact sheet to communicate with the community that that is going ahead – that is also engagement. The process and the intent of those different engagement tools are very different things. In the community there is a high level of misunderstanding and a low level of literacy around public engagement. This is something that we come across every day as practitioners – that this term ‘engagement’ can mean so much that it means nothing at all.⁵

Further, the Committee heard that the word ‘consultation’ may be used mistakenly when the word term engagement is more appropriate, because it describes a spectrum of activities, including to inform. Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer of the Engagement Institute said this can create a disconnect in expectations:

Reading the materials from Victoria, it feels like ‘consultation’ is being used as we intend ‘engagement’ to be used. It is being used as an umbrella term... From a practitioner perspective, when we look at words like ‘inform’, ‘involve’, ‘consult’, ‘collaborate’ and ‘empower’, we look back to the definition that sits in the spectrum. That is why we use the word ‘engagement’ as our umbrella term. But given, when you talk about ‘consultation’, the disconnect between the spectrum’s definition of consult and your expectations around deliberative engagement, our interpretation of how you are using this ‘consultation’ is more as an umbrella term.⁶

Varying usage of this terminology is confusing. It also means that when a department or agency says that it will conduct an engagement or consultation process, people will understand these terms to mean different things.⁷ Differing understandings lead to differing expectations as to what the process will be – some of which may not be met

-
- 4 Bundoora Community Group, *Submission 123*, p. 2; B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 14; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 7; Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, pp. 2–3; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 2; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 1; Lance Brooks, Managing Director, Brooks Community Engagement, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63; Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61; Julie Phillips, Chairperson, Disability Advocacy Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.
- 5 Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.
- 6 Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.
- 7 Bundoora Community Group, *Submission 123*, p. 2; B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 14; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 7; Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, pp. 2–3; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 2; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 1; Lance Brooks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61; Julie Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

by the actual process that takes place. Unmet expectations contribute to feelings of discontent and disappointment in the community.⁸

For these reasons, the Committee considers it vitally important to clearly define the purpose and type of engagement to be conducted early in the process. Indeed, clearly defining the purpose of the engagement is identified as step 1 in the Victoria's Public Engagement Framework.⁹

FINDING 3: In the context of public participation in decision making, the term engagement means different things to different people.

FINDING 4: When the terminology of engagement and consultation are used without specific meaning, expectations clash and trust erodes.

2.1.1 Sharing information is a form of engagement – but some in the community expect more

As noted previously, providing the community with 'balanced and objective information'¹⁰ is a form of engagement according to the IAP2 Spectrum and the Public Engagement Framework.¹¹ Providing reliable information is an important precursor to engaging the community in decision making. The absence of reliable information allows misinformation and rumours to spread.¹² It is also respectful to keep communities that may be impacted by decision making informed.

As discussed above, people in the community understand 'engagement' to mean different things. Some told the Committee that they do not consider the provision of information to be 'genuine engagement'.¹³ Rather, they consider that engagement or consultation must, at a minimum, seek community feedback or input. This input must then be used to inform a final decision.¹⁴

Therefore, even though providing information to the community about a finalised decision is a legitimate level of engagement, it falls short of the standard some in the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 15.

¹⁰ International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), *Core Values, Ethics, Spectrum – The 3 Pillars of Public Participation*, <<https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars>> accessed 7 January 2025.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ika Trijsburg, Head, Democracy and Diplomacy, Municipal Association of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

¹³ Bundoora Community Group, *Submission 123*, p. 2; B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 14; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 7; Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, pp. 2–3; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 2; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 1; Lance Brooks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61; Julie Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

¹⁴ B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 14; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 1; Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 7.

community hold. This misalignment creates real tension, as a government entity may characterise its actions as engagement, whilst the community may not.¹⁵

Figure 2.1 What the Committee heard

“ People want to co-inform plans and not just be informed of what has been decided for them, without their input.

B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 14.

“ Often government announces decisions, then announces community consultation will commence. Genuine community consultation should inform government decision making.

Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, pp. 2–3.

“ Calling a process in which you tell stakeholders what has been decided after the major works have been put out to tender a ‘consultation’ does not make it a consultation.

Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2.

“ Community engagement is really just a marketing exercise – telling people what is happening rather than seeking their input to make improvements.

Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 1.

“ This approach highlights the critical distinction between communication (information) and engagement. Providing information is not a substitute for genuine community consultation.

Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 2.

“ Genuine engagement with these communities should go beyond simply informing them of the decisions being made.

Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 7.

FINDING 5: Some in the community do not consider the provision of information a form of engagement, they expect an opportunity to be consulted and to influence decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require engagements to involve consultation with participants, rather than to simply inform. Information should be clearly labelled as that and not presented as consultation.

¹⁵ Bundoora Community Group, *Submission 123*, p. 2; B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 14; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 7; Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, p. 2–3; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 2; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 1; Lance Brooks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61; Julie Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

2.2 Making sure language matches the level of involvement offered

Language sets expectations. Therefore, it's important that the descriptions of an engagement process align with the actual level of community involvement that is intended.

The Committee heard that sometimes the language used to describe an engagement process can differ from the actual level of community input sought.¹⁶ Such misalignment can set up engagement processes to be less successful – as communities engage with the process expecting a level of influence over decision making that does not eventuate.

For example, a process may seek to engage the public by providing reliable information – or ‘inform’ on the IAP2 Spectrum. This level of engagement aims to tell the community about a decision that has already been made. Using phrases like ‘come and have your say’,¹⁷ ‘co-design’ or ‘consult’¹⁸ to describe such an engagement process is misleading. Such language implies a level of participation and influence over decision making that does not align with the planned engagement. It sets up an expectation that will not be met by the process and can lead to participants feeling disappointed or misled.¹⁹

Figure 2.2 What the Committee heard

“ The use of incorrect language not only has the potential to mislead ACCOs about the value that they can provide on an issue or project, but when a request for advice or endorsement is mislabelled as a consultation and the support sought is not exploratory in nature, it can add to community sentiment that support is being requested as a box-ticking exercise.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 9.

“ The community come along expecting a chance to shape and change the initiative, when the actual people presenting are saying, ‘Oh, we’re here to tell you. You get you what you get: don’t get upset.’ That is actually the message you are getting. Value is not wanted, except to tick the box to say, ‘Here it is.’

Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 9; Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 4–5; Iain Walker, Executive Director, newDemocracy Foundation, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 59–60; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 44*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 44*, p. 2.

¹⁸ The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 44*, p. 2; Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 9; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

The Committee notes that a lack of descriptive language can also foster misaligned expectations in the community. By not specifically describing the level at which the engagement session has been set, participants may make assumptions about the process that may not be met. It is especially important to be clear, since some people see information-only approaches as inadequate and anticipate deeper involvement.

FINDING 6: Accurate language is essential to align community expectations with the real scope of engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to develop standardised language guidelines for engagement processes.

2.3 Only ask for feedback if it will be used

An engagement process should only seek input from communities that it has the power and intention to utilise.

The Committee heard that sometimes communities are asked to provide feedback that when given, cannot be acted upon.²⁰ This is because a decision may already have been made or the power to make the decision lies with another level of government or entity. This creates frustration in the community, as the engagement process appears tokenistic rather than genuine.²¹

For example, the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) spoke about being invited to provide input, but was ‘presented with a nearly complete product at the end of a project timeline’.²² This meant that any feedback VACCA provided could ‘not have been taken on board’.²³ In this case, it’s clear that there was misalignment between the type of engagement process that was set up and the actual decision that was able to be made. There is little utility asking the community for input on issues that are determined to be non-negotiable or not actionable within the timeframe.

²⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 12; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2; Greg Buchanan, *Submission 111*, p. 1; Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 39*, p. 1; Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40.1*, pp. 3–5; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, pp. 1–2; Judith Abbott, Chief Executive Officer, Carers Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49; Melissa Edwards, Climbing Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 66–67.

²¹ Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 12; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2; Greg Buchanan, *Submission 111*, p. 1; Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 39*, p. 1; Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40.1*, pp. 3–5; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, pp. 1–2; Judith Abbott, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49; Melissa Edwards, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 66–67.

²² The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 9.

²³ Ibid.

Figure 2.3 What the Committee heard

“ Energy infrastructure consultations have asked for community views on alignment options and social impact. But when residents propose alternative corridor routes or highlight unacceptable risks, they are told the technical process has already determined the best outcome.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 12.

“ The questions we were asking did not align with the purpose and did not align with the negotiables and non-negotiables. In this case the decision had already been made, but the questions were asking, ‘Do you support this? How can you influence the decision?’ They were the wrong questions.

Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 4–5.

“ I also often see community consultation happen – for example for infrastructure around a new housing development – that then goes nowhere because those who are leading the consultation don’t have the power to actually implement any of the identified solutions. For example, a local Council conducts community consultation and the community identify areas that need better traffic management or waste management. Then the Council says the traffic management is a state government issue, or down to the developers, and the waste management is through a private contractor chosen by the developer, not the Council waste services... This happens frequently!

Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

FINDING 7: Engagement processes should be designed to seek community input at a point when it can and will be meaningfully utilised.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to state that the input of participants should be sought at a point when it can be meaningfully used.

2.4 Let people know what's on the table

Communities want clarity and honesty about what is and is not negotiable during an engagement process.²⁴ Knowing what is open to change means that the community can direct its efforts towards areas they can influence, making the process feel more empowering and productive.

A lack of clarity about the scope of an engagement means that the community must rely on their assumptions. This may cause people to feel frustrated or disempowered if their assumptions do not align with the actual scope of an engagement process.²⁵ Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, in its submission to this inquiry, noted that unclear boundaries about what was genuinely open for consultation led participants to invest time in issues that were never up for change. This resulted in frustration, distrust and a sense that the process was not genuine.²⁶

The Committee heard from Professor Sara Bice, Co-Founder and Director Co-founder and Director of Next Generation Engagement. Professor Bice reiterated that the community wants greater transparency around what isn't up for discussion during an engagement process:

The other thing that our research demonstrates, which sometimes people find surprising, is that the vast majority of Australian community members we have surveyed say that they just want to know what the non-negotiables are. What is it that cannot be changed, that is not going to change, and can we then talk about the things that we could have some impact on. Often in project world there is a real reluctance to discuss non-negotiables; there is a concern that if we put these out there, people will become upset. But actually the public tell us that they just want to know what the playing field is and what they can move and not move. If they can start from that point, they feel more empowered, and I think you are more likely to get a better result.²⁷

24 Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 17; Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 39*, p. 1; Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40.1*, pp. 3–5; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, pp. 1–2; Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33; James Houton, Senior Policy Advisor, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5–6; Judith Abbott, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49.

25 Ibid.

26 Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40.1*, pp. 3–5.

27 Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

Figure 2.4 What the Committee heard

“ Nothing erodes trust and destroys social licence more than asking for community comment or feedback on a matter that is not up for debate or the outcome is predetermined.

Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 39*, p. 1.

“ The result was a process that felt not only manipulative, but profoundly disempowering. At no stage were the true parameters of consultation made clear. Instead, residents were repeatedly invited to engage, to give feedback, to participate in what we were led to believe was a meaningful process—only to have our input routinely ignored or dismissed. The illusion of influence was carefully maintained, but there was no transparency about what was actually open to change.

Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, pp. 1–2.

“ ‘Transparency’, is also very important. That basically comes down to being absolutely clear about the purpose and the expectations when it comes to consulting with community members: being clear about why you are there, what you are hoping to achieve and what the purpose of it all is so that people understand, they do not feel that they are in a bewildering environment, they know what they are there for, and they know why they are being asked.

James Houghton, Senior Policy Advisor, Ethnic Communities Council Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5–6.

FINDING 8: When seeking public participation on a decision, it is important to be clear on what can and what can’t be changed.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to outline the boundaries with participants of what aspects of a policy or project are within the scope of an engagement.

2.5 Unclear or misaligned engagement feels like box ticking

When purpose, language and design align, communities can see that an engagement is genuine and meaningful. If communities are left to make assumptions about an engagement process, it can all feel like a 'box ticking exercise' and 'tokenistic'.²⁸

A belief that engagement is a 'box ticking exercise' erodes community trust and damages their relationship with governments. It signals that community voice doesn't matter and may lead people to disengage in engagement processes as they form a view that their input won't make a difference. For example, Liz Turner, in her submission to this Inquiry, stated:

I have lost all faith in any genuine interest by our local council, or the state government, in determining the opinions of the community, the consultation I have taken part in seemed like an exercise in box-ticking.²⁹

The Committee heard that when projects are tied to political promises, more people in the community doubt whether engagement processes are genuine.³⁰ Professor Sara Bice said:

Our research demonstrates that approximately 74 per cent of members of the Australian public would agree or strongly agree that their opportunity for genuine consultation and engagement is reduced or even non-existent when a project or initiative is a political announceable. The feeling is that once it has become part of a campaign promise or a political agenda, there will not be genuine consultation. We have got about three-quarters of the Australian public having that feeling. There is also this question of how a government can act with mandates and at the same time build the trust necessary for genuine consultation.³¹

To ensure that the community has faith in engagement processes – even when they are linked to political promises – the purpose must be clear, and the language and process should align with that goal.

²⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1; Mareeta Cox, *Submission 15*, p. 1; Paula Hall, *Submission 19*, pp. 1–2; Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network, *Submission 26.1*, p. 1; Sean Kelly, *Submission 31*, pp. 1–2; John Davies, *Submission 41.1*, p. 1; Julian Nambu, *Submission 48*, p. 1; Liz Turner, *Submission 49*, p. 1; George Kanjere, *Submission 59*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 68.1*, p. 102; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 2; Kate and Tyler Nelson, *Submission 76*, p. 1; Concerned Waterways Alliance, *Submission 84*, p. 3; Zheng Chin, *Submission 96*, p. 1; Richard Evans, *Submission 106*, p. 1; Colleen Hartland, *Submission 107*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 1; newDemocracy Foundation, *Submission 129*, p. 3; Donna Groves, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9; Kendra Clegg, Chair, Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, public hearing, Melbourne 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

²⁹ Liz Turner, *Submission 49*, p. 1.

³⁰ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

³¹ Ibid.

Figure 2.5 What the Committee heard

“ When community involvement is sincere, contributions are valued. When it is superficial, trust is lost.

Concerned Waterways Alliance,
Submission 84, p. 3.

“ There has to be a way that community consultation is taken on board and applied, not just given the tick that the consultation has taken place.

Paula Hall, *Submission 19*, pp. 1-2

“ But so often the consultation seems to make no impact on the outcomes. The process appears to be a check box. A way to demonstrate a willingness to listen – without actually listening.

Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

“ Rather than being a process that seeks to reflect the needs and wants of the community, balanced with the technical understanding provided by ‘experts’ community consultation practices have more often than not become exercises to tick boxes that prove democratic processes were followed... These tokenistic consultation practices results in a deep level of distrust towards government authorities which leads to an antagonistic relationship between community and government, resulting in community consultation practices which only serve to entrench these tensions.

Zheng Chin, *Submission 96*, p. 1.

“ People want to shape the future of their communities, but cannot do so when the system treats consultation as a compliance step, not a conversation. The current approach is not just failing it is actively harming trust in public institutions.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development,
Submission 70, p. 2

“ It can be tokenistic. Some of our engagement is simply around ticking the boxes, and that is not best practice and not what any of us would advocate for.

Donna Groves, Member, Advocacy Committee, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025,
Transcript of evidence, p. 9.

“ The experience I have had with community consultation is that it’s something organisations have to do to ‘tick the box’. It never results in a change to the original proposal.

Mareeta Cox, *Submission 15*, p. 1.

FINDING 9: Aligned purpose, language and design makes engagement processes feel genuine. Without this clarity, it can look like ‘box ticking’ and ‘tokenistic’ to the community.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require alignment between the purpose, language and design of an engagement to contribute to more effective community consultation.

Chapter 3

Identifying who to engage and when

Engagement practitioners can improve how they advertise, who they inform and when engagements take place. People who wish to participate are not always being reached. Narrow advertising and selective engagement practices can exclude affected community members and weaken confidence in the process.

Opt-in engagement methods can be unrepresentative, amplifying the voices of narrow groups. Alternative approaches such as random lottery selection and deliberative engagement can provide a way to ensure a wider range of views are heard.

Poorly coordinated, repetitive or rushed engagement processes can cause frustration, and tight timeframes limit meaningful participation. More effort needs to be put into ensuring engagements are coordinated, representative and accessible.

3.1 Reaching relevant stakeholders

Not everyone in the community will choose to participate in an engagement process. People have busy lives, competing priorities or simply may not be interested.¹ What matters is ensuring that those who do want to engage have clear, accessible opportunities to do so.

Identifying the relevant stakeholders is step 2 of the Victorian Government's *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025* (The Public Engagement Framework).² The Public Engagement Framework suggests that at this stage making sure that community demographics, history and issues are well understood and that relevant stakeholders are identified is key.³ 'Relevant' includes those:

- With an interest
- Who may be affected
- Who could influence the decision and
- Who may support the local implementation of a future change.⁴

¹ YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission 131*, p. 2.

² Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, 2021, p. 16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The Committee heard that some who wished to participate in engagement processes didn't know they were taking place. This included residents living near a project and others with a strong interest in the policy areas.⁵ According to the Public Engagement Framework, these individuals are considered key stakeholders who should be identified and informed when relevant engagement opportunities arise.

Reports of low turnout at engagement sessions are another sign that notifications may not be reaching the people that should know about them.⁶ This is not ideal, because a small number of people cannot represent what the whole community thinks or needs – nor should they be expected to.

Improving how engagement opportunities are advertised can help ensure that people who want to participate hear about it. The Committee was told that a good first step is recognising that not everyone can be reached in the same way. Some notice online advertisements, some mainly see things on social media. Others rely on more traditional advertising like flyers, local newspapers or radio. This was reflected in the evidence provided to the Committee, with different people calling for more advertising across a range of formats.⁷

The Committee acknowledges that diversified advertising is resource intensive and may not be possible in some circumstances. However, relying exclusively on one advertising method risks reaching only a small part of the community. This in turn affects how well the engagement process works and the type of feedback it gathers.

The Public Engagement Framework advises that taking the time early on to identify relevant stakeholders is an important part of understanding community interests, values and opportunities.⁸ Furthermore, finite resources can be directed towards the advertising methods most likely to reach the people that should be engaged. The evidence suggests that there is room to improve how this part of the Public Engagement Framework is carried out in practice.

The Committee also heard that people value receiving direct notification about relevant engagement opportunities, instead of learning about them only through word-of-mouth or other unofficial sources.⁹ Some said that not being officially notified made them feel disrespected or left them questioning whether the process was being properly managed.¹⁰ Improved advertising reduces the chance of this happening because official notification is more likely to reach the relevant stakeholders directly.

5 Name withheld, *Submission 35*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 17*, p. 1; Donna Scobie, *Submission 21.1*, p. 1; Jenni Weaver, *Submission 32*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 36*, pp. 1–2; Donne Parker, *Submission 97*, p. 1; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 2; Monica Kerlin, *Submission 120*, p. 1; Liz Turner, *Submission 49*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 53*, p. 1.

6 Liz Turner, *Submission 49*, p. 1.

7 For example, see Rose Capp, Policy Advisor, Dementia Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Allegra, Member, Commission Youth Council, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

8 Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 16.

9 Name withheld, *Submission 35*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 17*, p. 1; Donna Scobie, *Submission 21.1*, p. 1; Jenni Weaver, *Submission 32*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 36*, pp. 1–2; Donne Parker, *Submission 97*, p. 1.

10 Ibid.

Figure 3.1 What the Committee heard

“ There were community pop-ups as well, and even though I consider myself a well-informed and inquisitive member of our community, I found out too late about them. Most people I spoke to had no idea of what was happening, and many still don’t.

Liz Turner, *Submission 49*, p. 1.

“ Our farm is directly across the Heathcote-Rochester road from this proposed facility, and the first we heard of it was through a neighbour!

Jenni Weaver, *Submission 32*, p. 1.

“ Despite the significant impact such a project will have on the local community, the neighbours only became aware of its existence on the 3rd of February 2025 through social media. Some (not all) neighbours received a letter from the proponent and shared.

Name withheld, *Submission 17*, p. 1.

“ I walked around the catchment zone of Hampton East in September 2024 just days before the deadline of 29/9 for residents to make submissions. Many people I spoke with were not aware of the pilot program believing that Bayside Council had already created an activity centre with densification close to the Station, South Road and Nepean Hwy and not in their neighbourhood streets.

Monica Kerlin, *Submission 120*, p. 1.

FINDING 10: Not everyone will want to take part in engagement processes, but it is important that those who do want to be involved know about the opportunity and can access it easily.

FINDING 11: Wherever possible, engagement opportunities should be promoted through a range of channels, recognising that people access information in different ways.

FINDING 12: Stakeholders said they prefer clear, direct notification of engagement opportunities, as learning about them informally can feel disrespectful and undermine confidence in the process.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require informing relevant stakeholders through diverse channels to ensure engagement opportunities are accessible and widely known.

3.1.1 Engaging a wide range of stakeholders

Participating in engagement processes is a way that people can ‘exercise their right to take part in decision-making’.¹¹ For that reason, it is important that those who want to participate are able to do so. The Committee recognises that this won’t always be possible, but generally engagement processes should aim to encourage diverse involvement across the community. The Public Engagement Framework also emphasises the importance of ‘inclusive and accessible’ ‘access to public engagement opportunities’.¹²

The Committee heard that sometimes engagement processes are restricted to a narrow group of stakeholders, with no opportunity for the wider community to contribute.¹³ An example is engagement processes where only the views of government departments or agencies are sought.¹⁴ Some people viewed these narrow engagement processes as disingenuous.¹⁵ It also led some people to question the credibility of the process and whether the aim was to genuinely seek broad input or simply confirm a decision already made.¹⁶

Wherever possible, engagement opportunities should be open to a broad range of stakeholders. While it may be convenient to engage only with a small group of professional stakeholders such as government departments or peak bodies, this approach can overlook the experiences or expertise of groups in the community. It can also cause problems when people feel blindsided by decisions that appear to come out of nowhere.¹⁷ The evidence suggests that there is room to improve how this part of the Public Engagement Framework is carried out in practice.

¹¹ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, 2021, p. 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³ Riley Pitcher, *Submission 100*, p. 1; Harry Jensen, *Submission 85*, p. 1; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 6; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2; Melissa Edwards, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Riley Pitcher, *Submission 100*, p. 1; Harry Jensen, *Submission 85*, p. 1; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 6; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2.

¹⁵ Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 6; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Melissa Edwards, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Riley Pitcher, *Submission 100*, p. 1; Harry Jensen, *Submission 85*, p. 1; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 6; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2; Melissa Edwards, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Riley Pitcher, *Submission 100*, p. 1; Harry Jensen, *Submission 85*, p. 1.

Figure 3.2 What the Committee heard

“ Non-host stakeholders were excluded from meaningful consultation – including local businesses, tenants, tourism operators, the broader Geurie and Wongarbron communities, and downstream water users.

Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2.

“ This announcement came as an absolute shock and surprise, when we learned that meetings and discussions had been undertaken for apparently two years between these parties, and none had seen any reason to invite members of the community into the discussion until Melbourne Water had reached an agreement that favoured Melbourne Water’s devised position.

Harry Jensen, *Submission 85*, p. 1; Riley Pitcher, *Submission 100*, p. 1.

“ Table 2, which lists “key stakeholders” consulted during planning. This table identifies only commercial operators, utilities, and government agencies such as SUEZ, Holcim, the EPA, and the Victorian Planning Authority. Notably absent are local residents, community associations, or any groups representing the general public.

Lynbrook Residents Association, *Submission 57*, p. 2.

FINDING 13: Engagement processes should be open to the wider community, as relying on a narrow group of professional stakeholders can exclude important perspectives.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to show how their engagement approach has reached, or attempted to reach, a broad and diverse cross-section of stakeholders.

3.1.2 ‘Opt-in’ engagement processes

The Public Engagement Framework suggests that engagement processes should aim to capture a ‘diversity of community perspectives’.¹⁸ This means engaging people of different ages, backgrounds and experiences.

The Committee heard that some engagement processes do not attract input from a broad cross-section of the community. Instead, it was claimed by some that engagement processes tend to be dominated by time-rich older property owners

¹⁸ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 16.

who have greater capacity to participate.¹⁹ In its submission to this Inquiry, YIMBY Melbourne ‘analysed a sample of 15 community consultation demographics from across six metropolitan Melbourne councils’.²⁰ It found that opt-in community consultation practices can be ‘biased and unrepresentative’²¹ of the broader community, noting that:

- **In 92% of the sample, older residents were overrepresented** compared to the actual demographics of the local government area;
- **In 100% of the sample, homeowners were overrepresented** compared to the actual demographics of the local government area; and
- **On average, only 0.2% of the community opted in** to local consultation processes.²²

The Committee also heard that opt-in engagement practices often prioritise the views of the most vocal or highly active stakeholders. Iain Walker CEO of the newDemocracy Foundation, questioned why the perspectives of so-called ‘blue pen action groups’²³ are frequently over-represented and afforded greater influence than other community voices in engagement processes.²⁴ He expressed concern that amplifying certain voices above others can have ‘very detrimental effects’,²⁵ ‘particularly in a planning and housing context’.²⁶

Opt-in engagement processes that draw on only a limited range of participants may lead to feedback that does not accurately reflect the wider community’s perspective. When engagement captures only a limited demographic, it can create a perception that the process is unbalanced, leading some people to lose confidence in its legitimacy.²⁷ This highlights the need to make sure the people or groups participating in engagement processes are similar to the community’s demographics overall.

The Committee also heard that sometimes demographic breakdowns are not made available after engagement processes. As a result, it may be difficult to assess how well the demographics of the participants match those of the broader community.²⁸ Greater transparency throughout engagement processes may assist in building community trust, as people are generally more accepting of a process they can clearly see and understand.

¹⁹ YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission 131*, pp. 1–2; Kathy Nemeth, *Submission 88*, p. 1.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Iain Walker, Executive Director, newDemocracy Foundation, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kathy Nemeth, *Submission 88*, p. 1; Lynbrook Residents Association, *Submission 51*, p. 2; Melissa Edwards, *Submission 11*, p. 2; Dale Webster, *Submission 1A.1*, p. 2; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 6; Harry Jensen, *Submission 85*, p. 1.

²⁸ YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission 131*, p. 9.

FINDING 14: Some engagement processes don't attract a diversity of community perspectives.

FINDING 15: When opt-in engagement attracts only a limited demographic, the feedback gathered may not represent the broader community, especially groups such as younger people, renters and time-poor participants.

FINDING 16: Sharing demographic breakdowns of engagement participants can strengthen trust in the process by demonstrating openness about who provided feedback.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure engagement processes attract a diversity of community perspectives.

3.1.3 Alternatives to opt-in engagement methods

There are several approaches to bringing stakeholders into the engagement process. The Committee heard that, unlike opt-in approaches, stratified random lottery selection tends to generate input from a wider cross-section of the community.²⁹

Stratified lottery selection is a method where participants are randomly chosen in proportions that match key community demographics, such as age, gender, location and housing status. It aims to create a group that broadly reflects the populations, rather than relying on whoever chooses to opt in to an engagement process. Iain Walker explained more about how a stratified lottery selection method works:

Lottery selection, coming back to principles: start from your largest available database. We use the Australia Post reference file for where anyone has ever delivered mail. You do a random extract from that. They get what hopefully looks like a wedding invitation; they feel special, they see how they will be heard. They opt in, because we cannot compel people. And then we do a second-round lottery draw to match it to the census.³⁰

Iain Walker cautioned that attempts to adjust a sample for hard-to-measure factors, like political views, are likely to undermine its credibility.³¹ This means the selection methodology must be both rigorous and transparent to the community.

²⁹ Iain Walker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission 131*, p. 7.

³⁰ Iain Walker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

We do not measure by view. We trust that if you reach your hand into a jar of jellybeans, you do not pull out all the red ones or all the green ones, such that it may be. People are not that political – you know, the vast majority of the community.³²

An established and trusted use of stratified random sampling is the jury system, which relies on randomly chosen citizens to ensure fairness. The Committee heard that allowing opt-in public comments to determine court outcomes would be vulnerable to organised campaigns and could undermine public confidence in the fairness of the process.³³ The newDemocracy foundation argued this shows that engagement processes, too, should be built on simple and reliable principles to preserve legitimacy and fairness:

Imagine our court system allowing anyone to comment online, then tallying up the comments and deciding to convict or release a defendant. What would happen is either the victims' or defendants' families would campaign to flood the system. We would – and *should* – largely ignore the content of that discussion except as a general barometer of sentiment. That is why in the court system we instead see a methodology imposed that requires random selection of participants, a small group size, a requirement to listen to all the evidence, and a commitment to act on a decision once it reaches a given consensus threshold (generally 11 of 12 jurors aligning).

We would strongly recommend similar simple principles be established for public engagement.³⁴

The Committee also heard about more deliberative engagement processes. These processes can seek to embed a neutral 'third voice' in the engagement process – a representative group of everyday citizens – thus reducing the extent to which opposing interest groups can dominate the process.³⁵ In these deliberative settings interest groups can put their case to a representative panel of ordinary citizens who ultimately make the final decision. Because the final decision rests with an impartial citizen group rather than political office holders, this model goes some way to mitigating perceptions of political bias.³⁶ Iain Walker explained further:

I think at the core of it they realised that if you were to do this through politics as usual, you would end up with interest groups on each side that would go head-to-head, and what they needed was a third voice. So, they took 100 citizens, in this case, because they had done the 66–33 mix, realised that they trusted the process and left citizens to it. Why it worked is because the active interest groups, be they the legalisation group or the church groups, made their case to a group of people in the street...

³² Ibid.

³³ The newDemocracy Foundation, *Submission 129*, p. 1.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Iain Walker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

³⁶ Ibid.

One of the key benefits of a deliberative model is that it is a transparently fair hearing. If you cannot convince 35 to 40 citizens from your local area in front of you, then you kind of have to start accepting that you are wrong.³⁷

The Committee acknowledges that, unlike opt-in engagement methods, random sampling or deliberative processes demand greater time, resources and coordination to be carried out effectively. However, it is important that stakeholder demographics reflect the broader community, otherwise engagements risk gathering input that is neither helpful nor genuinely representative of community views. Moreover, unrepresentative engagements risk undermining trust in both the process itself and the organisations responsible for conducting it.

FINDING 17: Random lottery selection and deliberative engagement models can create a more balanced process by minimising the dominance of vocal interest groups.

FINDING 18: Although random lottery selection and deliberative engagement models can be more resource intensive, they generally produce more representative input than opt-in methods and are often viewed as more credible and transparent.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to specify methods of reaching engagement participants in addition to the traditional opt-in approach. This may include random lottery selection or deliberative engagement models.

3.2 Coordination of engagement processes

Engagement should not be done in a silo. Communities feel the cumulative impact of all government activity – not just the work of a single department, agency or entity. The Committee heard that when multiple engagements in an area are planned independently, the same people are often consulted at the same time.³⁸ This risks creating duplication, mixed messages and consultation fatigue.³⁹ It is also an inefficient way to gather and use community input.

The Committee heard that siloed engagement processes are particularly prevalent in regional and rural Victoria. These areas are ‘at the centre of a transformation ... where energy and mineral sands extraction are all looking to happen at the same time for a drive of federal and state policies’.⁴⁰ As a result, regional and rural Victorians

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, pp. 1–2; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 3; Amy Hubbard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61.

³⁹ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁰ Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 57.

are 'overloaded'⁴¹ with fragmented consultation processes 'all landing at once'.⁴² Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, in its submission to this Inquiry, described the community being overwhelmed because of multiple 'poorly sequenced' engagement processes:

The community is expected to absorb and respond to dozens of consultations while trying to live their daily lives raising families, running businesses, and dealing with drought, flood, or economic strain.

This places an impossible burden on the community. They are expected to engage in detailed policy questions, often back-to-back, without rest or clarity. Volunteers, landholders and local organisations are caught in a cycle of endless consultation. There is no room to recover, reflect, or strategise. Each process assumes the previous ones did not exist.

In practice, this leads to disengagement. People go quiet. Not because they do not care, but because they no longer see a point. Government interprets this silence as support, and the cycle repeats.⁴³

Poorly coordinated engagements not only contribute to community fatigue but also strain relationships with government and developers.⁴⁴ Professor Sara Bice referred to a recent study of more than 7000 Australians which found that people exposed to six or more projects in their local government area are significantly more likely to report that their treatment has not been transparent.⁴⁵ Evidence presented to the Committee supported this finding.⁴⁶ It heard that when people feel overwhelmed, rushed or unable to participate meaningfully in engagement processes, the experience can be perceived as exclusionary or deliberately opaque, even when well intentioned.⁴⁷ Such an approach risks damaging long-term relationships and can undermine the legitimacy of the projects involved.⁴⁸

The Committee heard that there is a need to assess cumulative engagement loads before launching new engagement processes.⁴⁹ Some stakeholders suggested that this be achieved by adopting place-based approaches⁵⁰ or centralised registers of current engagement processes.⁵¹

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴ Professor Sara Bice, Director, Institute for Infrastructure in Society; Co-Founder and Director, Next Generation Engagement, Crawford School of Public Policy, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, pp. 1-2; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 3; Amy Hubbard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ City of Ballarat, *Submission 43*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, pp. 1-2; Donna Groves, Member, Advocacy Committee, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

⁵⁰ Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 61.

Figure 3.3 What the Committee heard

“ Government and statutory authorities approach each project in isolation, but communities experience the consequences collectively. Poorly timed and poorly executed consultation doesn’t just frustrate it creates fertile ground for misinformation, distrust, and political opportunism.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, pp. 1–2.

“ Over the last 2 years we have been inundated, overwhelmed, and bewildered by the activity of renewable energy companies and related government agencies in our district. To say we feel under siege is an understatement.

Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 1.

“ On day one Resources Victoria reached out to her about the Victorian critical mineral sands wanting to talk to her about that as her region was going to be impacted. Day two, one of the wind companies she is negotiating with around a renewable energy project reached out and said, ‘Oh, can you come and spend some time in the office with her?’ Day three, VicGrid was doing a consultation in the region. Day four, one of the mining companies was looking to do some engagement with her. Then on the fifth day there was a follow-up call from Resources Victoria. This is while she is trying to run a \$50 million-plus business, which is a typical farm in the region. As I say, she was a volunteer on the Wimmera Southern Mallee Development Board and I was trying to get the best out of her, and she was just saying, ‘The government doesn’t realise that we just can’t keep on being consulted when it seems to be a tick-a-box exercise.’

Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

FINDING 19: Siloed consultation process can overload communities with multiple complex issues at once. This is a particular issue in regional and rural Victoria and can cause engagement fatigue.

FINDING 20: Poorly coordinated engagement can damage trust in engagement processes, as people can perceive them as being rushed, unclear or unfair.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet create a centralised engagement calendar to track consultations and assess cumulative community engagement loads to avoid duplication and reduce the pressure on local communities.

3.3 Incorporating existing knowledge

The Committee heard that some in the community could be frustrated at repeated engagements on the same topic. They felt that engagement could be improved by building on the previous findings of engagements rather than starting from scratch.

Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People from the Commission for Children and Young People said it was important that engagement practitioners did not ask participants to engage on topics that had recently been covered:

it is really important that the people doing the consulting and seeking out the views do the hard work first and recognise what work is out there already and what knowledge is already out there, because you might have the same people being engaged on things. They could be the very people challenging you and saying, 'Hang on, I talked about this two years ago. What has happened with it?'.⁵²

Similarly, Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead at the Engagement Institute said, 'Where does that data and information go? We should be building on those conversations, not starting afresh every time the state determines we are going to go again.'⁵³

Dr Emanuela Savini, Practice Lead at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance told the Committee that engagement practitioners need to build from previous engagements:

Recognising the history that has happened in those communities and meaningfully engaging with that history and saying, 'We know that you've been asked this question 10 times, and it hasn't come to a satisfactory point,' and actually bringing that to the beginning of the conversation I think helps, because communities will feel really tired and exhausted. How many times have you probably heard, 'We've told you a million times. We've been consulted about this a million times.' We pretend that it is from scratch, and it is not. It never is.⁵⁴

FINDING 21: Engagement practitioners can fail to check if a community has recently been consulted on the same or similar topic.

FINDING 22: Engagement practitioners may fail to incorporate the findings of previous engagements into their work.

⁵² Meena Singh, Acting Principal Commissioner and Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

⁵³ Amy Hubbard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Dr Emanuela Savini, Practice Lead, Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to review and report on recent engagement findings in affected communities, explain their incorporation into current decisions and ensure new processes build on prior feedback.

3.4 Sufficient timeframes for engagement

Engagement should not be an afterthought; it needs to begin early in the decision-making process. The Committee heard that avoiding rushed processes enables calmer and more considered conversations with community.⁵⁵ This reduces pressure on both relevant stakeholders and project teams.⁵⁶ Early engagement also creates room for flexibility, allowing plans to be adjusted to better reflect local context, preferences and priorities.⁵⁷

The Committee heard that sometimes engagement processes in Victoria are ‘time-sensitive’⁵⁸ or start too late.⁵⁹ This gives the impression that engagement was not strategically integrated into the decision-making process, which can be disappointing for impacted communities. Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer of the Engagement Institute, stated that engagement in Victoria:

It is quite often an afterthought or ‘Oops, we’d better do this’.⁶⁰

When engagement is squeezed into tight timeframes, project teams are stretched and the quality of engagement may suffer.⁶¹ Iain Walker told the Committee:

The number one way you constrain an engagement: time. I have done 32 projects. Candidly, two have really properly blown up in our hands. What have we got wrong each time? If the time is too short, things go awry.⁶²

Short engagement timeframes also create pressure for community stakeholders, who can feel rushed or constrained by the process. Stakeholders told the Committee that rushed processes made meaningful engagement extremely challenging.⁶³ This can be especially stressful as the projects or decisions involved often have a direct impact on people’s lives.

⁵⁵ Lance Brooks, Managing Director, Brooks Community Engagement, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Lance Brooks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 65. Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Amy Hubbard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Marion Short, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Lance Brooks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 65; Marion Short, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Iain Walker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁶² Iain Walker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁶³ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 2; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Submission 45*, p. 5; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 6; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 2; Lance Brooks, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 60–65.

The Committee heard that the timing of some engagement processes do not adequately consider the reality of people's busy lives, including work and family responsibilities.⁶⁴ These challenges are compounded by short notice periods. For example, engagement processes held during business hours 'exclude most working-age residents'⁶⁵ or young people who are at school.⁶⁶ Engagement processes can also be scheduled without regard for peak seasonal periods such as harvest, fire preparation or school holidays⁶⁷.

The Public Engagement Framework emphasises the importance of understanding community preferences and capacity to participate.⁶⁸ Scheduling decisions should be informed by a clear understanding of who the key stakeholders are and when they are most likely to take part. This may require offering opportunities outside of standard business hours, which is essential to ensure relevant and accessible participation. The framework also says that Victorians should be provided with enough time to take part in engagement processes and that holiday periods, cultural and religious celebrations should be avoided.⁶⁹ The evidence suggests that there is room to improve how this part of the Public Engagement Framework is carried out in practice.

Rushed engagements risk missing key community voices and perspectives, leading to an incomplete or unrepresentative understanding of the issues. When important voices are missing from engagements, decisions may not be fully informed, may appear less credible and may attract increased community concern. For these reasons, it is important that sufficient time for engagement is built into project timelines from the outset, rather than being added as an afterthought. A good understanding of the community is also essential to ensure that engagement is scheduled at times that work for the people you are trying to reach.

⁶⁴ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 68.1*, p. 6; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 19; Kate and Tyler Nelson, *Submission 76*, p. 1; Julie Writ, *Submission 104*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 1; YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission 131*, p. 2; Simon Faivel, Director, Consulting, Social Ventures Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40; Lorraine Langley, Senior Manager, Policy and Insights, Carers Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53.

⁶⁵ YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission 131*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Submission 45*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 1; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Figure 3.4 What the Committee heard

“ Proponents have years to prepare their reports and the financial resources to hire consultants to write them. The community have roughly 40 days, including holidays and weekends, to analyse thousands of pages of the proponents’ reports and write comprehensive submissions.

Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 3.

“ The consultation process is rushed. For a ‘project’ of this scale and nature that will have such an enormous impact on residents, consultation should be given the appropriate time to truly engage with council and the community.

Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 2.

“ In rural and regional Australia, I have sort of got a bit of a saying: it is as if we are in a movie franchise, and the movie franchise we are seeing is *The Fast and the Furious*, where consultants and governments come in fast and the community ends up furious.

Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

“ Several solar power projects in the Wimmera region were scheduled to hold consultations during peak farming seasons, such as harvest time. These critical periods meant that many farmers, who rely on these months for their income, were unable to attend and voice their concerns. The scheduling of consultations at such times shows a disregard for the farming community’s needs, and highlights the prioritisation of expediency over meaningful engagement with those most affected by these projects.

Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 1.

FINDING 23: Engagement works best when it is built in from the beginning of the decision-making process, not treated as an afterthought.

FINDING 24: Understanding the community is essential for choosing engagement times that people can realistically participate in.

FINDING 25: When engagement is rushed or inaccessible to key stakeholders, valuable perspectives can be missed. This can lead to decisions that are less informed, less trusted and more likely to face concern or pushback.

RECOMMENDATION 14: Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require:

- holding engagements at appropriate times to allow for the participation of relevant stakeholders.
- allowing sufficient time for participant input so engagements don't feel rushed and insincere or undermine the integrity of engagement.

Chapter 4

Participation that works for everyone

Everyone should have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in engagement processes. The Committee heard that full participation in engagement relies on people having:

- the information they need to contribute
- the time to explore the issues in sufficient depth
- the space to hear how the views of others in the community may differ from their own
- the confidence that any accessibility needs will be appropriately supported.

The Committee also heard about how the use of external consultants and non-disclosure agreements (NDA's) in engagement processes can make it harder for the community to participate meaningfully.

The *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025* (The Public Engagement Framework), along with other guidance such as the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing's *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement* (the Better Practice Guide), provide direction on designing and delivering meaningful and accessible engagement processes. Stakeholders emphasised that the guidance documents themselves are strong. However, the main challenge is making sure that it is actually put into practice, so that people leave engagement processes feeling they could take part, that their views were heard, and their time was worthwhile.

4.1 Participation should be well-informed

It is important that engagement processes provide people with the information they need so that they can meaningfully contribute in an informed, confident and constructive way.

The Public Engagement Framework emphasises the importance of providing people with 'information in advance of engagement activities to support informed participation'.¹ Information should be 'in a format that is easy to read, accessible and in plain English'.² The Inquiry's evidence suggests that there is room to improve how this part of the Public Engagement Framework is carried out in practice.

1 Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, 2021, p. 18.

2 Ibid.

The Committee heard that some people received vague, incomplete or poor-quality information during engagement processes.³ Some stakeholders also felt that information was selectively released or presented in misleading ways.⁴ For example, through unclear maps⁵ or glossy brochures lacking detail.⁶ This limited the extent to which they could participate and at times, raised doubts about whether the process was truly designed to obtain community input. Stakeholders advocated for clearer, more transparent information to support confident and meaningful engagement.

The Committee acknowledges that sometimes information cannot be shared, such as when it is cabinet-in-confidence or commercially sensitive. However, engagement practitioners noted that even with these limits, there is still more information that could be provided to communities. Donna Groves, a Member of the Advocacy Committee at the Engagement Institute, told the Committee:

Let us tell people the truth, let us give them context, let us of course not create public fear. But give them the context, explain the process.⁷

Donna Groves also explained that restrictions on what information can be shared make the work of engagement practitioners more difficult, as they are unable to give the communities the full picture.⁸ This can create tensions within the community that might have been reduced had more complete information been provided earlier.

Stakeholders emphasised they want to contribute, but it is difficult to do so without a clear understanding of all the relevant details. Providing more information would help support their engagement. Importantly, the Committee notes that providing more information does not mean giving communities a larger volume of material. Overwhelming people with hundreds of pages of technical documentation does not support informed participation.⁹ Information still needs to be accessible, clear and well-designed so that it genuinely improves community understanding.

The Committee heard that providing information to communities is particularly important today given engagement ‘occurs within an eroded information context’.¹⁰ Mis- and disinformation ‘have become pervasive elements of our social and political

³ Name withheld, *Submission 25*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 36*, pp. 1-2; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 1; Yvonne Bowyer, *Submission 66*, p. 2; Friends of La Trobe Water, *Submission 105*, p. 4; Colleen Hartland, *Submission 107*, p. 4; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33.1*, p. 1; Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 3; Julie Mulhauser, *Submission 62*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 68.1*, p. 3; Kate and Tyler Nelson, *Submission 76*, p. 1; Ian Penna, *Submission 115.1*, p. 8.

⁴ Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 1; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33.1*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 36*, pp. 1-2; Julie Mulhauser, *Submission 62*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 68.1*, p. 3.

⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 36*, pp. 1-2; Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 3.

⁶ Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 68.1*, p. 3; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33.1*, p. 1.

⁷ Donna Groves, Member, Advocacy Committee, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 5; Ross Colliver, *Submission 87*, p. 2; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 6; Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 8-11; Marshida Kolthoff, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Council on the Ageing Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Ika Trijsburg, Head, Democracy and Diplomacy, Municipal Association of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

contexts'.¹¹ The World Economic Forum has ranked mis- and disinformation as one of the biggest risks to society, because they undermine trust, divide communities and disrupt essential systems.

Stakeholders described the integrity of information as 'a central concern of community consultation at all tiers of government'.¹² Chris Sounness, CEO of Wimmera Southern Mallee Development told the Committee that mis- and disinformation 'is rife in our region at the moment'.¹³ He emphasised that limiting information through 'strategic silence' is giving 'misinformation credibility because there is no pushback against it'.¹⁴ Giving people honest, easy-to-understand information early on makes it harder for mis- and disinformation to take hold.

Figure 4.1 What the Committee heard

“ At each stage, information was tightly controlled and selectively released. The community was invited to submit feedback—but, without meaningful context or access to key documents, it was often impossible to understand the real-world consequences of what we were shown.

Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 1.

“ I support the idea of housing being built around train stations, but I walked away from the information session quite shocked at the lack of information and concerned about the flaws in a concept that I should have been able to support ... Effective consultation should be about bridging gaps, not widening them, and yet the approach taken seems to only emphasize the divide.

Colleen Hartland, *Submission 107*, p. 4.

“ When I ask them about where they have landholder appetite they tell me a different story each time. They are being deliberately vague – stating 'we have more in the north compared to the south' or 'more in the south compared to the north'. As a neighbour I have no way of knowing if the project is viable and how close these turbines will be from my home. I genuinely feel like the state government has given developers all the cards to completely disregard neighbours. This is why these projects are met with so much community resistance.

Name withheld, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

“ The information that was made available typically consisted of generalised maps providing only high-level information or idealised artists' impressions, such as renditions of the new station and surrounds. No detailed plans or reports on the Project's design were ever made available ... The consequence of this lack of detailed information was that the public, including local residents and traders, were unable to provide meaningful feedback on the proposed design of the station and surrounds.

Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 58.

¹⁴ Ibid.

FINDING 26: Meaningful engagement is strengthened when communities are provided with clear and sufficient information.

FINDING 27: What matters is not the volume of information, but whether it is clear, accessible and useful to communities.

FINDING 28: Information provided during some engagement processes can be vague, incomplete or poor-quality — sometimes selectively or misleadingly presented through unclear maps or glossy, low-detail brochures.

FINDING 29: Providing timely and accurate information is one of the strongest defences against mis- and disinformation taking hold.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require clear, sufficient, and timely information about the subject of the engagement to participants.

4.2 Being heard matters

When people invest time in an engagement process, they expect their views to be respected. People also expect the opportunity to explore issues in appropriate depth. It is these authentic, thoughtful discussions which lead to meaningful engagement outcomes and make people feel as though they have been understood.

The Committee heard that some engagement processes felt intentionally structured to limit participant input.¹⁵ Some stakeholders considered that sessions were tightly controlled or did not allow sufficient time to explore complex issues.¹⁶ Others noted a perception that sessions were intended to promote a pre-determined viewpoint rather than gather input, and that opportunities to question key stakeholders were limited — particularly when some officials left before question time began.¹⁷ These processes fell short for some participants, who came ready to engage constructively with the issues at hand.

¹⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 10*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 8; Donna Parker, *Submission 97*, pp. 1–2, Friends of Vic Market, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 6; Friends of Vic Market, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Hetheron Family, *Submission 24*, p. 1; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, pp. 1–3; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 10; Donna Scobie, *Submission 21.2*, p. 1; Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 4; Friends of Vic Market, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 44*, p. 4; Chris Erlandsen, *Submission 46*, p. 1; Port Phillip Eco Centre, *Submission 52.1*, p. 2; George Kanjere, *Submission 59*, p. 3; Long Island Residents Group, *Submission 89*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 2.

The Committee also heard that the use of surveys could limit the depth of an engagement. Some felt that survey structures oversimplified complex issues and limited their ability to provide fuller, more nuanced responses — especially when text fields were too short to capture lived experience.¹⁸ Others considered that survey options were leading or appeared to presuppose a particular viewpoint.¹⁹ These design flaws contributed to a perception that surveys were crafted to produce outcomes aligned with a pre-determined agenda, rather than genuinely seeking broad and balanced community feedback.

Wherever possible, engagements should allow sufficient time to explore issues in appropriate depth. People seek real opportunities to contribute, with space to ask questions and get clear, timely replies. Processes that feel too restricted can frustrate participants and may undermine the quality of community input collected.

Figure 4.2 What the Committee heard

“ Face-to-face meetings were strictly limited to 45 minutes to 1 hour — wholly inadequate for discussing complex issues and cumulative impacts.

Peter Reardon, *Submission 33*, p. 2.

“ At the first meeting, most of the time was occupied with introductions of those officiating, with little opportunity for the community members to interact.

Chris Erlandsen, *Submission 46*, p. 1.

“ In the survey, only 25-character text responses are possible for all but the final feedback box (which permits 50 characters) – I realise this is to reduce the amount of content that needs to be synthesized however it is difficult to answer many of the questions without providing more detail than 25 characters allows. It makes it quite a frustrating survey to complete.

Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 5.

“ The 2-hour consultation then commenced with over an hour’s presentation by the proponents. There was only about 30 minutes for questions, many of which went unanswered. The community did not attend to hear from the consultants – they went specifically to ask questions. The disrespect shown to community members heightens mistrust and anxiety, negatively impacting mental health.

Source: Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 2.

FINDING 30: Engagement improves when the process allows people to delve deeply into issues and actively participate.

¹⁸ Women’s Health Goulburn North East, *Submission 83*, p. 6; Friends of LaTrobe Water, *Submission 105*, p. 10; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 5; Marshida Kolthoff *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1; Chris Erlandsen, *Submission 46*, p. 1; Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 1; George Kanjere, *Submission 59*, p. 1; B McNicholas, *Submission 126*, p. 11.

FINDING 31: Stakeholders seek survey designs which offer broader response options and more space for sharing the complexity of lived experience.

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement framework to require departments to:

- Provide multiple formats for engagement, including surveys with open-ended questions and opportunities for in-depth discussions.
- Include sufficient time for participants to ask questions and receive answers.

4.3 Listening to each other in shared forums builds understanding

An important aspect of community engagement is creating opportunities for people to hear a range of viewpoints in an open and transparent forum. The Committee heard that engagement is most effective when it enables the public exchange of ideas, rather than relying on one-on-one or small group conversations that can limit the sharing of perspectives.²⁰ Dr Emanuela Savini, Practice Lead at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, noted that giving people the ‘chance to listen, question and weigh evidence together’ means ‘they are less likely to retreat to their entrenched positions and more likely to recognise the complexity of issues’.²¹

Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead at the Engagement Institute, elaborated further, noting that best practice engagement brings diverse voices together and avoids ineffective ‘vacuum’ approaches which keep people separated:

An element of leading practice engagement is to bring the diversity of voices together. Whether they are in a physical room or an online forum, they need to be able to hear each other’s views, because until they understand that people may think, feel or value things that are different to their own, they are not able to accept that perhaps the government might think, feel or value something different to what they think. Fundamentally, in engagement people need to have access to the views of others in the public domain. How that is done – there are many different ways.

But when it is that sort of vacuum approach, it is very much a risk management approach – ‘We’ll keep everyone separated; we’re not going to share anything, and then we’ll make a decision.’ We want to leave communities in a better place than when

²⁰ Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9; Dr Emanuela Savini, Practice Lead, Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

²¹ Dr Emanuela Savini, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

we got there, we want to create connections and we want to build knowledge and understanding, so keeping people separated is poor practice engagement.²²

The Committee heard that some engagement processes deliberately separate participants. For example, by placing strict limits on group size or relying on individual drop-in sessions.²³ These approaches not only deny people the chance to hear and understand the views of others in their community but can also be perceived as an intentional strategy to ‘divide and conquer’ rather than genuinely listen.²⁴ Wherever possible, engagement processes should create inclusive forums that enable the open exchange of views within the community.

Figure 4.3 What the Committee heard

“ Instead of having a community meeting, where all attending can hear the same information; ask questions and hear questions from others; Developers consult via a Drop In Session. That way if a difficult question is asked, they can isolate the question from others. This questions the openness & transparency once again ...

The Drop In Session format, requires individuals to go and ask questions, so you need to research before going to Session, to be of any benefit. If you don’t ask – you don’t get told. Some people are not confident or capable to interact with this format. They deserve to have a group meeting setting to gain information – we are all equal; and all have the right to information that will change our community forever.

Donna Parker, *Submission 97*, pp. 1-2.

“ People are less likely to be vehement if they understand other points of view as well and they understand other motivations.

Donna Groves, Member, Advocacy Committee, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

“ They have been advised that consultation will resume but *only* with three group representatives. Excluding other community stakeholders from future discussions only limits the broad range of inputs that effective consultation practices require.

Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p 8.

FINDING 32: Effective engagement gives people an open forum where they can hear perspectives beyond their own.

²² Amy Hubbard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²³ Name withheld, *Submission 10*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 8; Donna Parker, *Submission 97*, pp. 1-2; Chris Goodman, *Submission 50*, p. 2.

²⁴ Donna Parker, *Submission 97*, pp. 1-2; Chris Goodman, *Submission 50*, p. 2.

FINDING 33: Separating participants into small groups or one-on-one sessions restricts community dialogue and may be perceived as deliberately divisive.

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to specify that:

- Wherever possible, engagement processes should create inclusive forums that enable the open exchange of views within the community.
- Engagement processes should be transparent and enable participants to share and engage with a diversity of views, online and in person.

4.4 Engagement should be accessible

While some people will opt-out of participating in engagements, others will be prevented from participating because the process isn't accessible to them. This means valuable insights and perspectives will go unheard. Best practice engagement recognises these access barriers and takes deliberate steps to remove them so that everyone has a fair opportunity to contribute.

The Public Engagement Framework emphasises the need to make engagement accessible to all Victorians. It highlights the need to minimise 'barriers to engagement', including by making sure staff are appropriately trained or experienced, and that engagement design and delivery meets people's accessibility needs.²⁵ For example, by ensuring:

- there is adequate time to provide accessibility options for participants
- venues and locations are accessible and welcoming
- catering for all dietary requirements, allergies and personal/cultural preferences
- information in alternative formats including languages other than English
- the format and materials are culturally safe. Consider an experienced and culturally sensitive facilitator
- interpreters, captioning, hearing loops, spaces for support animals and carers, a prayer room etc.
- extra support for participation may be necessary. This could include travel expenses, child-care, accommodation or catering.²⁶

²⁵ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, 2021, pp. 16–18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The Public Engagement Framework also notes that it is important to consider the historical context of the community, which may include ‘racism and discrimination’ or ‘conflict or divisions’.²⁷

In November 2025, the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing published the *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*.²⁸ The Guide aims to assist ‘anyone who engages with the community’ to ‘engage with the community in a more inclusive way’.²⁹ It stresses that inclusive engagement is key to building trust, improving policy and services and making sure decisions reflect what communities actually need.

The Guide encourages an intersectional approach that recognises people’s identities influence how they interact with government. It also includes practical tips for engaging different groups, such as:

- First Nations peoples
- multicultural and multifaith communities
- young people
- LGBTIQ+ communities
- older people
- people with disability
- carers
- regional and rural communities
- people experiencing disadvantage, and
- people who have experienced trauma.³⁰

The Committee heard that Victoria’s guidance for practitioners is strong. However, stakeholders stressed that the main challenge is lifting the standards of practice when it is applied.³¹

4.4.1 Regional and rural Victorians

The Committee heard that ‘regional and rural perspectives are often left out of important conversations’.³² There are several factors that contribute to exclusion, including barriers like distance, geographic isolation, poor digital connectivity and

²⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*, November 2025.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 18–36.

³¹ Farah Faroque, Chief Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Hayat Doughan, Ageing Well Lead, Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

³² Women’s Health Goulburn North East, *Submission 83*, p. 4.

fewer local engagement opportunities. Given that more than 1 million Victorians reside in regional and rural communities,³³ engagement processes must support participation from all parts of the state to capture its full diversity of views.

Stakeholders highlighted that successful engagement in regional and rural Victoria involves going to the communities themselves — offering multiple local sessions instead of expecting people to travel to central sites.³⁴ In person opportunities are also valued, as they reinforce a sense of genuine inclusion and ensure people with limited digital access or skills are not left behind.³⁵

The Committee heard that project teams don't need to start from scratch, but should work closely with the networks and knowledge that already exists in the community.³⁶ Engagement opportunities also need to be promoted through local channels, rather than depending exclusively on online tools like Engage Victoria.³⁷

Figure 4.4 What the Committee heard

“ Develop consultation strategies that take into account the unique characteristics of rural areas, such as dispersed populations, limited internet access, and differing community priorities. In-person consultations, including community meetings, site visits, and workshops, can be particularly effective in rural communities.

Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 5.

“ Often a barrier in the rural population's ability to participate in community consultations is limited access to reliable internet and lower rates of digital literacy. It's important to provide alternative engagement methods for individuals with limited digital skills or access.

Women's Health Goulburn North East, *Submission 83*, p. 4.

FINDING 34: Some regional and rural Victorians are excluded from engagement processes due to distance, geographical isolation, poor digital access and limited local opportunities.

FINDING 35: Good engagement means meeting people where they are, holding local in-person opportunities and working through established community networks.

³³ Victorian Government, *People living in rural and regional communities*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/diversity-victorian-government-board-guidelines/key-considerations-cohorts/people-living-rural-and>> accessed 8 January 2026.

³⁴ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 5.

³⁵ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 1; Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, *Submission 56*, p. 2; Women's Health Goulburn North East, *Submission 83*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 5; Judith Abbott, Chief Executive Officer, Carers Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 54.

³⁶ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Women's Health Goulburn North East, *Submission 83*, p. 4.

³⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 5.

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require local, in-person engagement in the communities that will be impacted, addressing barriers like distance and digital exclusion, particularly in rural and regional Victoria.

4.4.2 Young Victorians

Young people are often left out of engagement processes. When they are invited, their involvement doesn't always feel meaningful, such as when they are added late or treated as a single group.³⁸ Yet young people bring fresh perspectives to engagement processes. They are forward thinking, understand generational inequality and are leaders in their own right.³⁹ Given that policy makers often lack direct insight into the realities faced by young people, good engagement 'is a way to bridge that chasm'.⁴⁰

The Committee heard that busy study and work schedules, coupled with limited transport options, make it harder for young people to take part in engagements.⁴¹ They also may access information differently from adults and may not want to or feel confident using platforms like Engage Victoria.⁴²

The Better Practice Guide acknowledges that some young people 'feel that they have limited opportunities to effect change'.⁴³ To make sure the voices of young people are captured in engagement processes, it suggests that practitioners:

- consider the age group you wish to engage with and what competing commitments they may have (such as school and work)
- co-create your approach and communication materials
- ensure cultural and psychological safety
- include regular breaks after 45–60 minutes
- engage with them separate to elders in the community. Speaking up in rooms with community elders present may not be considered culturally appropriate
- focus on clear, positive and honest messaging
- send information in advance where possible so people feel prepared

³⁸ Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission 122*, p. 2; Lauren Frost, Advocacy Manager, Policy and Communications, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 23; Julia, Member, Commission Youth Council, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

³⁹ Lauren Frost, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Julia, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Meenah Singh, Acting Principal Commissioner and Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 24–25.

⁴¹ City of Greater Dandenong, *Submission 77*, p. 4; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 4.

⁴² City of Greater Dandenong, *Submission 77*, p. 4; Pra Ashok Raj Kumar, Young Peer Facilitator, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

⁴³ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*, November 2025, p. 31.

- ensure content is appropriate for this audience and that they can influence change
- provide skill development opportunities
- get informed consent, including information about their rights
- work with influencers, youth organisations and community services to help reach your audience and ensure underrepresented young people are included
- address the power imbalance of engaging, especially if you represent government.⁴⁴

Despite the existing guidance, ‘children and young people are still often underrepresented in, or excluded from many government consultation processes or decisions that affect their lives’.⁴⁵ The Committee heard that some young people felt their involvement was tokenistic or that the engagement process failed to recognise the diversity of views among young people.⁴⁶ Other engagement opportunities were inaccessible to young people as they were held during school hours or only offered to select students in leadership roles.⁴⁷

Effective engagement means going to the places young people naturally connect — schools, TAFEs, universities, youth services, community organisations and social media.⁴⁸ Good engagement also involves being upfront with young people about why they are there and how their views will shape the outcome. With many demands on their time, they need a clear reason to prioritise participating.⁴⁹ Further, traditional formats, like town-halls or written submissions, do not always work for young people. These processes can feel ‘stuffy’ or hard to access, as they often require a level of literacy or jargon knowledge that not everyone has.⁵⁰ Good engagement listens to how young people want to take part and adapts its methods to meet those needs.

44 Ibid.

45 Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission 122*, p. 4.

46 Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission 122*, p. 4; Julia, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

47 Allegra, Member, Commission Youth Council, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

48 City of Greater Dandenong, *Submission 77*, p. 4; Meenah Singh, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

49 City of Greater Dandenong, *Submission 77*, p. 4.

50 Ibid.

Figure 4.5 What the Committee heard

“ We are not all the same, but sometimes adults forget that; we are treated like a single group instead of being recognised for our diverse backgrounds, experiences and needs.

Julia, Commission Youth Council Member, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

“ I would like to add a lot of people say that young people are the leaders of the future, but we are also leaders that exist now. We do a lot of advocacy work. We are more than involved, and I think leveraging that through either community consultations or just by having optional voting would be incredibly impactful.

Pra Ashok Raj Kumar, Young Peer Facilitator, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

“ Again, another example: I have been trying to get in contact with my local district’s youth council, but the only meeting times I have been given for the head of their youth council are during school hours. So there are a lot of roadblocks that need to be worked through, I think.

Allegra, Commission Youth Council Member, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

FINDING 36: Young people are underrepresented in engagement processes.

FINDING 37: Some young people reported feeling that engagement processes are tokenistic or inaccessible due to limited opportunities, narrow representation or sessions held during school hours.

FINDING 38: Good engagement meets young people in their spaces, explains why their input counts, avoids stuffy formats, and adapts to the ways young people want to take part.

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require appropriate engagement with young people using appropriate times, formats and venues.

4.4.3 Multicultural Victorians

Multicultural Victorians ‘are not a sub stream of our society’, with ‘close to 50 per cent of Victorians either born overseas or have a parent born overseas’.⁵¹ Accessible engagement is therefore ‘at the heart of mainstream service delivery’⁵² and should not be overlooked.

Multicultural Victorians face multiple barriers which limit their participation in engagement processes. For example, people with limited English may find it difficult to take part, particularly when the process uses complicated language or government jargon. Other people may feel unsure about government processes or find it hard to trust government, especially if they come from places where interactions with authorities have been ‘hostile or frightening’.⁵³

The Public Engagement Framework identifies the value in considering ‘the needs of diverse and priority communities when you plan all elements of the engagement. For example, culturally and linguistically diverse communities ... This includes the location and venue, the facilitator, the written material, the timing etc’.⁵⁴ The Better Practice Guide provides further advice, noting that ‘multicultural communities have diverse needs that traditional processes do not always meet’.⁵⁵ It suggests:

- using plain language aiming for a reading level of grade 8
- sharing your message via WhatsApp, local community radio, places of worship or ethno-specific media
- working with facilitators who are part of community or the same gender if the topic is sensitive
- offering practical support like childcare, free transport and paying people for their time
- scheduling engagement outside of business hours with safe and accessible transport
- hiring familiar venues that are culturally safe, like a place of worship or cultural centre.⁵⁶

Despite the expectations set out in the Public Engagement Framework and the Better Practice Guide the Committee heard that information is still often only in English or written in complicated, jargon-heavy language.⁵⁷ If people can’t understand or access the notices about engagement opportunities, its likely they will continue to be excluded. Further, when engagement is held in central metropolitan areas or

51 Farah Faroque, Chief Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., p. 4.

54 Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 16.

55 Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*, November 2025, p. 23.

56 Ibid.

57 Troy Van Gorp, *Submission 37*, p. 1; Kerry Baker, *Submission 91*, p. 1.

online only, it can be hard for multicultural communities in outer suburbs, or for people with limited digital access or skills, to get involved.⁵⁸ Hayat Doughan, Ageing Well Lead at the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, noted that despite people 'trying their best', culturally responsive practice is not being consistently delivered in practice.⁵⁹ Stakeholders highlighted that working more closely with multicultural organisations can help close this gap and make it easier for multicultural Victorians to get involved in engagements.⁶⁰

Figure 4.6 What the Committee heard

“Of course, many of our multicultural communities come from countries where engaging with authorities – police or government – can be a frightening and hostile experience. They might come under scrutiny, and there could be consequences.

Farah Faroque, Chief Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

“Wording is often so “professionally” written and wordy that anybody whose 1st language isn't English has no idea what is meant by the questions.

Kerry Baker, *Submission 91*, p. 1.

“The approach – I know people, they try their best, and sometimes they think they are culturally responsive but they are not in reality. What we think is not what really is. We need to try to put it into practice.

Hayat Doughan, Ageing Well Lead, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

FINDING 39: Culturally responsive practice is inconsistently applied in practice.

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require consistent application of culturally responsive practice to engagement processes.

⁵⁸ Farah Faroque, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 4–6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Goulburn Broken Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 4.

4.4.4 First Nations Victorians

Governments have historically made decisions without meaningfully engaging First Nations communities, resulting in a lingering distrust of government among some people.⁶¹ Genuine engagement recognises the value of First Nations voices.

The Better Practice Guide notes that where possible, First Nations people ‘should lead the conversations with a focus on respectful and deep listening’.⁶² Engagements should, where appropriate:

- identify appropriate contacts from the specific First Nations mobs and language groups you wish to engage
- plan for early and repeated engagement (do not presume what they need or present a finished product)
- set clear expectations of roles and the level of influence stakeholders will have. This supports a greater understanding of each other’s priorities, expectations and available resources
- identify and be prepared for engagement activities that may require more time and resources
- ensure agreed processes for managing disputes
- be aware of existing differences or disputes between Traditional Owner groups
- have ways to collect feedback and measure for progress and evaluation.⁶³

Scope to strengthen how guidance is put into practice

The Committee heard that even with strong guidance, more work is needed to ensure it is applied consistently in practice.⁶⁴ Stakeholders said that engagement can sometimes feel tokenistic when agencies rely on a single meeting — noting that one-off, large group sessions fall short of ‘strong collaborative practice’.⁶⁵ Disappointing engagement experiences can erode progress, especially given there ‘are still high levels of government distrust within community’.⁶⁶

The Committee heard that Aboriginal public servants are sometimes used as a proxy for genuine community engagement.⁶⁷ This practice burdens Aboriginal public servants with an unsustainable cultural load. Emily Hocking, Manager, Strategic Policy and Reform, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, emphasised that

61 Victorian Aboriginal and Child Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 7; Emily Hocking, Manager, Strategic Policy and Reform, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

62 Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*, November 2025, p. 19.

63 Ibid.

64 Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, p. 18.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, p. 22; Emily Hocking, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37.

Aboriginal public servants should not be used to ‘shortcut’ engaging with the broader community, noting:

Oftentimes it like, ‘Well, we had an Aboriginal public servant provide advice and they said it was okay,’ but they are also in a different position and capacity and they have different access to information. I think that is something that comes through quite often.

Some Aboriginal organisations reported being over-consulted and under-resourced, often asked to provide advice with limited notice while navigating government processes that lack transparency.⁶⁸ Others reported that they often had to initiate engagement themselves because government agencies lacked the cultural knowledge to know who to approach.⁶⁹ Emily Hocking elaborated further:

I would also add that with the local governments one thing we have consistently heard back is that they do not know how to reach out. They do not know who to talk to. They do not know whether it is the ACCO or the TOC or a community elder or what the roles and functions are within the community, and then they do not have the resources or the cultural competency to actually be able to navigate that context and to do things in a culturally safe and meaningful way. So there is work on our side that we are doing to kind of help develop that guidance.⁷⁰

Engaging First Nations peoples

Effective engagement with First Nations peoples requires dedicated resources, especially given the capacity constraints many organisations face.⁷¹ Stakeholders emphasised that this includes proper payment for Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and community members, rather than token payments such as gift cards.⁷² They also highlighted the importance of reimbursing organisations when they are expected to undertake engagement work on behalf of government.

The Committee heard that engagement processes should be tailored specifically to First Nations communities, as generic mainstream approaches may not meet their needs.⁷³ However, other stakeholders noted that ‘it is not always about creating separate spaces for Aboriginal people and communities’ but rather ensuring all public spaces are culturally safe.⁷⁴ Some stakeholders called for explicit consequences when cultural safety is not upheld, as at present, there is ‘little recourse’ for practices that fall short of expectations.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ Emily Hocking, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 4.

⁷² Victorian Aboriginal and Child Community Agency, *Submission 73*, pp. 5–10; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 4; Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, p. 20.

⁷³ Victorian Aboriginal and Child Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Emily Hocking, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

⁷⁵ Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, p. 29.

Stakeholders noted that engagement should start early and move beyond acknowledgements, giving First Nations people real influence over decisions and allowing their cultural knowledge to shape projects before they are set.⁷⁶ This is consistent with national and Victorian commitments to self-determination, which emphasise Aboriginal leadership, transparent engagement and community control.⁷⁷

Victoria's Statewide Treaty – First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and The State of Victoria

The *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* (Vic) was passed by the Victorian Parliament on 30 October 2025. At its heart, Treaty is grounded firmly in advancing the 'inherent right of First Peoples to self-determination'.⁷⁸ In practice, this means that engagement with First Nations people *must* be led by their priorities, shaped by their voices and carried out in ways that respect cultural authority. Treaty sets the expectation that engagements will move past symbolic practices and enable First Peoples to meaningfully shape the decisions, processes, and outcomes that concern them.⁷⁹

The *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* (Vic) establishes a First Peoples representative body, to be known as Gellung Warl.⁸⁰ Gellung Warl will comprise three arms — the First Peoples' Assembly as the permanent representative body,⁸¹ Nyerna Yoorrook Telukuna as the truth-telling and healing arm,⁸² and Nginma Ngainga Wara as the independent accountability and monitoring arm.⁸³

⁷⁶ Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, pp. 6–7; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Closing the Gap Partnership Forum, *Submission 125*, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁸ *Statewide Treaty* (First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria Ltd – the State of Victoria, 13 November 2025) p. 13.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–22.

⁸⁰ *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* (Vic), pt. 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pt. 3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pt. 10.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pt. 9.

Figure 4.7 Gellung Warl



Source: First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria Treaty for Victoria, *Frequently Asked Questions*, <<https://firstpeoplesvic.org/faqs>> accessed 2 February 2026.

Although the specific ways government departments will engage with Gellung Warl and implement the expectations set out in the Statewide Treaty are yet to be defined, the Act requires each Department Secretary and the Chief Commissioner of Police to prepare written guidelines outlining how they will consult with the First Peoples' Assembly when developing any law or policy that specifically affects First Peoples.⁸⁴ Given that the Treaty framework establishes a firm expectation of self-determination and obliges departments to articulate how they will put this into practice, it is reasonable to expect significant short-term change within departments as they work to meet these new requirements.

Figure 4.8 What the Committee heard

“ Furthermore, government and consulting bodies must understand that Aboriginal families have heard a disempowering narrative about themselves and their communities for many years, and this understandably impacts their willingness and feeling of safety to self-advocate and share their experiences and needs. To counter this, consultation processes should work hard to avoid deficit-based approaches to framing the issues and should focus also on what works well and take a strengths approach to questioning. Prioritising the conditions for self-advocacy and self-determination in the consultation process is vital to create the conditions for truth-telling and cultural safety.

Victorian Aboriginal and Child Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 7.

84 Ibid., s. 88.

FINDING 40: The *Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Vic)* establishes that advancing First Peoples' self-determination is paramount, setting a clear expectation that engagement must be led by First Peoples' priorities and give them real influence over decisions that affect them.

FINDING 41: Government departments will need to develop clear guidelines for consulting the First Peoples' Assembly when creating laws or policies affecting First Peoples.

FINDING 42: Prior to the passing of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Vic)* inconsistent practice, tokenistic one-off engagements, over-reliance on Aboriginal public servants, consultation fatigue, and a lack of cultural knowledge within government could undermine engagement of First Nations peoples.

FINDING 43: Effective engagement with First Nations peoples requires adequate resourcing, culturally safe and tailored practices, and early involvement which gives communities real influence over decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to reflect the principles of engagement of First Peoples articulated by the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Vic)*. The Department should also ensure engagement with First Nations communities is culturally safe, tailored, and undertaken early, with meaningful opportunities for First Nations peoples to influence decisions. Engagement should prioritise respectful listening, collaboration with appropriate representatives, and incorporation of cultural knowledge.

4.4.5 Victorians with a disability

Victorians with a disability may experience services, environments and systems differently. Inaccessible engagement processes risk entrenching inequalities and overlook the valuable insights and contributions that Victorians with a disability can bring.

The Public Engagement Framework emphasises that engagement must be accessible. This includes a wide range of considerations, from the way the process is designed, to the materials provided, to the venues in which engagement takes place.⁸⁵ The Better practice guide for inclusive engagement elaborates on the need to ensure accessibility, by suggesting that engagements:

- ask people what their accessibility needs are for in-person engagement and online (e.g. Auslan interpreting or visual aids)

⁸⁵ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, pp. 16–18.

- ask the facilitator to do a rollcall of everyone present, so blind and vision impaired are aware of who is in the room
- have speakers say their name before speaking and describe what they look like
- use accessibility tags on PDFs
- use accessible colour contrast in online or printed content
- use accessible Word document formatting
- describe images with alt text
- have captioning for online sessions
- use plain language aiming for a reading level of grade 8 and Easy Read translations of documents
- if there are speeches, display a PowerPoint slide with key messages from the speech
- offer multiple ways to engage.⁸⁶

Some local governments or peak bodies, such as Dementia Australia, have also developed guidance material to support accessible engagement.⁸⁷

The Committee heard that despite extensive guidance and co-design commitments, some feel as though decisions are still made about them, without their input.⁸⁸ Stakeholders stressed that limiting engagement to small advisory groups bound by non-disclosure agreements falls well short of the government's stated commitments — such as 'nothing about us without us' — and does not align with the expectations set by the Disability Royal Commission. Others noted that accessible materials are sometimes not available during the session, which limits the feedback participants can provide in the moment.⁸⁹

Stakeholders emphasised that accessible engagement materials must be made available ahead of time. While online sessions work well for some, others prefer in-person engagement. For these sessions, careful consideration must be given to the venue to ensure that factors such as lighting, noise, signage and navigation do not exclude anyone from participating.⁹⁰ Stakeholders further emphasised the need to recognise power imbalances within engagements, including by involving people with lived experience in facilitation roles.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*, November 2025, p. 27.

⁸⁷ Moonee Valley City Council, *Submission 27*, p. 8; Dementia Australia, *Submission 71*, p. 2.

⁸⁸ Julie Phillips, Chairperson, Disability Advocacy Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 45–46.

⁸⁹ Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Rose Capp, Policy Advisor, Dementia Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁹¹ Simon Faivel, Director, Consulting, Social Ventures, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40; Julie Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

Figure 4.9 What the Committee heard

“ I would say that the disability community in Victoria is exceptionally not consulted with but at the same time claimed to be consulted with by government, which is very vexing.

Julie Phillips, Chairperson, Disability Advocacy Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

“ As a person with a vision impairment, I requested these of the SRLA and it took until well AFTER the consultation ended for me to receive the documents in the mail. This is discriminatory and completely unacceptable.

Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 2.

FINDING 44: Despite existing guidance and commitment to genuine co-design, some stakeholders reported that engagement processes still feel exclusionary for Victorians with a disability, with decisions being made without their input or being limited to advisory groups bound by non-disclosure agreements.

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure that engagement with people with a disability is accessible and inclusive.

4.4.6 Victorians with low digital literacy

Engagement processes are increasingly shifting online. For some, online sessions are more convenient, but it is important to remember that ‘not everyone is online’⁹² or has the required levels of digital literacy. Therefore, processes that are held entirely online are likely to exclude a number of Victorians.

The Committee heard that low digital literacy is particularly prevalent amongst older Victorians. 12% of adults aged 55 to 64 and 42% of adults aged over 75 consider themselves highly digitally excluded.⁹³ Stakeholders emphasised the need to consider ‘both explicit and implicit forms of ageism’⁹⁴ when designing engagement processes to ensure the voices of older Victorians are not excluded ‘due to design shortcomings’.⁹⁵

The *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement* notes that ‘we live in a state with an ageing population’.⁹⁶ To make sure engagement processes are accessible, practitioners should:

⁹² Marshida Koltzoff, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Council on the Ageing Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Better practice guide for inclusive engagement*, November 2025, p. 24.

- consider using large text in digital and print materials
- use plain language, aiming for a reading level of grade 8
- have a phone contact (as well as email and in-person) on all promotional materials
- have clear instructions, tips and a digital support person for online engagement
- understand that some older people might process information slower than others.⁹⁷

Engagement processes should not ‘assume that the internet is the only way’⁹⁸ to connect with communities. Face-to-face engagements remain important to many older Victorians, especially when processes are held in familiar local places.⁹⁹ However, the Committee heard that these opportunities are becoming less common.¹⁰⁰ Stakeholders highlighted that more engagement processes need to ‘meet older people where they are; both literally and figuratively’.¹⁰¹

Figure 4.10 What the Committee heard

“ One of the most significant barriers to meaningful engagement is digital exclusion. While some older Victorians are highly connected, a substantial proportion face difficulties with technology, whether due to lack of access, familiarity, or age-related impairments. As a result, online-only consultation processes can inadvertently exclude or frustrate those who are otherwise eager to participate.

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

“ Paper-based or in-person options are increasingly rare, leaving a growing group behind.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 19.

FINDING 45: As engagement increasingly shifts online, stakeholders stressed that some community members lack the digital literacy need to participate effectively in online processes. Face-to-face sessions remain important to some stakeholders, particularly older Victorians.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Judith Abbott, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49.

⁹⁹ COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, pp. 4–5; Name withheld, *Submission 17*, p. 1; Farah Faraque, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 5.

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure engagement processes are accessible to people with low digital literacy.

4.5 Use of external consultants

Some people perceive the use of external consultants in engagement processes as a way for government to avoid scrutiny and accountability.¹⁰² The Committee heard concerns that consultants were sometimes treated as a scapegoat, shielding government from accountability when issues emerged.¹⁰³ When it's unclear who is ultimately answerable for a process, communities can experience confusion and frustration.

The Committee heard that engagements delivered by consultants can feel disconnected from the decision-maker. This makes people less inclined to trust or take part in the process. As a result, people may be less inclined to engage as they believe their time will not lead to meaningful outcomes. Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, in its submission to this Inquiry, noted:

There is a growing perception that third-party consultation is one step removed from power, and therefore one step removed from impact.¹⁰⁴

Other stakeholders reported a belief that consultants sometimes feel pressured to shape community feedback to reflect what the government wants to hear. Given consultants are dependent on future contracts, some stakeholders perceive them as conflicted rather than truly independent. Some stakeholders considered that the same issues exist in the public sector — where staff may not feel comfortable giving honest advice because they worry it could cost them their job.¹⁰⁵

Some reported feeling frustrated when consultants were under-prepared or unable to answer basic questions during engagement processes.¹⁰⁶ Stakeholders spoke about feeling 'rushed, spoken over, or not believed.'¹⁰⁷ Other stakeholders reported negative experiences, including where consultants arrived unannounced at people's homes, did not provide accurate information or contributed to feelings of being gaslit or ignored.¹⁰⁸ The absence of effective oversight of consultant-led engagement

¹⁰² Name withheld, *Submission 10*, p. 1; Suzette Miller, *Submission 110*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 13.

¹⁰³ Zheng Chin, *Submission 96*, p. 1; Friends of Queen Vic Market, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ Zheng Chin, *Submission 96*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 10; Kate and Tyler Nelson, *Submission 76*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Kate and Tyler Nelson, *Submission 76*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

contributes to community stress and a feeling of having no legitimate pathway to contest poor practice.¹⁰⁹

An overreliance on external consultants creates several risks for government. When consultants lead engagement activities, the associated knowledge and capacity is not embedded within government.¹¹⁰ This results in diminishing institutional expertise and a self-reinforcing dependence on external consultants.¹¹¹ It also risks reducing the quality of engagement, as community feedback can be misunderstood, diluted or lost as it passes between consultants and government.¹¹² It is preferable for the public sector to build and retain the capacity to conduct engagements in house.¹¹³

Effective engagement relies on sustained, relationship-driven interactions rather than brief, transactional exchanges.¹¹⁴ If consultants appear only for a short time without ongoing presence or local ties, communities perceive the engagement as transient and doubt the value of taking part.¹¹⁵ Trust develops gradually through consistent contact, familiarity, and ongoing engagement.¹¹⁶

Figure 4.11 What the Committee heard

“As neighbours to a proposed wind project, we feel like there is nowhere we can turn for advice and assistance on these matters. This feeling of being ‘stuck’ and powerless is eroding our mental health, and that of many of our neighbours.

Kate and Tyler Nelson, *Submission 76*, p. 1.

“Using [external consultants] in this way is an easy curtain to hide behind to avoid your audience, with a scapegoat on stage to take the fall that has no real consequence.

Name withheld, *Submission 10*, p. 1.

“Engagement is relational, not transactional. Short-term consultancies undermine continuity, and this can lead to an in-and-out perception or practice of community consultation that can impact the quality of outcomes and weaken community trust and investment in policy outcomes.

Ika Trijsburg, Head of Democracy and Diplomacy, Municipal Association of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁹ Tess Healy, *Submission 13*, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 1; Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 39*, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 13.

¹¹² Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 1; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 13.

¹¹³ Professor Carolyn Hendricks, ARC Future Fellow, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

¹¹⁴ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 13; Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56; Simon Faivel, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 47; Professor Carolyn Hendricks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

¹¹⁵ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 13; Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

¹¹⁶ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28; Professor Carolyn Hendricks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26; Donna Groves, Advocacy Committee, Principal Consultant & Managing Director of Comacon, Engagement Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5–6.

FINDING 46: The use of external consultants can be seen as a way for government to avoid accountability for engagement processes.

FINDING 47: Stakeholders reported that inadequate oversight of consultant-run engagement processes left them unable to challenge poor practice, leading to significant frustration.

FINDING 48: Overreliance on external consultants erodes government capability, weakens engagement quality, and creates a cycle of dependence that stakeholders say must be broken by rebuilding in-house skills.

FINDING 49: Trust grows through consistent, relationship-based engagement — so brief, disconnected external consultant visits make communities view the process as temporary and not worth their time.

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to summarise the benefits of conducting engagements in house.

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to:

- Justify and publish the rationale for using external consultants in engagement processes and ensure consultants meet the same transparency and accountability standards as government staff.
- Ensure that where an external consultant is used, a departmental or agency representative is present at all consultations to both oversee the process and answer any questions from participants.

4.6 Confidentiality requirements

Using Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) in engagement processes restrict information from being shared with the broader community. While there may be situations where NDAs are appropriate, the Committee heard that overusing them in engagement processes can create division, limit informed discussion, and undermine trust.¹¹⁷ Professor Sara Bice, Co-founder and Director of Next Generation Engagement, was critical of NDAs being used in engagement processes, noting that:

¹¹⁷ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

NDA's do not protect community members. Usually what happens is that they sow seeds of community division, limit transparency and close down critical opportunities for robust discussion within communities. Trust and social cohesion are vital to thriving communities, and NDAs, intentionally or unintentionally, undermine this.¹¹⁸

Without open access to accurate information, communities struggle to have constructive conversations, misinformation can spread, and frustration can grow.¹¹⁹ Ika Trijsburg, Head of Democracy and Diplomacy at the Municipal Association of Victoria, noted that creating space for misinformation to spread is particularly concerning when public dialogue is already under strain:

In the context of increasing incivility, we actually need to restore and relearn some of those skills as well. At the moment, if we are actually removing information, we are removing the opportunity for people to have those conversations with evidence-informed content, then information will fill that void but it will not be accurate information, and people will be frustrated because they know that they cannot access the official information and so then that drives that distrust.¹²⁰

The Committee also heard concerns that the use of NDAs in engagement processes is fundamentally at odds with democratic practice.¹²¹ For some, NDAs compromise the transparency expected of public projects and government decisions. Requiring people to sign an NDA before receiving mitigation measures — like additional vegetation to screen lighting from new structures — is not acceptable and undermines transparent project delivery.¹²²

Stakeholders reported that requiring Community Reference Group members, council officers and other representatives to sign NDAs prevented them from sharing information with the very communities they were meant to represent.¹²³ NDAs placed them in difficult positions by requiring them to hold important information they were unable to share. They also created broader community issues, including frustration, mistrust and concerns about the integrity of both the engagement process and the decision being made.¹²⁴

The Committee heard that the confidentiality clauses built into NDAs makes it difficult to know how frequently they are being used in practice.¹²⁵ However, some stakeholders observed a shift away from using NDAs in some engagement processes, such as those relating to energy transmission.¹²⁶

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 6; Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 6.

¹²² Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 6.

¹²³ Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 6; Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 6; James McLean, Lead, Planning and Sustainable Development, Municipal Association of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 57–61; Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63; Yvonne Bowyer, *Submission 66*, p. 11.

¹²⁴ Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, p. 6; Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 6; James McLean, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 57–61; Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63; Yvonne Bowyer, *Submission 66*, p. 11.

¹²⁵ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

¹²⁶ Marion Short, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

Stakeholders were clear that NDAs are rarely justified and should generally be avoided in engagement processes.¹²⁷ Further, any need for confidentiality should be driven by the participants needs, rather than be imposed by government or private developers.¹²⁸

Figure 4.12 What the Committee heard

“ A clear remit of the group was to ensure that local communities are informed about issues that may impact them during construction. It is nonsensical then that members of the [Community Reference Group] were required to sign confidentiality agreements which prevented them from informing the community.

Yvonne Bowyer, *Submission 66*, p. 11.

“ So obviously with use of NDAs and that sort of containing of who is able to access information about these decisions that do have collective impact, it makes it difficult to have oversight, but it also makes it difficult for communities to have the conversations that we do need to have, because we need to be able to disagree with each other respectfully.

Ika Trijsburg, Head of Democracy and Diplomacy, Municipal Association of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

FINDING 50: The use of non-disclosure agreements in engagement processes can create division, shut down informed dialogue and erode community trust in decision making processes.

FINDING 51: When engagement participants are bound by non-disclosure agreements, they cannot fully inform their communities, which can lead to frustration and mistrust.

FINDING 52: Non-disclosure agreements that oblige the recipient to not disclose the existence of the non-disclosure agreement are entirely antithetical to a genuine consultation process.

FINDING 53: The Victorian Government imposing a non-disclosure agreement on the Municipal Association of Victoria obstructed them from fulfilling their duties as a statutory body.

¹²⁷ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 28–31.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require that non-disclosure agreements should not be used, except in circumstances where confidentiality is genuinely required or requested by participants. The Framework should:

- clearly define when non-disclosure agreements are appropriate
- require transparency about their purpose and scope
- not prevent recipients disclosing that they are subject to a non-disclosure agreement
- ensure they do not prevent recipients from sharing general information with their communities
- reaffirm that open, transparent engagement is the standard practice.

4.7 Engage Victoria

As discussed in Chapter 1, Engage Victoria is an online consultation platform administered by the Department of Government Services. Although Engage Victoria is well-known within the engagement sector, it is largely unfamiliar to many in the community. Uneven adoption of the platform across departments further prevents it from functioning as a fully centralised, ‘one-stop-shop’ resource.

The Committee heard that the platform can contribute to superficial engagement practices, particularly when complex issues are reduced to overly simplified formats. Aspects of the platform’s design require improvement to support meaningful and accessible participation. Importantly, stakeholders emphasised that the Engage Victoria platform should complement — not replace — other forms of engagement, as digital platforms alone cannot meet the diverse needs of all Victorians.

4.7.1 Not yet consistently used by all departments

Some stakeholders acknowledged the value of Engage Victoria as a central hub — highlighting the benefit of search and notification functions.¹²⁹ However, because not all departments use the platform consistently, it falls short of being a complete, centralised resource.¹³⁰

The Committee heard that departmental use of Engage Victoria has increased since its launch in 2016. However, it remains up to each department or agency to choose whether to use the platform.

¹²⁹ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Moonee Valley City Council, *Submission 27*, p. 10.

¹³⁰ COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

4.7.2 Familiar within the sector, but largely unknown in the community

The Committee heard that the Engage Victoria platform is well-liked by professional stakeholders.¹³¹ James Houghton, Senior Policy Advisor at Ethnic Communities Council Victoria, considers the platform is valuable for those who have experience working in the engagement space, characterising it as a useful ‘one-stop-shop’.¹³²

By contrast, many people in the wider community don’t know it is there. Several stakeholders felt that Engage Victoria lacks visibility,¹³³ with some noting that they had not heard of it prior to this Inquiry.¹³⁴ Others observed that the platform tends to attract a narrow group of repeat users, meaning it does not necessarily capture a diverse range of community voices.¹³⁵

Because Engage Victoria is a digital platform, it is not likely to be used by those in the community with limited digital access or skills. The Committee heard that this is not an insignificant group – with many older people, people from diverse communities, or those living in regional and rural areas experiencing challenges accessing Engage Victoria. Digital exclusion is discussed more in Sections 4.4.1, 4.4.3, and 4.4.6. Stakeholders were critical of engagement processes being confined to a digital platform that they cannot access.¹³⁶

4.7.3 Makes some engagement superficial

Some stakeholders warned that conducting engagement on a platform like Engage Victoria can strip away nuance and result in superficial engagement practices.¹³⁷ When surveys prioritise simplicity over substance, the quality of the feedback they collect can be reduced.¹³⁸ Further, this approach can give the impression that genuine community views are being avoided, contributing to mistrust in the process.¹³⁹

Stakeholders also described Engage Victoria as largely a one-way communication tool – more like a noticeboard than a genuine engagement platform – with limited

¹³¹ James Houghton, Senior Policy Advisor, Ethnic Communities Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Rose Capp, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹³² James Houghton, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹³³ Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 3; Kendra Clegg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53; James Houghton, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Rose Capp, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Sean Kelly, *Submission 31*, p. 2; City of Ballarat, *Submission 43*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 53*, p. 2; Dementia Australia, *Submission 71.1*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 98*, p. 3.

¹³⁴ Donna Scobie, *Submission 21.1*, p. 1; Hetherton Family, *Submission 24*, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

¹³⁶ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31; Farah Faroque, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Concerned Waterways Alliance, *Submission 84*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 118*, p. 6; Marshida Kolthoff, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

¹³⁷ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 2.

¹³⁸ James Houghton, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 6; Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 4.

¹³⁹ Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 4; Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association, *Submission 40*, pp. 1–2; Vivian Clark, *Submission 72*, p. 1.

functionality for two-way dialogue.¹⁴⁰ One-way communication cannot replicate the richness of in-person engagement because it doesn't allow people to ask questions, clarify information, or challenge assumptions by hearing other perspectives.¹⁴¹ Some went so far as to characterise the platform as 'a passive clearing house'¹⁴² because it gives users no way to seek clarification. This was described as an alienating experience, with stakeholders emphasising that public trust requires direct access to people rather than reliance on online systems alone.¹⁴³

The Department of Government Services manages the Engage Victoria platform. Although, in evidence provided to the Committee the Department emphasised that 'management' of the platform is largely limited to providing 'the technology to support'¹⁴⁴ engagement processes. The Department made very clear that 'all contents, consultation processes, collection and analysis of data is the responsibility'¹⁴⁵ of whichever department is leading the engagement process. This dynamic can leave users confused and with no clear way to clarify or question the information they read on the platform.

Another function of the platform is consolidating and aggregating community input into high-level summaries. While closing the feedback loop is good practice, overly broad reporting can make it seem as though feedback wasn't properly understood or considered.¹⁴⁶ Stakeholders called for more detailed summaries of community feedback to be published on the platform.¹⁴⁷

4.7.4 Room to improve the design of platform

Stakeholders emphasised the need for stronger accessibility features to make the platform easier to use, particularly for people with low digital literacy, disabilities, vision impairments or adaptive technology needs.¹⁴⁸ In particular, because Engage Victoria is a digital platform, translation features could be integrated to make it more accessible to people whose first language is not English.¹⁴⁹

The Committee also heard that some design features make the platform hard to navigate. This includes the platform being text heavy, visually uninviting, difficult to navigate across multiple pages, poor formatting, excessive scrolling and unclear

¹⁴⁰ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Concerned Waterways Alliance, *Submission 84*, p. 9.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² John Barnes, *Submission 64*, p. 2.

¹⁴³ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Laurel Chidgey, Executive Director, Transformation, Department of Government Services, public hearing, Melbourne, 15 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Professor Sara Bice, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31; Name withheld, *Submission 44*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 44*, p. 6; Julie Weir, *Submission 118*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ Marshida Koltzoff, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 3; Moonee Valley City Council, *Submission 27*, p. 10; Sean Kelly, *Submission 31*, p. 2; City of Ballarat, *Submission 43*, p. 2; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Submission 45*, p. 13; Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 23*, p. 3; Moonee Valley City Council, *Submission 27*, p. 10; City of Ballarat, *Submission 43*, p. 2.

headings.¹⁵⁰ Stakeholders noted that human-centred design had not been well implemented on Engage Victoria, leading them to consider the platform as far from best practice.¹⁵¹

4.7.5 Not a replacement for other engagement methods

Stakeholders stressed that Engage Victoria should complement — not replace — in-person or other non-digital engagement methods.¹⁵² Many people prefer face-to-face or community-based engagement supported by trusted local organisations.¹⁵³ Relying solely on the online platform risks excluding those who are not comfortable with or unable to access digital tools. Further, wholly online engagements are likely to lack the depth of in-person engagements, which continue to offer distinct value.¹⁵⁴ Stakeholders advocated for pairing the Engage Victoria platform with alternative forms of engagement to maximise community input.

Figure 4.13 What the Committee heard

“ While well-intentioned, the Engage Victoria platform is limited in reach, suffers from information overload, and lacks follow-up mechanisms to close the loop with contributors.

Sean Kelly, *Submission 31*, p. 2.

“ I have never heard of this platform.

Donna Scobie, *Submission 211*, p. 1.

“ Public trust depends on access to people, not portals.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 2.

“ The Engage Victoria platform is too difficult for individuals such as myself with a vision impairment and with limited technological ability. It is too hard to find the consultation that I want to respond to and impossible for me to get anyone to call me back and assist me over the phone. Simply put, all platforms should be made easily accessible for people with adaptive technology needs.

Amanda McNeil, *Submission 57*, p. 2.

FINDING 54: Inconsistent departmental uptake of the Engage Victoria platform prevents it from functioning as a fully comprehensive, whole-of-government resource.

¹⁵⁰ Chris Sounness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53; Rose Capp *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Name withheld, *Submission 53*, p. 2; Bundoora Community Group, *Submission 123*, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ Name withheld, *Submission 53*, p. 2.

¹⁵² Marshida Kolthoff, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 16; COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁴ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 5; Concerned Waterways Alliance, *Submission 84*, p. 9.

FINDING 55: While the Engage Victoria platform has good uptake amongst professional users in the engagement sector, it has low visibility in the community.

FINDING 56: Exclusively conducting engagement processes on a digital platform like Engage Victoria excludes some Victorians, including some older Victorians, multicultural Victorians, regional and rural Victorians and Victorians with limited digital literacy.

FINDING 57: The Engage Victoria platform can sometimes oversimplify complex issues and lead to superficial engagement processes that collect lower-quality community feedback.

FINDING 58: Some design aspects of the Engage Victoria platform fall short of best practice, with accessibility gaps and confusing, text-heavy navigation that makes the platform difficult to use — especially for people with low digital literacy, disabilities or language barriers.

FINDING 59: Stakeholders emphasised that Engage Victoria should supplement, not replace, community-based, face-to-face engagement. Relying on a solely digital platform risks excluding people and diminishing the depth of input.

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Government Services jointly develop and implement a mandatory guide for departments using the Engage Victoria Platform to ensure that:

- Engage Victoria is sufficiently publicised to attract input from wider sections of the community
- engagements offer people with barriers to using Engage Victoria other ways to participate
- Engage Victoria apply functionality that allows nuanced input
- a style guide be produced to ensure that users have, as much as possible, a common user experience when responding to Engage Victoria surveys
- the accessibility of Engage Victoria is improved through increased use of plain language, multiple languages and text for people with vision impairment
- the Engage Victoria platform provides greater transparency and publishes de-identified community consultation feedback.

Chapter 5

Engagement feedback

Providing feedback to engagement participants about how their input has been considered and the impact their views have made is important. This is because it validates the significant time, effort and expertise provided by participants, even if the outcome is not as they wished.

However, the Committee was provided a number of examples where stakeholders did not get a response after participating in engagement. They did not know how their contribution was considered, or the difference their views made on the outcome of the Government's decision.

Participants who did not receive adequate feedback reported frustration and an erosion of trust in engagement, making them less likely to participate in engagement processes in the future. Disengagement of key participants can lead to the Government missing essential views to inform its policy and project work, which would deliver poorer outcomes for all Victorians.

5.1 Feedback is important

Stakeholders told the Committee that feedback about the outcome of an engagement process was important in validating their time and effort, as well as their experience and expertise. Engagement participants want to hear about how their input was used and made a difference. The Committee also heard that sharing personal stories could be difficult and providing feedback helped participants feel valued.

Validating participants' time and effort was important to a number of people. For example, a submitter said:

Engaging with consultation processes is time and energy consuming. People take the time to understand the issues and provide considered feedback. This should be valued and be seen to be valued.¹

Others noted that feedback was important in acknowledging their experience and expertise:

It is so crucial, because if young people – anyone really – are participating in consultation and they give their personal experiences, their expertise, their thoughts, but then they do not hear back about how that was taken on board or what happened.²

¹ Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

² Lauren Frost, Advocacy Manager, Policy and Communications, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

The Committee was informed that sharing personal stories as part of consultation could be challenging and that feedback should be provided in return. Examples were provided of information that was stressful, distressing or traumatic.³ In these cases, follow-up was ‘really important’⁴ in making sure the experience of sharing these stories was worthwhile. A member of the Commissioner for Children and Young People’s Youth Council said, ‘I want to know what sharing my trauma changed.’⁵

Figure 5.1 What the Committee heard

“ I do not think the idea is to give people the false perception that their feedback is going to instrumentally influence the outcome of that consultation, but it is about ensuring that they feel that their voice is of value. Whether or not that aligns with the final outcome, with the proposals that are recommended out of consultation, it is about ensuring that people feel that they have a right and that there is value in raising their opinion, sharing their lived experience.

Marshida Kolthoff, Manager Policy & Advocacy, COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

“ I think if people are genuinely engaged and there is follow-up – because the follow-up is really important; quite often we just go in, we listen, we take something and we do not actually go back – that is probably one of the most respectful things.

Lance Brooks, Managing Director & Senior Community Engagement Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 57.

“ From my experience, not as a worker but as a community leader, it is very important to be acknowledged, to be heard and also to have some follow-up after – not just doing the consultation and after you never hear from them what happened and what the outcome is.

Hayat Doughan, Ageing Well Lead, Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

FINDING 60: Receiving feedback on the outcome of an engagement is important for participants to feel valued for their time, effort, experience and expertise.

³ Rose Capp, Policy Advisor, Dementia Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission 122*, p. 2.

⁴ Rose Capp, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

⁵ Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission 122*, p. 2.

5.2 Examples of a lack of feedback

The Committee was provided a number of examples where feedback to participants in an engagement processes was unsatisfactory. This includes:

- a lack of information about the impact of participation
- a lack of information about how input is considered
- a lack of open communication with participants.

5.2.1 A lack of information about the impact of participation

An absence of feedback about how information collected affected the outcome of a decision led to some stakeholders feeling like their participation was dismissed or did not make a difference. Susannah Aumann gave the Committee an example of how the impact of her participation was not acknowledged by engagement practitioners:

We attended meetings, wrote submissions, launched petitions, and kept asking questions even when it was clear the answers were not coming. I know for a fact that this effort made a difference—some trees were saved, some impacts reduced—but those changes were hard-won and never acknowledged. And that is not a sign of a successful consultation process.⁶

The Committee heard that a lack of information about the impact of engagement left people feeling that their input had been ignored.⁷ This could lead to disengagement with engagement processes.⁸ This is discussed further in Section 5.3.1.

Farah Farouqe from Ethnic Communities Victoria told the Committee it is important that outcomes are reported to participants and their input is reflected:

As much as you gain the input from participants, it should be publicly acknowledged and reflected in outcomes as much as possible, but at least the acknowledgement and the feedback of the outcome of the process is returned to the grassroots participant.⁹

Strategies to improve feedback processes for engagement are discussed in Section 5.4.

⁶ Susannah Aumann, *Submission 63*, p. 2.

⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 1.

⁸ Dr Kendra Clegg, Chair, Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

⁹ Farah Farouqe, Chief Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

Figure 5.2 What the Committee heard

“ There has been a lot of input provided over the last few years, but there is no traction or feeling of what that means, so then people who were engaged become disengaged and people who felt that they were getting somewhere also become disengaged.

Kendra Clegg, Chair, Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

“ People who are going to be affected by exploration and mining are often not consulted about new projects and, even when invited to make submissions, find their genuine concerns, local knowledge, lived experience and evidence-based information are routinely dismissed.

Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 1.

5.2.2 A lack of information about how input is considered

Some stakeholders expressed concern about a lack of transparency in how the information provided for engagement processes would be used. Greg Buchanan said:

Consultation platforms – such as online surveys and drop in sessions – typically lack transparency about how feedback will be used, and offer no assurance that public views will influence outcomes. It comes across as consultation in name only.¹⁰

Another submitter, Kerry Baker, said the lack of transparency around how information is used could undermine trust in the engagement process:

Community consultation is cited but it's not transparent how this has taken place or the number of people returning the surveys and their demographics/age groups are not included so there is no evidence that the results are not skewed.¹¹

The issue of a loss of trust is discussed further in Section 5.3.1.

5.2.3 A lack of open communication with participants

The Committee was also provided with examples of a lack of open communication in engagement processes. This includes engagement practitioners not responding to questions from participants and a lack of updates about the process. For example, a submitter said:

There was no response to further questions and feedback although community members were invited to submit them. The February meeting did not occur and there were no further communications from Resources Victoria Department of Energy or MRSDA Reforms until 20 May 2025 following several unanswered emails from ARMR.¹²

¹⁰ Greg Buchanan, *Submission 111*, p. 1.

¹¹ Kerry Baker, *Submission 91*, p. 1.

¹² Name withheld, *Submission 29*, p. 8.

Julie Mulhauser also gave an example of questions not being responded to:

[REDACTED] was surprised that I submitted a very long list of questions on notice, although I persuaded [REDACTED] to agree to providing answers after pointing out that I had email confirmation that Questions on Notice would be accepted. Responses were NEVER received to my submitted questions.¹³

A lack of updates and communication about the progress of projects was another theme raised by participants. Tony Simpson said:

This lack of communication is disturbing and clearly they have no respect for our business and personal well being and sense of community. This has caused our relationship to strain and put much unnecessary doubt into our future plans as we head towards the end of our lifetime journey.¹⁴

Figure 5.3 What the Committee heard

“ I had a email on 29/3/2023 confirming receipt of some of the concerns I raised at the community meeting regarding this project. But since then, basically no communication, no updates, nothing.

Name withheld, *Submission 108*, p. 1.

“ We have submitted in good faith but there is no submission tracker and find the decision processes are not transparent.

Friends of La Trobe Water, *Submission 105*, p. 11.

“ The communications team – I think it was [REDACTED] said, ‘Yes, we’ll get in contact with you, and we’ll send you the communication packages through the regional partnership.’ To this day we have not received any communications, so it makes it really challenging, because we want to stand up and we want to lead and we want to support, but if we do not get the loop back we do not even know what channel to go down to follow up through.

Kendra Clegg, Chair, Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

FINDING 61: Engagement participants do not always receive information about how their input is considered and the impact their input had on the outcome of a decision, and there can be a lack of open communication with engagement practitioners.

¹³ Julie Mulhauser, *Submission 62*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Tony Simpson, *Submission 109*, p. 1.

5.3 The impact of a lack of feedback

The Committee was told a lack of feedback can lead to consultation fatigue and a loss of trust. This can bring about disengagement from participation in future engagement processes.

Disengagement with engagement processes means that the Government may miss out on the input of key groups with lived experience or important insights. Ultimately this can lead to poorer policy outcomes for all Victorians.

5.3.1 A loss of trust leading to disengagement

When engagement participants have an unsatisfactory experience, do not feel valued and do not see the impact of their work, they can become disheartened and disengage with consultation processes altogether. Participants told the Committee they felt let down when they had unsatisfactory experiences. Greg Buchanan said:

community members enter these processes with hope and a belief in their role – only to walk away disillusioned, having lost faith in a system that does not appear to be working as it should.¹⁵

Similarly, Lorraine Langley from Carers Victoria said, ‘It can lead to a situation where people feel quite let down. They feel that they acted in good faith, they felt that they did all of this, and what happened at the end?’¹⁶

These poor experiences can erode trust and reduce willingness to participate in engagement processes in the future. The Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority gave an example:

Consultation fatigue is increasingly evident, particularly in regional areas where communities report being over-consulted by multiple government agencies without seeing tangible outcomes from their input. This undermines trust and reduces willingness to participate in future engagement activities.¹⁷

This point was also made by the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, who said, ‘The absence of feedback erodes trust and discourages future involvement.’¹⁸

FINDING 62: A lack of feedback to engagement participants on the outcome of engagements and the impact of their input can lead to a loss of trust and disengagement from future engagement processes.

¹⁵ Greg Buchanan, *Submission 111*, p. 1.

¹⁶ Lorraine Langley, Senior Manager, Policy and Insights, Carers Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁷ Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, *Submission 18*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5.3.2 Poorer outcomes

As discussed in Chapter 1, engagement is important because it improves government policy outcomes. The Public Engagement Framework is clear on the positive impact engagement has on the work of the Government, allowing it to ‘make decisions that take into consideration the rights, needs, preferences and values of the public.’¹⁹ It also recognises the value of public knowledge and expertise and uses engagement to help identify potential issues early.²⁰ Engagement not only assists Government decisions but can strengthen communities by ‘involving people in creating better outcomes for everyone.’²¹

A loss of trust and disengagement with engagement processes due to a lack of feedback would lead to poorer policy outcomes and weaken community trust and investment in the work of Government.²²

FINDING 63: Disengagement from engagement processes due to a lack of feedback can lead to a loss of experience and diverse views in engagement processes. This can lead to poorer outcomes and weaken community trust.

5.4 What feedback should look like

Stakeholders suggested that feedback about the outcome of engagement processes should:

- be mandated or automatically sent to participants at the end of an engagement process;²³
- include information about the level different aspects of the participant input had on the outcome of the decision;²⁴ and
- include an explanation if a decision was taken that was contrary to a major theme of participant input.²⁵

Stakeholders were clear they want mandatory feedback.²⁶ For example, Chris Souness from Wimmera Southern Mallee Development said, ‘We need to ensure there are mandated feedback loops.’²⁷

¹⁹ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, p. 9.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ika Trijsburg, Head, Democracy and Diplomacy, Municipal Association of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 September 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

²³ Friends of La Trobe Water, *Submission 105*, p. 11; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 7.

²⁴ Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

²⁵ Municipal Association of Victoria, *Submission 128*, p. 18.

²⁶ Julie Weir, *Submission 104*, p. 6.

²⁷ Chris Souness, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

In relation to reporting the impact of input, it was suggested that every engagement ‘publicly demonstrate how community input was considered and how trade-offs were communicated’.²⁸ The submission from the MAV agreed, saying departments and agencies should be required to publish a ‘You Said, We Did’ summary for each engagement, outlining how feedback informed the decision-making process and what actions were taken.²⁹

In relation to explaining to participants why certain decisions were taken, the Committee heard that participants were comfortable with the complexity and trade-offs involved in decision-making.³⁰ For example, Simon Faivel from Social Ventures said, ‘There is never going to be that agreement in community around what is required. There is always going to be difference.’ However, stakeholders believed it was important that engagement practitioners are up-front in letting people know what cannot be done and explaining why.³¹ Ika Trijsburg from the MAV said:

Sometimes things are recommended through consultation processes that cannot be implemented at any level of government, but it is very important to then feed that back and, as part of that reporting mechanism, to say to community members why that was not able to be implemented and why an alternative solution was chosen. It is really about increasing that transparency and trying to ensure that we are building community trust in these consultation processes at a time when community trust in all levels of government is decreasing.³²

Figure 5.4 What the Committee heard

“ Let people know how their voice mattered, even if the answer is no.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 7.

“ Mandate reporting on how public feedback influenced decision making.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 7.

“ That the outcomes from feedback provided during consultations should be communicated with ACCOs, and if feedback is not implemented the Victorian Government should report back to ACCOs as to why.

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 5.

“ Recommend the delegated decision-maker provide a statement of reasons to make the approval process more transparent.

Friends of La Trobe Water, *Submission 105*, p. 11.

²⁸ Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 7.

²⁹ Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59; Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, *Submission 70*, p. 7; Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, *Submission 73*, p. 5; Friends of La Trobe Valley Water, *Submission 105*, p. 11.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Simon Faivel, Director, Consulting, Social Ventures Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 22 August 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

³² Ika Trijsburg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to require departments to provide feedback to engagement participants about the outcome of the engagement. Where an engagement has asked for the input of participants regarding a decision, such feedback should include, but not be limited to:

- The decision made;
- The impact of participant input on the decision; and
- Clear explanations for decisions made contrary to a major theme of participant input, and the feedback should explain why that input was not taken up.

The Committee would like to thank all those who contributed to this Inquiry, including the individuals and organisations who made submissions, appeared at public hearings and participated in online community roundtable sessions. Their feedback and insights into community consultations undertaken by the Victorian Government at the local level were instrumental in shaping the findings and recommendations of this report.

The overwhelming evidence received during the Inquiry indicates that the Victorian Government has not implemented the standards set out in the existing Public Engagement Framework. Submissions also highlighted that further work is required to ensure consultation and engagement are meaningful and genuine, rather than undertaken as a procedural or ‘tick-box’ exercise.

Effective community consultation must begin with and be grounded in local knowledge that adds value to projects, rather than relying on a top-down approach focused primarily on communication and risk management.

**Adopted by the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
Tuesday 10 February 2026**

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A.1 Submissions

1	Dale Webster	27	Moonee Valley City Council
1a	Dale Webster	28	Dora Pearce
1b	Dale Webster	29	The Alliance for Responsible Mining Regulation (ARMR)
1c	Dale Webster	30	Friends of Queen Victoria Market Inc
1d	Dale Webster	31	Sean Kelly
2	Wayne McKail	32	Jenni Weaver
3	Judi McKail	33	Save Geurie – Stop Boree Solar Factory
4	Name withheld	34	Rowvillian Angling Club
5	Name withheld	35	Name withheld
6	Confidential	36	Name withheld
7	Petrina Alexander	37	Troy Van Gorp
8	Name withheld	38	COTA Victoria and SRV
9	Mark Witham	39	Corangamite Shire Council
10	Name withheld	40	Surrey Hills and Mont Albert Progress Association
11	Melissa Edwards	41	Colbinabbin Renewable Action Group
12	Carisbrook Flood Prevention Assn Inc	42	Elizabeth Benton
13	Tess Healy	43	City of Ballarat
14	Name withheld	44	Name withheld
15	Mareeta Cox	45	Youth Affairs Council Victoria
16	Irina Matihias	46	Save the Preston Market
17	Name withheld	47	Renee Harrison
18	Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority	48	Jillian Nambu
19	Paula Hall	49	Liz Turner
20	Barry Watson	50	The 3068 Group
21	Donna Scobie	51	Lynbrook Residents Association
22	Name withheld	52	Port Phillip EcoCentre
23	Wellington Shire Council	53	Name withheld
24	Hetherton Family	54	Claire Tuohey
25	Name withheld	55	Casey Residents and Ratepayers Association
26	Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network		

56	Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership	91	Kerry Baker
57	Amanda McNeill	92	Save Beaconsfield Reservoir Action Group
58	Save Buckley Street	93	Save Beaconsfield Reservoir Action Group
59	Save The Preston Market Action Group	94	Name withheld
60	The Kilmore and District Residents and Ratepayers Association Inc.	95	Name withheld
61	Lorne Independent Newspaper	96	Zheng Chin
62	Julie Mulhauser	97	Donna Parker
63	Susannah Aumann	98	Name withheld
64	Save Our Station SOS Ballarat Inc.	99	Confidential
65	Julie Rodman	100	Save the Beaconsfield Reservoir
66	Yvonne Bowyer	101	Name withheld
67	Belinda Randall	102	Anthony O'Hara
68	Name withheld	103	Luke Sorensen
69	Aldonio Ferreira	104	Julie Weir
70	Wimmera Southern Mallee Development	105	Friends of Latrobe Water
71	Dementia Australia	106	Richard Evans
72	Vivian Clark	107	Anti Toxic Waste Alliance
73	Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency	108	Name withheld
74	Berwick Springs Community Association	109	Tony Simpson
75	Watertrust Australia	110	Suzette Miller
76	Kate and Tyler Nelson	110a	Suzette Miller
77	Greater Dandenong City Council	110b	Suzette Miller
78	Name withheld	111	Greg Buchanan
79	Climbing Victoria	112	Marianne Johnston
80	Julie Craig	112a	Marianne Johnston
81	Name withheld	113	Confidential
82	Vic Catchments	114	Mansfield Shire Council
83	Women's Health Goulburn North East	115	Ian Penna
84	Concerned Waterways Alliance	115a	Ian Penna
85	Harry Jensen	116	Toni D'Antonio
86	Robert Evans	117	Brent Bailey
87	Riddells Creek Planning Group	118	Name withheld
88	Kathy Nemeth	119	Name withheld
89	Long Island Residents Group Inc.	120	Bayside Heritage Group
90	Council Watch	121	Sandra Alexander
		122	Commission for Children and Young People

123	Boroondara Community Group	129	New Democracy Foundation
124	City of Melbourne	130	McKinnon
125	Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Closing the Gap Partnership Forum	131	YIMBY Melbourne
126	Walk in St Kilda Rd & Environs	132	Name withheld
127	Carers Victoria	133	Nasha Makedonija Inc.
128	Municipal Association of Victoria		

A.2 Public hearings

15 September 2025

Federation Room, Parliament House, Spring Street, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Philippa Nihill	Director, Platform and Products, Digital Transformation, Department of Government Services
Laurel Chidgey	Executive Director, Transformation, Digital Transformation, Department of Government Services

5 September 2025

Federation Room, Parliament House, Spring Street, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Farah Farouque	Chief Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
Hayat Doughan	Ageing Well Lead, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
James Houghton	Senior Policy Advisor, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
Marshida Kolthoff	Manager Policy & Advocacy, COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria
Rose Capp	Policy Advisor, Dementia Australia
Lauren Frost	Advocacy Manager, Policy and Communications, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
Pra Ashok Raj Kumar	Young Peer Facilitator, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
Meena Singh	Acting Principal Commissioner and Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People
Julia	Commission Youth Council Member, Commission for Children and Young People
Allegra	Commission Youth Council Member, Commission for Children and Young People
Lisa Briggs	Executive Director, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Closing the Gap Partnership Forum
Emily Hocking	Manager, Strategic Policy and Reform, Ngaweeyan Maar-oo Closing the Gap Partnership Forum
Judith Abbott	Chief Executive Officer, Carers Victoria

Witness	Position and Organisation
Lorraine Langley	Senior Manager, Policy & Insights, Carers Victoria
Julie Phillips	Chairperson, Disability Advocacy Victoria
Ika Trijsburg	Head of Democracy and Diplomacy, Municipal Association of Victoria
James McLean	Planning and Sustainable Lead, Municipal Association of Victoria
Katherine Keirs	Policy Coordinator , Women's Health Goulburn North East
Annika Stewart	Health Promotion Officer, Community Engagement, Women's Health Goulburn North East
Melissa Edwards	Climbing Victoria

22 August 2025

Federation Room, Parliament House, Spring Street, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Marion Short	Chief Executive Officer, Engagement Institute (formerly IAP2 Australasia)
Donna Groves	Advocacy Committee, Principal Consultant & Managing Director of Comacon, Engagement Institute (formerly IAP2 Australasia)
Amy Hubbard	Practice Lead/Co-founder of Capire, Engagement Institute (formerly IAP2 Australasia)
Iain Walker	Chief Executive Officer, New Democracy Foundation
Dr Emanuela Savini	Practice Lead and Lecturer – Democracy and Citizen Engagement, Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance
Professor Carolyn Hendricks	ARC Future Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy at ANU
Professor Sara Bice	Co-founder and Director, Next Generation Engagement
Simon Faivel	Director, Consulting, Social Ventures
Kendra Clegg	Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership
Lance Brooks	Managing Director & Senior Community Engagement Consultant, Brooks Community Engagement
Chris Sounness	Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development

Extract of proceedings

Legislative Council Standing Order 23.20(5) requires the Committee to include in its report all divisions on a question relating to the adoption of the draft report. All Members have a deliberative vote. In the event of an equality of votes, the Chair also has a casting vote.

The Committee divided on the following questions during consideration of this report. Questions agreed to without division are not recorded in these extracts.

Committee meeting – 10 February 2026

Ms Bath moved that, in Chapter 4, pages 46–48, the sub-section ‘Victoria’s Statewide Treaty – First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria and The State of Victoria’ be removed, along with findings 32, 33 and 34.

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	Ryan Batchelor
Gaelle Broad	Dr Sarah Mansfield
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	David Ettershank
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt

There being an equality of votes, the Chair gave his casting vote for the noes. Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved that, in Chapter 4, page 48, that recommendation 20 be amended to read:

That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to ensure engagement with First Nations communities is culturally safe, tailored, and undertaken early, with meaningful opportunities for First Nations peoples to influence decisions. Engagement should prioritise respectful listening, collaboration with appropriate representatives, and incorporation of cultural knowledge.

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	Ryan Batchelor
Gaelle Broad	Dr Sarah Mansfield
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	David Ettershank
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt

**There being an equality of votes, the Chair gave his casting vote for the noes.
Question negatived.**

Mr Ettershank moved, that in Chapter 4, page 48, recommendation 20 be amended to read:

That the Department of Premier and Cabinet update the Public Engagement Framework to reflect the principles of engagement of First Peoples articulated by the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Vic)*. The department should also ensure engagement with First Nations communities is culturally safe, tailored, and undertaken early, with meaningful opportunities for First Nations peoples to influence decisions. Engagement should prioritise respectful listening, collaboration with appropriate representatives, and incorporation of cultural knowledge.

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Ryan Batchelor	Melina Bath
Dr Sarah Mansfield	Gaelle Broad
David Ettershank	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell
Sheena Watt	Wendy Lovell

**There being an equality of votes, the Chair gave his casting vote for the ayes.
Question agreed.**