

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments

Melbourne – Tuesday 24 March 2026

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

WITNESSES

Russell Williams, Deputy Chair, Electrify Boroondara;

Tim Shue, General Manager, Business and Strategic Partnerships, Yarra Energy Foundation;

Dr Graham Moore, Electrification Adviser, Darebin Climate Action Now;

Pat Simons, Yes 2 Renewables Coordinator, and

Ari Pickering, Friends of the Earth Melbourne; and

Heidi Lee Douglas, Chief Executive Officer, Solar Citizens.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

We will run this session in a question-and-answer format. Committee members will ask some questions. If you wish to answer a question, please raise your hand. To make it easier for the Hansard reporters, please state your name before we start speaking. There may not be an opportunity for everyone to answer every question. If there are any important points that you do not have the opportunity to make during the session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing. I would like each participant to state their name and the organisation they represent. We will start with you, Heidi Lee Douglas.

Heidi Lee DOUGLAS: I am Heidi Lee Douglas. I am the CEO of Solar Citizens.

Russell WILLIAMS: I am Russell Williams. I am the Deputy Chair at Electrify Boroondara.

Tim SHUE: Good morning. Tim Shue, General Manager at Yarra Energy Foundation.

Graham MOORE: Good morning. My name is Dr Graham Moore, from Darebin Climate Action Now.

Pat SIMONS: Morning. Pat Simons. I am the Yes 2 Renewables Coordinator at Friends of the Earth.

Ari PICKERING: Hello. Ari Pickering. I am with the Energy Justice campaign at Friends of the Earth.

The CHAIR: Excellent. We are going to go straight into questions. Deputy Chair or Wayne, are you ready to kick off?

Wayne FARNHAM: Yes. I will go straight into it. What safeguards could be implemented to ensure cost savings flow on to renters and social housing tenants?

The CHAIR: Russell.

Russell WILLIAMS: I think the Vic government is doing a great thing with the Vic Energy Compare site, which allows people to get on the best possible gas and electricity tariff and also the greenest possible options there as well. It is a great capability, but it is very unusable and there is not a lot of incentive for renters in particular who just want to get the power on when they move on, and typically they are stuck with one of the big three energy providers until they move on. Somehow we need to incentivise our renters to use that great capability.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Graham.

Graham MOORE: I think the number one thing would be to mandate that apartments and other buildings have green energy performance ratings so that when a renter goes to rent a property they know what they are up for in terms of the energy performance. When an investor goes to buy a property, they know what they are up for in terms of the performance. If there were mandatory energy performance, then that could inform the rental price market, so better performing properties could stand out –

Wayne FARNHAM: So basically like an energy star rating system for tenants?

Graham MOORE: An energy star rating. Yes, absolutely.

Wayne FARNHAM: So 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 star?

Graham MOORE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Heidi.

Heidi Lee DOUGLAS: One of the things we are working on as a big picture systems change is actually making more of the networks that exist in our towns and urban centres. At the moment most of our electricity comes from offsite through transmission to our towns and cities. By upscaling commercial and industrial rooftop solar, backed by storage, and being able to share that with neighbouring renters and apartments, we can actually make our cities and towns energy sustainable, and that will reduce network costs, which is really the biggest hit on our energy bills.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Daniela, do you have a question?

Daniela DE MARTINO: Yes. Hello, everyone, and thank you very much for coming in, first and foremost. I know there is call for an introduction of a mandatory disclosure scheme for thermal and energy efficiency at the point of sale or lease. What evidence do you have that this will increase market recognition and reward sustainability measures in apartments, and how can we ensure it does not reduce the affordability of them as well?

The CHAIR: Graham.

Graham MOORE: It does provide competition between poorly performing apartments and well-performing apartments.

Heidi Lee DOUGLAS: I think this is a case for energy equity. Like, we actually need those measures in place to protect consumers and citizens. It is not just about driving a market here; this is about equity and parity. I think we are working on asking the federal government for an accelerated depreciation of taxable assets for landlords for rooftop solar and energy efficiency appliances. We would like them to do this in the budget, which would be in time then for your Victorian March 2027 rollout of the energy standards, and for that to be a carrot to incentivise the other states to also do that so that the state governments have a carrot but also the landlords have a carrot, whilst the states come in and provide that stick, which is I think what would really accelerate that energy equity.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Martha, do you have a question?

Martha HAYLETT: I do. I have got a few, so I do not know if we have time. Thank you so much to everyone who is here, and I know you have done a huge power of work on trying to empower owners corps to do more of this work into the future. I am going to kind of keep it a bit open-ended for whoever wants to reply, but just in terms of how we help owners corps into the future to actually do this work, what do you think is not working right now for owners corps, and what do you think we need to do more of to actually make sure that they are going to do this into the future?

The CHAIR: Tim.

Tim SHUE: Hi. Yes, thanks for the question. At Yarra Energy Foundation we are recently seeing a lot more interest from apartments and owners corps for electrification – renewables – I think in particular led by the

interest in electric vehicle charging. The right to charge has certainly come forward. We have seen similar calls in New South Wales as well for that right to charge. We will hopefully be working with local councils, at least one of them here in Victoria, to help owners corps directly with that process. I think what we are learning is that it can be a really complex undertaking, especially if you want to do the whole apartment building or a multi-unit dwelling complex. I think that can be quite overwhelming at first. There are a lot of factors which come into calculating the risks that owners corps have to evaluate before they can make informed decisions. So I think at least from our perspective, there is a strong benefit for independent advice, where there is no conflict of interest with suppliers or installers who are going to benefit from, you know, upselling, and it is really providing a support where those owners corps really do feel supported through the process so there is some sort of advocate that can work with them. There is apparently more uptake of intermediary sort of groups or contractors that are being used by owners corps to help smooth that process, but that does not necessarily always lead to increased capacity of the owners corps. Sometimes that can lead to dependency on these sorts of things, which can undermine the cost benefit. We think, at Yarra Energy Foundation at least, there is room for more independent support for OCs in general, which could take a number of different forms. But there is definitely a need there, especially if you are looking at complex upgrades.

The CHAIR: Graham and then Russell, and then, Martha, was there a follow-up you wanted to do?

Martha HAYLETT: Yes, just on that, I was wondering – you were talking about sort of independent advisory. We have had a few of our other guests talking about energy consultants and basically like a liaison one-stop person to help owners corps through this process. Do you think that needs to be a third party? Do you think that should be a team within DEECA? Where do you think the Victorian government's role is in this? Does it need to be baked into our bureaucracy, or do you think that it needs to be a third party?

Tim SHUE: Good question. I guess I do not know the answer exactly, but I would say there is merit to looking at third-party options. I suppose I am speaking from experience as a non-profit. We are based here in Fitzroy. We work directly with communities as that third party, in that role, as the independent trusted adviser. We work with local governments in particular and communities directly to enable those situations, where the overwhelm of the complexity could otherwise have been the barrier. We help to play that role. That is not to say that the Victorian government could not potentially play a role there as well, but we definitely see merit in groups like ourselves and others that help directly with those groups.

The CHAIR: Graham.

Graham MOORE: I think owners corporations are complex beasts. You have the owners, who get a say maybe once a year; then you have the committee, who might meet once every couple of months or three months or something like that; and then you often have a commercial manager. Now, the commercial manager has no incentive at all to do absolutely anything that is going to create more work for them. So if the committee comes along, saying, 'Oh, gee, wouldn't it be nice to have solar,' the commercial manager will say, 'Oh look, yeah. I've done that at another property and it didn't work there, so let's not do it here. Let's not waste our time.' I would say that some sort of incentive for managers to get their owners corporations over the line in moving towards more renewable energy and energy efficiency might actually break the deadlock here on owners corporations, because the commercial managers have absolutely no incentive to do anything at the moment – and can often be a barrier, in my experience, to an owners cooperation actually voting and taking on this new role.

The CHAIR: I certainly have lived experience with that. Yes, Russell.

Russell WILLIAMS: Yes, I would agree that owners corps tend to be very risk averse. One of the things that I am seeing – and I think perhaps your New South Wales colleagues might be leading this way with EVs – is the publishing of a set of case studies, maybe funded case studies, of where owners corps have previously done electrification, EV, solar et cetera, to give them procurement guidance. Technical financial case studies, risk assessment – all of these can be put in case studies because, as I said, owners corporations are typically risk averse, time poor and generally financially poor. They are worried today about replacing flammable cladding, so electrification is pretty low on their priority list – because it is just too hard. They do not have the capability or the resource to be able to research these projects, so having trusted, published case studies is a great step forward.

The CHAIR: Over to Ari.

Ari PICKERING: I think it seems to be touching on all these things. It seems to be correctly aligned motivations, in terms of carrots and sticks, are probably the fastest way to get this stuff done. Those who have experience on body corps are generally keen to spend as little money as possible, and there has to be a special levy or something that gets done. When you have got the motivation to spend as little as possible and then you have got a manager who has no motivation either, it is fairly plain really, when you look at it on the surface. If there is not a correctly aligned ‘What’s in it for me?’ then this is going to take quite some time to get done. But by using a well-balanced form of, whether it be tax incentives, and obviously the new minimum standards that are coming in and so forth, if we get that balance right, then we can get the balance right for those who are going to have the benefits from improving their investment – the correct tax deductions that they require for their investments and so on. Then the people living in these places can actually have the opportunity to have a warm, cheaper home.

The CHAIR: I was going to ask about you, being Friends of the Earth, suggesting that the State Electricity Commission could establish a virtual power plant for rental households. Why is this important, and what legislative reform would promote equitable energy sharing?

Ari PICKERING: We already have with the SEC, established in the constitution, a real great body here that we can utilise. They are already doing this in the wholesale market through various public–private partnership alignments, reverse auctions and so forth, providing opportunities for the private sector to get involved in this sort of investment and also for us as a state to establish our asset base in this area. It kind of makes sense, when you think about the fact that there is a margin that sits between the wholesale and the retail market, that if we were to quite easily, under a system that already exists, put a retailer in there that was available for renters specifically initially, so that they could have access to a retail business other than AGL or one of these other gentailers, then all of that production could be generated on existing government buildings, which Solar Citizens was just talking about – there are assets that are sitting here available that we could be utilising, and a lot of that investment could be done relatively easily with potentially long-term Treasury loans or whatever.

The CHAIR: Sorry. Can I just clarify: are we talking about community and social and public housing or the private rental market or both?

Ari PICKERING: I think that the former already has a lot of investment happening in that area; I think the government is already well underway with that. I think we are really talking about that private market where renters just do not have a choice. And yes, there are a lot of great technological options that we can look at, as we were discussing in the previous session. I think those are great and we should look into those. But a very simple way that we could potentially do this is just to give a renter or an apartment owner an option to purchase their clean, renewable energy from the government. Then that gives the opportunity for the government to have an income source that helps to moderate a market that we clearly see needs moderating, and it does not have to be a long-term thing. It might be just initially until we get some of these other things up and running. But to me it makes sense that we could easily provide an option for renters and also do it with very little major budget impacts, because we could do this sort of installation with co-located storage on sites. As the submission goes on to say, you could also potentially do that with public–private partnerships with other industrial owners or, say, shopping centres. There are various ways in which we could provide great business opportunities for some of those landowners, particularly if we are talking about generation and storage inside the city where a lot of electricity is being used as well. We have a lot of industrial space that there is no motivation whatsoever for any landowner to utilise, and the government could potentially get access to that quite easily.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Does anyone else want to add to that? Yes, Russell.

Russell WILLIAMS: I would just add that there has been a quite successful social housing battery, VPP solar project, in South Australia, which I would recommend you seek out and look at.

Graham MOORE: I would totally support those remarks. And in terms of incentives, we currently have land tax incentives to get empty properties into the market. How about a land tax incentive to get an empty acre of warehouse space roof into the solar market? We have so much roof space available in Melbourne that is being completely non-utilised. That could be the start of the generation for the virtual power plant.

The CHAIR: Interesting.

Jordan CRUGNALE: You have covered a lot of my questions.

The CHAIR: Marty.

Martin CAMERON: I am interested in a timeline. Obviously you deal with owners corporations a lot. What is the timeline from when they first engage with you or you engage with them to get a renewable asset into a multilevel apartment? Is it 12 months, 24 months? What is the timeline from day one to them actually signing off on all the different bits and pieces? Are we looking at two years down the track, four years down the track? Just to get our heads around it here, we are talking about putting solar panels and batteries into apartments. What is our lead time to actually be able to do it?

The CHAIR: Graham.

Graham MOORE: As part of my role with Darebin Climate Action I give advice to people on home electrification, as a volunteer. I have given advice to one apartment almost 12 months ago, and they basically still have not moved. As mentioned in the last thing, their meter panel needs to be upgraded, their pavement is cracked, I do not know if they have got insulation problems. Under the current regime, five years is probably being optimistic, I would say, for most apartments. Some move faster, for sure, but there is just no incentive to do anything, and it is very expensive. They are risk-averse. Things do not change from year to year.

The CHAIR: Ari, then Tim.

Ari PICKERING: I think coming back to that question around motivations, really the major issue here is that – I imagine those of us who have been involved with an OC before – let us say you have got 70 apartments, you have got 20 people who turn up to the meeting and they are a different 20 people to the meeting beforehand. The ability to be able to get some sort of consistency through – at least in Parliament everybody kind of has to turn up, whereas in these sorts of situations it is really hard to get those decisions made. I think that is why it is going to push out, but if we correctly align those carrots and sticks well, then that should actually happen quite quickly. That could happen as quickly as in a year.

Heidi Lee DOUGLAS: From our experience in New South Wales, it would also be very helpful if the government was to support a solar champions style program, so actually training up people who live in those apartments to be champions within their strata or their OC to guide that process. We have talked about having independent advice but also actually having some training that is on offer to nurture those solar champions within the apartments. We call them ‘solar champions’; you can call them ‘electrification champions’ or whatever you like, but I think there is a need to really support those individuals who bear that load, because they are the ones who drive the change within their local community.

The CHAIR: Tim, I am going to come to you, and I am sorry I missed you then. I would really love to be able to google ‘Motion for my body corporate to electrify my apartment’ and someone actually – I am sure AI would probably write it for me these days anyway. But if there was a really good motion that someone could literally do a Google search for and go to their AGM and say, ‘I know you’ve never seen me before, but this is what I am really passionate about. How do we move forward on that?’ That would be practical help for me. Yes, Tim.

Tim SHUE: Yes, absolutely. I think if we think about what the endgame is, it is about giving the OCs confidence to make an informed decision. So how do you backcast from that, if that is your success? To all the other points made on the panel, unfortunately there are a lot of unknowns when OCs or apartment groups want to embark on that journey to electrify or just install solar or get EVs, and there are unknown unknowns as well. There is a lot of uncertainty that has to be worked through, as we have heard as well – just the way things are set up, OCs can be risk-averse, which is natural. How do you manage that through the process? Sometimes anecdotally, from our perspective – to your original question – yes, maybe one year, two years, three years is quite normal unfortunately because of all these things that need to be worked through before that success point of, ‘Okay, can we make an informed, confident decision for our group, and we know the risks, we know how we want to distribute the benefits as well and share the costs.’ Yes, unfortunately it can take a while. Hopefully there will be some solutions to empower those groups with templates, resources or training to make those choices quicker, sooner and more confidently and get to that point without dragging things on for multiple years.

Heidi Lee DOUGLAS: Can I just say, I think what you are talking about is also a really hard to abate area. I think the lesson we have learned from trying to retrofit a high-rise complex in Wolli Creek in Sydney is that the state governments really need to adopt the National Construction Code as quickly as possible when it comes out and make sure your new activity centres have a clean energy mandate, because it is much harder to retrofit than it is to get it right when these things are being built.

The CHAIR: That is really good. Can I just ask Solar Citizens about mapping energy supply and demand across energy distribution networks and the establishment of urban renewable energy zones. Why is public mapping needed, and who should lead this work?

Heidi Lee DOUGLAS: At the moment we do not have public visibility over the local energy spatial mapping – it is protected by the distributed network service providers – and that means that people like local councils and commercial operators do not have access to know where is the flow and the congestion, where is it going to be viable to build new big high-rises. All of those sorts of things are actually behind closed doors. In the UK they have made that data publicly accessible to help with better energy planning. It is, I think, something really important for us to get our cities and towns planning right and to make that commercial incentive for like medium-scale batteries, for instance. The second part of your question was around urban renewable energy zones. That will enable that proliferation. Many flowers will grow in that garden of rooftop solar and storage in our cities if that data is more accessible.

The CHAIR: It has been a quickfire session, but does anyone have anything else before we finish? Daniela?

Daniela DE MARTINO: No, I am good. I think a lot of things have been covered off quite well actually.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Do you have anything that we have missed or that you would like to add? Pat.

Pat SIMONS: I just want to speak a little bit about the option of solar gardens. Obviously today's discussion is really focused on onsite solar and how to work with body corporates. There is an option similar to virtual power plants but where you develop offsite solar, and that could be on a commercial building or a local government building. It could also be in a regional area. That is led through ideally a community organisation. The Community Power Agency has developed this in New South Wales through the Haystacks Solar Garden pilot. Basically how it works is individuals or even body corporates can buy a share of that project. This is really important for sites where you do not really have any ability to install solar on the building. An issue for apartments is we have this massive variation in the actual physical design. Some buildings will be easier to retrofit than others, but there needs to be an option for buildings and people that are not going to be able to access solar directly on their homes. Solar gardens is a way to buy into a project and then to receive the benefit, maybe in the form of a discount on your energy bill – similar to doing it onsite, but it is just offsite. This also uniquely would work really well in regional communities in particular where you have people that might be able to be engaged in the development of those community solar projects, and then they can also be directly receiving a benefit on their bills. We would support an upscaling of this solution, maybe a pilot program where you are supporting community energy groups to roll out the solution, and that could also work in collaboration with the changes for body corporates and so on.

The CHAIR: As a committee dominated by regional MPs, I am sure there will be some interest in that. Graham, we will finish up with you.

Graham MOORE: Very quickly, you have got five excellent submissions from this panel. All of the answers are actually in there, so I encourage the members and your researchers – and if there is anything that is not understood, we are all ready to answer questions.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you very much for participating. As you said, your submissions are very detailed, and we thank you for the contributions that you have made. But if you walk out of here and say, 'I should've mentioned,' please email and reach out to the committee if there is something that you think would add value to our inquiry.

Witnesses withdrew.