T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments

Melbourne – Tuesday 24 March 2026

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WITNESS

Cameron Knox, Chief Executive Officer and Co-founder, Allume Energy.

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

I warmly welcome Cameron Knox from Allume Energy. Did I get that right?

Cameron KNOX: You did, yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. All evidence 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.

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I invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members. Over to you, Cameron.

Cameron KNOX: Great. Well, thank you so much for having me, first of all, and thank you for this inquiry. My name is Cameron. I am the CEO and Co-founder of Allume Energy. We are an Abbotsford-based company that are committed to unlocking rooftop solar and batteries for those in apartments and multidwelling units. We were founded in 2016 into this fantastic rooftop solar industry we have here in Australia. We have got almost 40% of our homes now with solar installed. But as you know, historically that number has been near zero for those in apartments and multidwelling units, despite them standing to benefit often the most from the savings that rooftop solar unlocks. In Victoria it is roughly a 25% lower income on average for apartment residents versus their standalone home counterparts. We really did not think this was fair, so we built a product to break down the barriers that have historically existed for apartment residents to get access to rooftop solar. We call it SolShare, and it is the world's first and only product that enables energy from a single rooftop solar system on the common roof of an apartment building to be accessed by multiple residents within that building. Essentially it is splitting the energy that is generated, giving each apartment a fixed allocation, typically proportional to their lot entitlement, and then sending them their allocation at a time which maximises their savings.

This is a hardware product. It is manufactured in Dandenong in Victoria and now installed across the world, including across Australia, the US, the UK and Germany. We have connected, as of this morning, 9800 apartments to rooftop solar. We are doing a little over 500 apartments per month, so we are about to cross a very exciting threshold for us, which is the 10,000th apartment. Over 3000 of these have been in Victoria, and we have over 1500 that have passed special resolutions and will be moving forward with shared solar in the coming months. Over our history we have attracted private investment from Australian investors, including Mirvac and Qantas Superannuation, and then internationally through the Schmidt Family Foundation, which is Wendy and Eric Schmidt's family office – Eric is a former CEO of Google – and more recently E.ON in the UK, who are the second-largest electricity retailer globally. In total we have raised a little over $30 million, and we employ 39 full-time staff, with 25 of them are in our Abbotsford office. In addition we have six full-time equivalents on our manufacturing line in partnership with SRX in Dandenong, and we have anywhere between eight and 12 teams on any given day from solar installers who are installing SolShare projects across Australia, so we have ongoing jobs for between 30 and 50 people in the field doing the actual installation work. In addition we have secured for 2026 already $8 million of export revenue, predominantly through our work that we are doing in the UK.

We feel, despite very much scratching the surface of this problem, we are leading in Australia and the world in rooftop solar adoption in this hard-to-reach part of the market, but we would be lying to say that we have solved the problem entirely. For that we need your help, and there are a few things that we have noted in our letter that would be very impactful at creating not just the technology landscape but also the policy landscape to make rooftop solar for this harder to reach and in-need part of the market really achievable at scale. There are a couple that I want to highlight and provide more verbal context on.

Firstly, the Solar for Apartments program in Victoria is a really pioneering program. It was the first of its kind globally that was dedicated to solar for apartments and was very catalytic, and continues to be very catalytic, for us. What we are requesting, though, is a longer time period on that program. The industry is, I suppose for good reason, wary of what we call sugar hit rebates, where you just get a quick period of time to capitalise on a rebate. But in apartments, as a solar company, it is very difficult to build your business in that way. Our customers, being the solar installers, need longer term commitment to be able to invest in this market segment, so having a longer term timeline for that will give them a lot of confidence and enable them to really invest in this new market segment. We also support it actually ramping down over time in the same way that the STC program does for small technology certificates, for small-scale solar in general, and more recently the cheaper home batteries program, the federal program, is stepping down. We see that as an effective way to ensure that the industry continues to mature and does not rely on rebates in the long term.

The other element that I would highlight from the Solar for Apartments program is that it has been very impactful at bringing not just apartment residents but tenants into the rooftop solar transition, and that has been a very interesting by-product of the challenge of collective decision-making in apartments. It does make it hard, but the reality of that is when you do make a decision, you bring along the whole building with that decision and what we call these passive supporters, being the ones who are supportive of solar but not supportive enough to go out and actually organise it for themselves. They get brought along for the journey, and we often see the vast majority of investor landlords sit in that category. They understand that there is an increase in property value, but there is not quite enough impetus to go out and do it themselves. But when you have an apartment building there is usually what we call a community champion, an owner-occupier who is driving the process, and then in doing so they bring along all of these investor landlords and hence give access to these tenants. In the Solar for Apartments program we have been able to deliver solar to more tenants than the solar for tenants program has. So it has been a real proof point to, I suppose, show that there is a mechanism to use apartments to actually access tenants in a really rapid and impactful way.

To catalyse that further, what we are suggesting is for the balance of the cost to have a loan product available, ideally a zero-interest loan product available for not just solar but also batteries and the enabling works, to ensure that, especially for investor-owners, it is a really easy decision for them to approve, and hence the tenants can get access. And then, particularly in community housing where everyone is a tenant, having a product like that – the feedback we have got from the industry is it would be really impactful, in fact more impactful than a grant that leaves a little bit of investment remainder, because enabling it to be 100% financed would allow them to use their budget to build homes, as is their core, I suppose, motive, core goal, and then use this funding to reduce the energy cost for their tenants. So those are two things: the extension of that program and the introduction of a zero-interest loan would be enormously impactful both for private apartments and community housing.

Then lastly, I would echo the previous session in that adopting or even beating the New South Wales rules in strata would be really dramatic in its impact. We have seen a 37% higher conversion and a faster conversion of projects in New South Wales compared to Victoria, and we put most of that down to their lower threshold for voting. Importantly, we have seen no negative feedback from those that did not vote when they get access to solar under that new program as well, so I think it has been well proven. I would probably suggest calling it an 'energy-saving resolution', because that is really what it is about: bill savings. But that mechanism is proven and would be, as I said, very impactful.

I will leave it there, but I did just want to emphasise that we are very thankful for the focus on this area from the Victorian government. I think the combination of good technology and good policy can really be a beacon not just for the rest of Australia but the rest of the world in how we can improve renewable energy adoption for this part of the market and create strong economic activity but also, importantly, save money for people who really need it most. So thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Cameron. That is a good segue for my question, and I will kick it off. Allume Energy is obviously active in the UK, as you have mentioned, and is also breaking into the American market. How do these jurisdictions differ from Victoria, and what could be learned to increase rooftop solar for apartments domestically?

Cameron KNOX: I will start with the UK, because there are far more learnings there than the US. In the UK a massive driver there is the sustainability ratings or what they call EPC, energy performance certificates.

In fact in the UK the economics of solar are considerably worse than here, as you could probably imagine, but each apartment has a requirement to have an energy rating when it is leased or sold. There are mandates for those to increase over time, and there is also funding associated with how much you can increase. For what they call their EPC bands, which go from a G to an A, you get funding depending on how much you can increase that. The tricky part of flats there has been that each flat has a different EPC rating, because the middle-floor flats are insulated from above and below, and so they naturally have a better performance. So they have had challenges with particularly solar on their apartments, because each flat needs something different. What we can do there is install a single system and allocate more to the top-floor flats of the solar and battery system than we do the middle-floor flats, so that they can all go up to the same EPC band. We have seen that to be a big driver of adoption in the UK, both in new builds and in retrofit. And yes, we put that down to, really, that framework, which they call their EPC framework, which is being considered here with the mandatory energy disclosure framework. So we would really support the fast-tracking of that in Australia, because we have seen that to have a really dramatic impact.

The other element that it really helps is this split incentive challenge, because it does put a lot of genuine incentive on the landlords to make these investment decisions. There is quite clear data in the market of the valuation difference between comparable flats based on different EPC bands that they are in, so they can see the return on investment, and they can make that clear decision. We would strongly support that. That is probably the main learning from the UK. There are a lot of other different structures there. They have a much larger council housing market segment. It is about 15 times larger than Australia, so that is a different dynamic, which in some ways helps, but in some ways adds more challenges. I think the most actionable one is the EPC.

In the US the structure of the utilities makes things a lot more challenging to scale. They have different incentive programs, but I would say that Victoria's is better and really world leading in the Solar for Apartments program from that perspective, so the key learning I would present is that EPC framework.

The CHAIR: Daniela is keen to –

Daniela DE MARTINO: Just following on from that, because that was quite interesting about being able to divert more of the solar to the top flats, which are clearly more exposed to the weather and need more power to control their climate, presumably then the owners of those flats are paying for the solar installation: how do you arrange who pays for the infrastructure to be put in, depending on who gets the lion's share of the benefit?

Cameron KNOX: In Australia we tend to do it based on lot entitlement, so a bigger apartment usually has a larger lot entitlement, and your lot entitlement is the percentage of the common expenses that you pay for. So if they need to repaint the building, the bigger apartments pay more than the smaller apartments for that. Investing in solar is the same for them. We configure our product to send more solar to the bigger apartments, so we try and match our allocation to their lot entitlement, because those bigger apartments do tend to need more energy, but also they have invested more in that system, so they deserve more of the output. That is how it tends to work in Australia. If you overlay an environmental framework on top of that or an energy performance framework on top of that, then you will have to account for that too. It is likely that they will line up fairly well, but if they do not, then you have to set up a different payment structure for that owners corporation. Then we would configure the SolShare to match that payment structure as well, so that can be done. In Australia it is quite straightforward at the moment because it is covered under the lot entitlement structure.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Thank you.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thanks for coming in, Cameron.

Cameron KNOX: No worries.

Wayne FARNHAM: I am actually pretty interested in this technology. I think it is a bit of a game changer. I am curious about – leading on from what you said earlier – if, say, the Member for Morwell and me both have a middle apartment, and the Member for Morwell is a party animal and does not go to bed till 2 am and I am a snoozer and I am in bed at 9 pm. How do you weigh up who gets the benefit? If we both get the same benefit, being in a middle apartment, how does all that work? The technology, to me, is very curious and I am very interested in it. How do you distribute the rebate or the extra solar to the Member for Morwell and the Member for Narracan?

Cameron KNOX: The important part is that if you are in the same size apartment and we have configured it so that you are getting the same allocation of solar, over the course of that month you are going to get the same amount of generation from that shared system, but at that point in time you might get different amounts based on your instantaneous usage. SolShare is, five times a second, making a new decision on what proportion of solar should go to what unit based on how much of that entitlement they have got and how much power they are using versus their neighbours. To extend that example, if you go out to walk the dog and your neighbour puts the kettle on, SolShare at that point in time is going to send your neighbour proportionally more of the solar that is generated. But then when you get back, SolShare recognises that you are behind and you need to be caught up. You might switch your air conditioning on, and you would be prioritised above your neighbour again. It is, multiple times a second, making these decisions to both give people their share and balance that over the month and also try to align it with their usage as much as possible.

What you see actually is over the course of the month the priority of those factors changes. At the start, because SolShare does not have as much information on energy usage, it is prioritising more self-consumption of solar. It is being a bit more loose, freely sending solar to whoever needs it at that point in time. As the month progresses, it starts to see that apartment 1 is getting more solar than its share, so we need to start dialling that back down and apartment 2 needs to get bumped back up, and then those prioritisations start happening. Obviously we are not sitting behind a desk making those decisions, but the product is, as it is installed, making these micro trade-offs. The outcome it creates is that everyone gets their share. It is the equivalent of everyone having their own individual system, but you get between a 10 and 30% increase in self-consumption of solar when you compare it to that individual scenario. By 'self-consumption of solar' I mean solar that you are using for your own load as opposed to letting it go out to the grid. I have rambled in my response to your question there, but hopefully I have given some context to how it is making these little decisions to trade off that and ultimately ensure that everyone gets their fair share but gets it at a time which maximises savings.

The CHAIR: Marty, did you want to –

Martin CAMERON: I can respond to that, thank you, Member for Narracan. Cameron, when you set up solar share in a building, obviously you might get a little bit of pushback from particular individuals that do not want it. Are you able, in the build, to set up for future connections for those particular owners of units so that once they hear about what the benefits are, word of mouth, and they think, 'Oh, I've missed the boat here, I need to jump on,' they can? If you have got 100 units, do you set up your infrastructure for 100 units, thinking that maybe six or 12 months down the track they are going to want to come on? Or do you get 80 units that want to come on and you just go in and go, 'Bang, we're going to supply for 80 units'?

Cameron KNOX: We always encourage customers just to go for everyone because that is the easiest way. But it is quite common that they do not. You might have a subset that say, 'Okay, we're really keen, but Dave and Jane are not keen. Can we leave them out for the moment?' And we can. But what we say is that it is challenging in the future for Dave and Jane to join because, although we can just connect one cable from SolShare to them – which is technically pretty straightforward, just a cable run – the financial engineering that is required is challenging because then suddenly the apartment owners who originally invested are giving a little bit of their share away. We often see a group 1 – say you have got an 80-apartment building and maybe 30 sign up straightaway. Then there are another 10 or 20 that start to get the word of mouth that the savings are good, it is real and it is credible, and they want in. Then you do a dedicated system for those 20. That works, and we have seen that done. But adding just one or two – if you are in the margins, we say to just do a vote, a special resolution, and everyone gets it. What we find is that we have never had a complaint from someone who has not voted yes, so someone who opposed the vote but then gets solar. When they get it, they just love it. Anyone who has solar knows, when you look up at the sky and the sun is shining and you realise that it is giving you free electricity, it is a pretty amazing feeling. Even if they did not vote yes at the meeting, people are really excited by it once it is installed.

The CHAIR: So they do not say, 'I told you so.'

Cameron KNOX: Yes, exactly.

The CHAIR: Jordan, we will get you to ask the last question, because the time has flown.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Thank you. I am keen to hear what the most common reason is that a project does not go ahead. How could this be addressed?

Cameron KNOX: In Victoria meter panel upgrades is the main one. Older meter panels in apartment buildings do need to be upgraded at some point. There are differing rules from the DNSPs on whether you need to upgrade them, and in some cases they are, I suppose, ambiguous, those rules. But currently there is not a financing structure for these owners corporations to fund the upgrade of those meter panels. It can often be as costly as the solar installation itself. What we say to them is, 'You have to do this at some point if you want to modernise your building. If you want electric vehicles, you're going to have to do it. If you want to increase your electrical load, you're going to have to do it. If you just want to improve generally the safety of the building, you should be doing it.' But it is a big investment. What we are really supportive of is having some kind of finance – ideally a zero-interest finance – option for those apartment residents so that that barrier does not mean that they just do nothing, which does not help anyone because then the meter panels are still old and they are not getting cheaper electricity either. That is the main one in Victoria.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Cameron, I know particularly our research team has lots of interesting questions that they are also interested in that we may not have had the chance to get through today. Would it be all right for us to contact you with further questions to assist in our inquiry?

Cameron KNOX: Absolutely, yes. And happy to host you in Abbotsford.

The CHAIR: Terrific.

Cameron KNOX: Come by and have a look at the product, and we can talk you through it.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Thank you very much for participating.

Witness withdrew.