

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

Carla Campbell-Redl, and

Richard Keeble (*via videoconference*), Owners Committee 61 and 61A Haines Street;

Jane Mavoia; and

Dr Valerie Kay.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Welcome to this 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.

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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 our Hansard reporters, please state your name before you start speaking. There may not be an opportunity for everyone to answer every question. If there is an important point that you would like to have the opportunity to make, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing.

One of our witnesses, Richard Keeble, is joining us via Zoom. Could I please remind you, Richard, to mute your microphone when not speaking, to minimise interference.

I invite each of you to make a 2-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from our members. I might start with you, Carla, if I could.

Carla CAMPBELL-REDL: Thank you to the Chair and the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak. I am Carla Campbell-Redl, and with Richard Keeble we represent the Owners Committee of 61 and 61A Haines Street, North Melbourne, a community of about 60 residents – families, singles, empty nesters, couples and renters – who live in apartments not as a stepping stone but as forever homes. Our buildings are part of the Hotham Gardens development in North Melbourne – well-designed 1960s flats, the Nightingale apartments of their time. We have rooftop air-drying for our apartments. We are 33 flats in a neighbourhood of 550. Our flats were built when natural gas was introduced for cooking, heating and hot water; electricity was for lighting, refrigeration and a few small appliances.

Governance for owners corporations, especially the high voting threshold, is not suitable for modern retrofit projects: a small minority of owners can stop a big project. Today, like many Victorians, we want to transition to all-electric homes. We have been actively and enthusiastically working to make it happen. I am going to hand over to Richard now. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Richard.

Richard KEEBLE: We cannot effectively use solar electricity and energy-efficient appliances until we upgrade internal infrastructure. However, local power grid design decisions made in the 1960s prevent access to the electrical capacity that we need. We cannot begin to design and cost internal upgrades without paying thousands of dollars for information about the existing local grid. Insufficient policy for 20th-century apartments and mismatched grant settings make our work even harder. What do we need? Open and affordable access to network capacity information; the upgrade of outdated infrastructure without costs being shifted to residents; the right expertise in government, industry and trades; and funding targeted to 20th-century apartment buildings. Without that, the 550 flats across four adjacent city blocks where we live will be locked out of the energy transition. Thank you. We welcome your questions.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Valerie Kay, I might ask you now, please.

Valerie KAY: Thank you, Chair and members of the committee. I have a relevant research background in this area, but a lot of what I have said in my submission – and now – is relevant to my experience as a member of the owners corporation committee for a small apartment block, also from the 1960s, that has succeeded in getting solar panels for eight out of the 10 apartments in our block through solar for apartments and Merri-bek council grants with almost no out-of-pocket costs for residents. I am happy to answer questions about this in more detail as we go through, but I would like to take this couple of minutes to just make some broad contextual points.

In the interest of equity, there is need for some reform of the electricity system. It is currently set up in such a way that it maintains the profit margin of the corporations running it, but its primary aim should be to provide an essential service to all in a sustainable way, which I think is relevant to some of the questions here. There is also a need for broad community education to explain why we need to electrify and switch to renewables. This is a complex social as well as technological change, and many people do not fully understand it. Politicians do need to work with the community on this. In the process it is important for people to be able to talk to trusted and reliable experts, actual humans. It is worth governments paying for staff as well as technology and infrastructure. The financial benefits of renewables and electrification are important, but they are not the most important thing; a stable climate, a livable future for children and future generations and the health of people and other living things are the most important. Again, please do talk about these things.

Please feel free to stop me; I have not kept my eye on the time. Apartment dwellers, especially those on low incomes, are likely to pay more in supply charges than actual usage – see submission 18 to this inquiry – so talking about return on investment or annual savings is not necessarily relevant or convincing to such people. It is useful to talk about specific, concrete financial benefits, such as being able to use your air conditioner on a very hot day without facing high charges, or the actual savings you make by getting off gas and not paying the supply charges anymore. The range of grants available is very welcome, but they are often a complex process for apartments. More support and regulation are needed to support this, including to ensure the rights of tenants and for the owners corporations and the management services. A lot of work is needed in that area. Some of the issues facing the larger blocks I cannot really talk about, but I just want to point out that there is a lot of unused roof space on public and community facilities, and that could be utilised to provide more solar for the large apartment blocks. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. Jane, I will ask you to make a submission too, please.

Jane MAVOA: Sure. I am Jane Mavoa, and I am an owner at 43 Haines Street, so neighbours to Carla and Richard. I am speaking on behalf of about four other owners. Building on what Carla has said, we have been in the building for 12 years. We have raised three children there very happily. We actually ended up buying the apartment upstairs when they got too big. We are not the only people that have been there a long time and intend to be there for much longer. We have got many people who have been there 20-plus years. The point I want to raise there is that we do not have a lack of motivation or a lack of understanding about the need to electrify and get off gas. What we do have is this electrical infrastructure problem, which is really just a mismatch between 1960s demands and what we are needing now. With all of that, there are very large costs, but there are also expertise and knowledge gaps. We are not electrical engineers, but I have felt over the last few weeks that I have had to do a crash course in understanding what the grid supply means and the size of the cables and so on and so forth. I think there is an information barrier there. And also I feel like there may be a bit of a blind spot when it comes to apartment buildings of this kind of age. So in addition to perhaps having apartment-specific policy, perhaps there needs to be also some kind of solutions for buildings with these capacity issues, which are huge.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. I will open this up to questions. The Member for Narracan.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Deputy Chair. I might go to Richard and Jane. Just to touch on what you both said about the infrastructure issues, you have not only the internal infrastructure of the building, being that it was built in 1960, but the external supply issue. Through your investigations in trying to transfer your apartment complexes to renewable, what did you find out, particularly about the external supply, and what was the projected cost of the internal infrastructure upgrade?

Jane MAVOA: I might let Richard answer this.

Richard KEEBLE: Thank you. What I did not say is that I have a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, even though I have not worked as an electrical engineer, so I am a bit more familiar with some of the ideas. There are two parts to your question: one, internal infrastructure, and connections to the grid. With internal infrastructure, we have had our internal cabling assessed at 25 amps per flat, which is the cable that runs from the flat to a meter board. We have had a few different assessments of that, but that is our official written assessment, and that is a very low amount of electricity to be able to use in the 21st-century power context.

On connecting to the grid, the details are in our submission – we do not have enough supply coming in from the grid to be able to support fully electric households. We do not have formal written information from Powercor because there is basically a paywall behind Powercor – we have to pay, in the case of 61 and 61A, over \$4000 to get information about what their ability to upgrade us actually is. The information that we have got is from informal advice that was provided to another block in our street, identical to the rest of us, and also old architectural drawings that came from the University of Melbourne's archives, which are publicly available. We have not taken the next step to actually contact CitiPower/Powercor to tell us what they can provide, because up until now we have been unwilling to pay the additional amount of money to find out how much that would cost. My back-of-the-envelope calculations for upgrading 61 and 61A is that it would be in the ballpark of a million dollars to go fully electric, excluding batteries. That would include upgrades to the internal cabling, installing solar but not batteries and only skeleton infrastructure for car charging and things like that.

Wayne FARNHAM: I just want to clarify one point you said there, Richard. You said you worked out the loads at about roughly 25 amps per unit. When you did that calculation, did that include getting rid of your gas hotplates, your gas heaters et cetera?

Richard KEEBLE: To clarify that, the 25 amps is what our cabling is able to support right now.

Wayne FARNHAM: That is the current cabling of the unit itself?

Richard KEEBLE: That is correct. Realistically, what we need is upward of 70 amps to be able to support full electrification of our flats, so there is a very big difference between the existing cabling and what we would need to be able to fully electrify.

Wayne FARNHAM: Right. Thanks.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Daniela, have you got a question?

Daniela DE MARTINO: Yes. I have many actually. I was just thinking, because we heard from others before talking about how in New South Wales they have mandatory training for owners corporations. Would that be useful or would it be an additional burden to be able to engage all members of an owners corporation? Obviously you have got a number of roadblocks, which is usually disengagement or just 'Don't want to know. Too expensive. Don't want to engage.' Would some form of education that everyone must undertake be helpful?

Jane MAVOA: I think it would depend. Probably for some buildings it would be. In our situation, because of the people who live in our buildings, I do not think that would necessarily help us. Our issues are not with a lack of motivation or getting owners on board, although if we had to do a million dollars worth of works, then we probably would not get 75% of people to agree. But I do not think that is what we need.

Carla CAMPBELL-REDL: If we are talking about education, I think it is more of a cultural education required here. The main education is societal education that a home can be an apartment, but there is a different way of living in a home. 'You live in an independent home' has kind of been the goal of all Australians for all their lives: 'That is what really successful people do. Not so successful people live in apartments.' By token we need to educate people that apartment living is a form of living. It is what we are aiming for now. It is what Homes Victoria is aiming for: mid density in the city, close to the amenities so that you can have the best of the amenities without adding infrastructure burden to outer suburbs and all of those things. It is quite an education piece that starts much earlier than owners committees. People who sit on owners committees are like me and Richard. I have got an MBA, I have got a BSc; we have got an alphabet to go to heaven with here – two

doctors. It would be nice to have a guidebook, yes definitely, but the education is deeper than that. It has got to come earlier. It has got to be clearer from that point. There is a societal benefit.

Valerie KAY: I just want to add I agree a lot of it is cultural, I think, and understanding that it is a different way of living. One of our owners, who does not live there, as I said in my submission, at one stage actually said she was part of the community and she wanted to do the right thing by the community, which is a great attitude, and I think people understand that a bit more. There were questions I heard with the earlier session about investors. It is a bit hard to single out individuals of course, but we did have one person who did not get connected because we the owners committee were just never able to contact them to get them to engage in it kind of thing.

I was talking about the practicalities of how when you are trying to get a grant you are pushed for time, you have got to get things done. Some flexibility in that set-up would be good, some ways of dealing with that and not always having to go through the management service, which is time consuming and unwieldy, but also for those people to have a sense of what they are taking on in this. I think in that case too the responsibility is to the tenant, that to simply allow an opportunity such as we were offering of basically free solar panels, their obligation to the tenant – I felt it was just a bit of a shame that that tenant could not enjoy those benefits because the owner did not engage in the process. But that might be more around regulation than just education. But obviously there are different ways of thinking about how you do that, and that is only one case. In our case we had a generally very supportive committee and were able to work with everyone. We mostly know each other and we have been there a while. But I think it is probably also typical of quite a lot that you might find in other larger, less cohesive kind of – where there are more people coming and going, more investors and so on. That difficulty in just engaging people might be more common in those sorts of situations.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Richard, do you have your hand up, or is that Martha?

Richard KEEBLE: I do have my hand up. This is tangential to the question, but it is about education. One of the things that we have been having difficulties with, rather than the committee knowing what they are doing, is actually finding people around us with subject matter expertise to be able to provide us with useful information. Across tradespeople, across product vendors, speaking to our local member, who has in turn spoken to the minister for energy, amongst other departments, what we have discovered is that we have become inadvertently the subject matter experts on electrifying our type of apartments. That does not mean that we know everything that we need to know; we know that that is far from the case. But what we are discovering is there is generally not a lot of understanding about the details of what you have to do for our sorts of apartments to be able to take advantage of things like solar and efficient electric appliances.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Member for Bass.

Jordan CRUGNALE: I guess further through our neighbourhood battery initiative in that substation battery space, you probably would not qualify for that either. How do we as a government look at the programs that we do have – we have got a whole heap of 1960s fabulous buildings; I love that area – and how can we actually move these buildings to full electrification substations?

Jane MAVOA: Am I allowed to make another point, or do we have to wait for you to ask a question?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes, sure.

Jane MAVOA: Listening to Valerie's experience with a similar age building, but your experience was completely different in that it seemed that you were able to get it. For us it seems like our whole block is facing a big barrier. I do not know whether anyone has done any kind of audit of this apartment stock in terms of how many other buildings like ours are fed by a single cable that was installed in the 1960s. Are we an isolated case? What is the scale of the problem?

Valerie KAY: Just to comment on that, we are just slightly different, I think, in the fact that we can have 35 amps, which actually makes quite a big difference. You can do quite a lot more with those extra 10 amps. Most of us have had our internal meter boards upgraded, because when putting in reverse-cycle air conditioning you often have to have it and there is the upgrade grant for that kind of work. So that is a difference, but we still face a lot of the same constraints. We just do not face them quite as severely as you do. It is also a bit mysterious about what we ultimately can do. Like if I can ever persuade the owners corporation that we

actually do need to change our hot-water system – I think legislatively we will have to. That is a shared system. It is obviously going to draw a lot more power. It is going to face some different challenges about what capacity we have then. But at the moment we have to be pretty careful in what we use. I have actually just been able to find an electric oven with an induction top that is 29.5 amps, but obviously if I had that turned full on, I would have to be very careful about what else I use. I can kind of just do it, but people do find that they trip the switches if they are using too many appliances and things. I think also our solar panels are connected individually to the apartments. I think you were perhaps looking at a bigger system with a shared power system. They are more expensive and more difficult, whereas we have taken a bit of a simple approach, which is that the solar panels are connected directly to the apartments. But, yes, we kind of squeaked into this, I think, and obviously you could not quite manage to for your system.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Can I just ask you all quickly: was there any point when you were purchasing that you were made aware of this limitation of electricity? Would you like to see that kind of information having to be declared going forward, because presumably you will then be selling?

Carla CAMPBELL-REDL: I will just answer that. In some ways I would say, yes, it would be useful, but on the other side of this I reflect and say the limitation in our building, the main issue – the internal infrastructure to us is part of our issue – the bigger issue is the supply from the network. That is 60 years of powers and lines fees, and we do not know that there is enough power. Then the back of the envelope that Richard has godsendingly done for us tells us the amount for each unit. Jane would have to pay another \$2000, our unit pays \$4000 and through our block – five blocks – to the one company that does not want to tell us what used to be publicly available information. It is good to tell people that you cannot run everything on 25 amps, and you need to understand, but that is basic understanding. The bigger issue is that is not the limitation.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Jane.

Jane MAVOA: Just on the point about being made aware at the point of purchase about the electrical capacity issues, I worry that if there is some sort of mandatory disclosure thing, then owners like us are going to be unfairly penalised in terms of the capital value of our houses because we cannot afford to fix the whole neighbourhood's power supply.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Valerie.

Valerie KAY: My point is the same. When we think about the buildings and all the infrastructure that is there, to kind of say 'Oh, they're just like that and we can't do anything about it' is not it in terms of sustainability. We want to refresh the buildings and make them better, and that is partly my point about the electricity companies. There has got to be some sort of social responsibility for tackling these problems and bringing our buildings to the stage that we need them to be – fully electrified. I mean, ours can get close to it, but as I say, it is quite limited. We have to be quite careful. I think it is a broader responsibility rather than just saying, 'Oh, these apartments are like this and you can't do much about it' – unless you spend a whole lot of money individually or as an owners corporation.

Jordan CRUGNALE: I think I see it as an essential service like when you build a house. Back in the day you got a landline; now you get NBN, power, sewerage, water. It is like you are also paying rent for that asset, so it does need to be upgraded.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Richard, to bring us home.

Richard KEEBLE: Would I have bought my flat if I had known that there were limitations? Probably not. But I agree with Jane; I would be reluctant for that to be disclosed. The owners corporation actually has a rule that if anyone wants to install a reverse-cycle air conditioner they must downgrade their circuit breaker to 25 amps, so we have actually had to incorporate this into our owners corporation rules not because of the internal cabling but because of the capacity to the external grid. Coming back to what everybody said, it is the external grid that is the showstopper for us. It is not the willingness to upgrade internal cabling or install solar or do other sustainability jobs.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Our time has come to an end. That has been a really interesting session, and I do thank you all for participating today. I remind you that if there are any important points – when you leave here

you may think ‘Oh goodness me, I should have asked that’ – you want to make, you are more than welcome to provide additional information in writing.

Witnesses withdrew.