

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments

Melbourne – Thursday 30 April 2026

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

WITNESSES

Jeff Sykes, Chief Executive Officer, Solar Choice;

Gavin Ashley, Director of Sustainability, HIP V. HYPE;

Brendan Lang, Founder, Get off Gas;

Francis Vierboom, Chief Executive Officer (*via videoconference*), and

Calum Harvey-Scholes, Head of Research (*via videoconference*), Rewiring Australia; and

Kate Nicolazzo, Director, Let Me Be Frank.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the broadcast. I am really pleased that we are continuing on with our inquiry today, 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 recorded by Hansard – and we thank them for the great work they do – 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 or indicate. 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 are any important points, and you do not have a chance to make them during the session, you are welcome to provide additional information. Two of our witnesses from Rewiring Australia are joining via Zoom – a very, very warm welcome to you. We have the magnificent Member for Bass joining us via Zoom as well.

I invite each organisation to make a 2-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions. I might start with Rewiring Australia, if you are happy to go first.

Francis VIERBOOM: Great. We are really grateful to be here for this really important inquiry. Australia needs to electrify everything: that is the simple plan we advocate for at Rewiring Australia. We are a non-profit, nonpartisan organisation. We were founded by the engineer and inventor and advocate Dr Saul Griffith. I am the CEO of the organisation, and I am joined today by our Head of Research Calum Harvey-Scholes. Our research demonstrates the cost savings, the emission reductions and the energy system benefits of going all electric, and it is crucial that all Victorians should be able to access these benefits. But as this inquiry is here to highlight, there are really important issues to address in apartments, and I want to hand over to Calum to introduce some of our thoughts on this.

Calum HARVEY-SCHOLES: Thanks, Francis. Yes, great to be here. Thank you very much. My name is Calum. Victorian apartment residents are locked out of the clean energy transition, despite their enthusiasm. Our internal analysis shows that electrification and EV chargers could save the average apartment over \$2000 a year, and that money is currently being burned on gas and petrol because people cannot get access to these technologies. This inequity, moreover, hits hardest where it hurts most. Most apartment dwellers are renters – 60 per cent, as many of you are aware – and earn about 20 per cent less than freestanding home residents. I think the Victorian government really holds the power to help apartment residents access affordable energy. We are really excited to have responded to this inquiry.

I think there are three big areas where changes are needed. The legislation – we need to make strata decision-making easier. That really requires a review of the OC Act to enable easier decision-making. We can go into that in more detail. I think some changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act* could also really help, from our

perspective, to enable renters to request reasonable upgrades from landlords, such as timers on their electric hot water. We have also really have been advocating for a sustainable strata upgrade scheme. This would involve government-funded loans for special levies to help people cover the costs of these upgrades in strata, and also trusted independent electrification advice and support. We know that is really important in helping people move through the many stages of that process of electrification. Finally, a renter's right to plug in – we need to think about the technical, safety regulation and really legalise that and give people access to portable plug-in balcony solar as well as batteries and even vehicle-to-grid chargers. I will leave it at that.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Can I just say, as someone who formerly lived in Wollongong, I have been really interested in the Rewiring Australia stuff. So, yes, good work what you are doing up in Wollongong – really, really interesting. Who would like to go next? Yes, Brendan.

Brendan LANG: Hi. Brendan Lang. Good morning. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee and thank you for this opportunity. My name is Brendan Lang, and I am the founder of Get off Gas. We are expert electricians who, alongside our day-to-day electrification work, run a training program to upskill tradies, building designers and community volunteers to electrify better, and we do that nationally. I have close to 20 years experience electrifying, and I am a strata property owner, resident and committee member, so I have a few perspectives on this transition. I am incredibly optimistic toward the opportunities of electrification. Sure, there are challenges on the ground with the delivery of retrofits, spatial considerations, power demands and shared amenity, all of which a skilled and passionate team of OC managers, residents, engineers and tradespeople can overcome. Ensuring this all happens as part of a fair and just transition requires much more progress and balance with ink on the paper than with tools in hand. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Gavin, would you like to jump in?

Gavin ASHLEY: Thank you. My name is Gavin Ashley. I am a director with HIP V. HYPE Sustainability, and we provided a joint submission with Brendan from Get off Gas to this inquiry. Thanks for the opportunity to be here. I have been working in sustainability and energy for nearly 20 years. I am also a renter in an apartment building of 30 apartments. Our core message, building on Brendan's insight there, is pretty straightforward. Where there are no technical barriers and no financial barriers, the barriers to transition are primarily governance-related, and they fall into a few categories that we think are important to address through this inquiry – the misalignment between the cost and benefit piece, such as where an owner planning to sell or an investor has a very different set of objectives to a long-term owner. The significant complexity of volunteer committees – it is hard work in there. People get tired, people go overseas, people's life circumstances change, and that feeling of being blocked every step of the way.

Based on our analysis and experience, we think the reform should target a few key areas, including simplifying approvals pathways and looking at thresholds; energy upgrades as core asset improvements rather than a different type of investment; enable access to financing, which deals with that split incentive in some ways; and on tap advice, backing up Rewiring Australia's point. Looking forward to your questions when we get there in a moment.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you so much for being here. And thank you everyone for your submissions as well. Jeff.

Jeff SYKES: Thanks, guys. I am the CEO of Solar Choice. We have been around for about 20 years. Over that time we have helped 2017 strata buildings across Australia, most of those completing feasibility studies. My team will help a building by completing a feasibility study, then we will manage a tender process. We will help them all the way through with advice, combating owners' objections to the projects, and we attend AGMs to help do Q and A before the voting process. We really go end to end on these projects. Of those 2000 projects, about 6 per cent of them have been installed. In Victoria that is 1.4 per cent, so we have much less success here – we operate nationally.

Looking at why some of those projects fall over, my three pieces of advice would be a lot of the votes landed in between 50 per cent and 75 per cent. We have a much higher success rate in New South Wales, where the voting threshold is lower. There are a lot of people – we call them detractors to these projects – who object, I think it is almost philosophically, to solar, and then they pick things like birds nesting under the panels and

insurance as an avenue to have a reasonable objection. Having some kind of government-supported FAQ or resources that we can direct owners to in those scenarios can help dissuade owners who might be on the fence from listening to these types of people, and then I will say support for people like us, trusted advisers, to help committees get through that process. Without patting ourselves on the back, I think of that 6 per cent very few would have gone ahead without independent support – someone saying ‘This is what’s next. This is what you have to do’, taking them through the entire journey.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Hello. Kate from Let Me Be Frank – what a great name.

Kate NICOLAZZO: Thanks, Juliana. I run Let Me Be Frank. We are a social change agency. We work primarily with local government and community groups across the strategy, action and research space in terms of building a just planet, I guess, for people and the future. I have been working in sustainability and renewables for around 20 years, a little bit like Gavin, but our team has actually been working specifically in this sector of strata for the past 10.

At the moment we are working quite deeply in partnership with the Owners Corporation Network and the Strata Community Association on a couple of key projects we think can hopefully inform the inquiry today. We have got some funding at the moment from the Victorian government, under the CHEEP. We are actually running a program in Maribyrnong and Brimbank around electrifying apartments, which is primarily about providing a layer of information and support to help people living in apartments to actually access the Victorian energy upgrades program and the Solar for Apartments rebates, because as we have heard, there are a lot of barriers to accessing those programs when you are living in apartments. We think there are some really key opportunities to not only partner with local government and other organisations but actually to potentially redesign some of those programs with the strata sector specifically in mind, because the challenges that people face in apartments go well beyond technology. We are talking about really complex decision-making amongst potentially hundreds of people who live in an apartment or manage the building, all of whom will have different priority areas, different decision-making powers and also different financial capability.

Whilst we do need those changes to the OC Act, and I think you have heard a lot about that throughout this inquiry, we also need the support that goes alongside that in terms of communication – I think what Jeff was mentioning there, that idea around the FAQs, all those sorts of things – to give people a level of comfort to be able to make those decisions really easily. That is one point that we really wanted to make, that we need to go well beyond technology when we talk about this inquiry.

I think the other one is this unique opportunity for apartments and electrification, energy upgrades and renewable energy in apartments to actually deal with an equity issue around renters. By working out the entire base building, you actually get to capture renters. For decades we have been working with local government and community groups trying to access and deliver programs for renters. They are impossible to scale. They are really complex to run, and they are very, very expensive. Solar Victoria talked earlier about the challenge of working with and connecting with landlords. They are the sorts of issues we have seen with energy programs over the past 20 years. If there was an opportunity to look at a clear pathway and timeline for electrification and energy upgrades through the updated *Gas Substitution Roadmap*, explicitly talking about how we electrify apartments through that program, alongside legislation that looks at all tiers of owners corporations planning for electrification by the maintenance plan, being able to fund that over periods of time and then also that direct support, you will capture renters at that base building level. So I think that is a really key opportunity that we do not want to miss.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you. Wow, what an incredible panel. Deputy Chair, you have the honours.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you, once again. Jeff, to you. Your business is a one-stop shop virtually to walk investors through why they should be moving towards renewable energy and solar. I would be interested, from your point of view, in just how hard it is to get from day one to actually getting the project finished and what the main reasons are that there are troubled times for them and they end up saying, ‘No, it’s all too hard,’ and walk away and where the government steps in to smooth the waters and such.

Jeff SYKES: Yes, we think of these projects as 12 to 18 months from idea to something being installed. I would say before the solar banks and the state-based grant programs, 90 per cent of these projects fell over when they realised what the return on investment was because of the additional costs involved. If you are

splitting solar, then the Allume system is more expensive than really the benefits that it delivers, so without the grant programs the financial feasibility kind of did not stack up. We did quite a lot of common area only systems, but we are talking small capacity compared to what the potential was. Once we cross the financial threshold with the grants, then it comes down to – yes, really we cannot be the only ones driving the projects. If we are providing the feasibility, providing the next steps, it still takes someone on the owners committee stepping up and championing the project and taking it all the way through. If you do not have that person, the project does not happen. You are kind of shouting out into the void in terms of the next steps. If you can get there, then I think it comes down to the dynamics of the vote. It can all look really good for 17 out of the 18 months, and then you get to the vote and often 90 per cent of the people voting are hearing about the project for the first time on the day of the vote. That is why we usually show up to the AGM and do Q and A, because otherwise we find that the champion who is representing this project is kind of on the firing block and they are getting lots of questions that they do not necessarily feel that comfortable answering. I think that is where the vote goes wrong on a lot of these projects.

Martin CAMERON: Is it, I suppose, frustrating on your behalf that there are so many owners in that OC? And if they are only getting there for the vote for the very first time, are you targeting that champion or those champions inside that OC, working diligently with them to get the word out there that this is what is needed? Because a lot of people think for the first time, if they are voting, ‘Well, I’d rather the devil that I know than the devil that I don’t know, so to speak, so I’m not going to vote that way.’

Jeff SYKES: There is a bit of that. We give them an information pack, and we encourage them to put together something to distribute to all owners. I think just a lot of these people do not read anything. They do not even read AGM notices, some of them. A lot of them do not show up. If you have got a building of 20 people, you might have six or seven people voting. It depends. I have seen buildings where you get 20 out of 20 showing up, but the majority are very apathetic, just showing up on the day and then concerned about spending money on something they do not really understand.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Rewiring Australia, you have recommended technical, safety and regulatory reform to establish renters’ legal right to plug-in portable energy generation and storage. I just asked Solar Victoria about that very question, and they were very cold on it. They said that there were a lot of concerns. What does Solar Victoria or DEECA, our department, need to know to bring them to change their opinion on that?

Francis VIERBOOM: I will take that question. I think that it is quite important in the context of apartments to be clear about exactly which technologies are going to make a big difference. Although obviously solar panels are the iconic upgrade that Australians have enjoyed for 15 years, the actual capacity for us to generate more solar off the side of balconies is not that large. The really interesting thing is the batteries on wheels that are rolling out into the country and the fact that actually a battery parked in the garage of these apartments can play an enormous role both in supporting the building and in reducing that owner’s bills. The idea of a suitcase battery, if you like, that might be able to plug in inside the home is already on the market in Europe as well. That storage availability in our communities is what can take pressure off our local grids. It can take pressure specifically off the need to upgrade things like the supply point of an apartment building if you manage those batteries in a sophisticated way. If we get the safety regulations right so that we can have devices that you can take with you as a renter in particular, because of that big overlap between renters and apartments, then we might be able to enable renters in apartments to use their car as a bidirectional battery and not have those renters miss out on this next generation of bill-saving opportunities. We have a fair bit more detail about this. Balcony solar takes the headlines on this sometimes, but we really emphasise the potential of battery storage at that small scale both inside the home and inside cars to play a really important role for both the energy system and household bills.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Does anyone else on the panel want to make a comment on that?

Jeff SYKES: I will say V2G will be extremely difficult at scale in apartments. Level 2 charging in general is going to be more expensive than level 1 charging. I think a smaller portion of people will choose to put level 2 charging in, and then those that do are often connecting back to the common meter, not their individual meter. For them to earn a reward for V2G there is a lot of evolution in terms of what electricity bill software systems need to look like. Beyond that you have got to then assume that the owners are going to be willing to discharge

their car into the grid. I think that is largely unproven yet with where V2G is. I would probably do it, but I am probably an anomaly in terms of where that sits. But I think solar has a big role to play. Batteries I think do have a really big role to play, and they could just be centralised batteries; they could be plugged into the apartment or they could be sitting in the garage near the switchboard and play a really important role for the grid.

Brendan LANG: I might just add to that briefly that we should acknowledge there are many different typologies of strata buildings. The one I live in has 10 townhomes. Each has their own individual car park, so it would be perfectly suited for V2G in the future. However, that does not suit as we scale up – just acknowledging, as Rewiring pointed out, that different technologies need to apply in different scenarios.

Daniela DE MARTINO: I think the word we have probably heard the most consistently from all of our witnesses across these hearing dates when it comes to barriers is governance when it comes to strata. So I just want to ask – and this can be to anyone to respond; I would be interested to hear: how would the establishment of a strata commissioner and a strata information hub, education for owners corporations and committees support apartment buildings to really undertake these sustainability upgrades? How do you see us tackling this issue? I think we have heard it across the board – governance seems to be this issue. You have given us great examples there, Jeff, about what you see when you walk into these moments of voting when you might not have a fully educated voting contingent there. And Brendan, I would be interested to find out, because you were explaining and you obviously are on the committee as well. Those different perspectives I think are really important for us to hear. Whoever wants to go.

Brendan LANG: Do you want to take it?

Kate NICOLAZZO: Yes. Just from our perspective, we advocated through the OC Act review quite strongly for a strata commissioner, the idea of a strata hub and a public education campaign, because continually when we work with the community directly they are buying into apartment complexes and into a strata system that they do not understand at all. They are continually told from the owners corporation managers or the building managers things that they cannot do, and they do not have the capacity to understand the places that they could go to actually get the help that they need to understand whether that is a real barrier or whether it is a barrier that is being placed to make them a less challenging member of the of the community, I guess, within the apartment building. Without a doubt the public education around what it means to live in and own in a strata title is really important, but the idea of having places to go I think is also really critically important.

We are doing some work with the City of Melbourne at the moment. They are going to pilot an apartment concierge service which is primarily focused on looking at opportunities for sustainability upgrades for apartments. But we are finding that we need to put in a whole heap of work into the governance side of things and look at the financial, legal, all those sorts of – being able to answer those questions for the people who want to access this concierge service to actually be able to do those sustainability upgrades. So from our perspective, working in those programs on the ground, it is critical.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Thank you.

Brendan LANG: Yes, it is hard to know where to turn to for information as a tradesperson and as a person who is living in strata. Is it your tradie, is it the state government, the local government? There are all these different programs happening in different areas. There needs to be a coordinated effort with a single source of trusted information. I think the SEC coming back is a great thing for that, and the simplification of those different layers of Solar Victoria, the VEU and the SEC. It really needs to be streamlined so that tradies can understand the objective and how to deliver the work and on the other end the consumers can really understand what outcomes are going to be best for them.

Daniela DE MARTINO: One source of truth.

Brendan LANG: That is right, yes.

Gavin ASHLEY: I will just add one point, if that is okay, and it is about timing. One of the things from program experience in this space is that some people's journeys are long and some people and some owners corporations can navigate a process quicker. So staged programs and trying to push many owners corporations

through a structured program all at the same time is ineffective compared to on-tap resources that can pick up an owners corporation wherever they are in the journey and help them make the next step towards where they ultimately need to go.

Jeff SYKES: Yes. Is what you are saying like a hub and written articles or actually people supporting people through the journey?

Daniela DE MARTINO: Yes. It lines up with Let Me Be Frank's – your advocacy in this space.

Jeff SYKES: Okay. I have not read that, but look, what I would say is there is lots of really good information, for example, on the New South Wales government website, on electric vehicle charging in apartments. No-one reads it. Everyone we have spoken to – we refer everyone to it: people do not digest information like that in long-form written content. This might be an unpopular view, but I do not think that would make much of a difference. I also think that apartments, from what we have learned, are enormously case by case. There is no one generic guide that you can read that would help you in your circumstance. You need an electrician to look at your building. You need to look at your switchboard – is it asbestos, what is going on, what are the metres, do we need to upgrade? There is not really a generic guide that you can pick up here; it is very case by case.

Kate NICOLAZZO: Just in terms of our thinking around a strata hub, because I agree that the information sits on a website and it is not necessarily useful, I think some of the questions from the earlier session were around access to understanding what building typologies we actually have, the age of the buildings and things like that. We are actually talking about building a registry of buildings, so actually really key information around the apartment buildings that sit within that, so a digital registry for key strata records so that owners and committees have direct and ongoing access to the essential information. People buy into apartment buildings having no idea that they are on an embedded network or how long the contract is for that embedded network. Those sorts of bits of information are what we are talking about having within the strata hub, but also having a central point of communication out for government agencies when they are looking to run these sorts of programs when rebates are available, because at the moment we actually do not know who is living in these apartments. We do not have any real way of communicating with them, except for occasionally on a really ad hoc basis when local governments, usually, and community groups put in a huge amount of work to actually start building those sorts of databases. So it is a little bit more around centralising that sort of information that would help us plan around electrification and actually help roll out those things. I think then there are opportunities for case studies and tools and templates alongside that, but the hub being a bit more focused on that information.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Calum has got his hand up. I am conscious of the time, so over to you, Calum.

Calum HARVEY-SCHOLES: Hi. Thank you. I think I would agree and I think we would at Rewiring Australia agree with a lot of what has been said. I think there are definitely two bits to this governance challenge. There is making the actual legislation, and I appreciate the OC Act review is ongoing, but I think specifics in there like what Jeff said around the voting, which I know a lot of people have mentioned, but also mandating consideration of sustainability. Things like a right to charge for residents, particularly in, as Brendan was saying, those townhouses or places where you have got exclusive use areas – a right to just stick in a charger for your EV without having to go through strata is a pretty reasonable request when you are just putting in a plug socket. You are getting a sparky to do it, but you are not having to engage with that governance beyond what is reasonable.

I think another idea that we would put forward, again in terms of that process and helping that process to give people the tools to go electric and reduce their bills, is mandating a phased 10-year plan of going electric, so mandating that every five years there are quotes for solar or batteries obtained for that OC and that, when they are replacing their gas hot water system or some other or any other major infrastructure, a quote for an electric equivalent is obtained at the same time for comparison. That is going to both encourage and facilitate better decision-making processes. It is also industrial policy to steer that market to offer those sustainable technologies. It will support businesses that can give that independent advice, like Solar Choice and others and other concierge services, to be able to come in and provide that service by just encouraging or mandating it really. I think that is one way to go, to mandate that the OCs just get those quotes and encourage them to do

those feasibility studies so that they can make those decisions, fully understanding the long-term consequences of that investment in the infrastructure.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you, Calum. We are going to go to Gavin, and then I am going to allow the committee to have a rest break before we continue on. Over to you, Gavin.

Gavin ASHLEY: I was just going to pick up the comment that Calum made about mandating getting quotes in a period. I think there probably needs to be a recognition that in the apartment space getting to a point of a quotation that is technically feasible takes far more than in the detached dwelling space. That actually needs to be a paid exercise. Because of the 6 per cent of follow-through or the 1.5 per cent in Victoria, that needs to be a paid exercise. I just want to make sure that that is clear, that actually getting to the point of understanding the technical capability of your building is a step. We have had program participants refuse to do that because they think it should be free, and it is like, 'You're not going to get the answer to your question unless you're willing to spend a little bit of money to understand what you can do and what you can't do.'

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you, Gavin. On that note, I thank you all for coming and for the written submissions you have made as well as being here today. To our friends on-screen as well, thank you for being with us today. If there are any important points that you still wish to make, you are welcome to provide that additional information to the committee in writing. With that we will end the broadcast now.

Witnesses withdrew.