

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

The Development and Expansion of Waste-to-Energy Infrastructure in Victoria

Melbourne – Friday 8 May 2026

MEMBERS

Georgie Purcell – Chair

Richard Welch – Deputy Chair

John Berger

Gaelle Broad

Katherine Copsey

Moira Deeming

Tom McIntosh

Evan Mulholland

Sonja Terpstra

WITNESSES

Julie A,

Nisa Y,

Rayaan S,

Jana G,

Aicha H, and

Tamara M, Al Siraat College.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Development and Expansion of Waste-to-Energy Infrastructure in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee, or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast or from the public gallery.

To kick off, we will just have committee members introduce themselves to you, starting with Mr Berger.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi, and welcome. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: I am Georgie Purcell from Northern Victoria, and I think we might have Sarah Mansfield online.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. And thank you so much for coming along today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of? We might start down this end of the room.

Rayaan S: Hi. I am Rayaan, and I am the Indigenous outreach leader at Al Siraat College.

Nisa Y: Hello. My name is Nisa and I am the SRC leader of Al Siraat College.

Julie A: I am Julie and I am a staff member at Al Siraat College.

Tamara M: I am Tamara and I am a student at Al Siraat College.

Aicha H: I am Aicha and I am an environmental leader at Al Siraat College.

Jana G: I am Jana and I am a year 6 student at Al Siraat College.

The CHAIR: Awesome, great. So cool to have students along. I have never done this at a hearing before. We now ask for your opening comments, but ask that they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions from the committee.

Julie A: We have about a 5-minute presentation.

The CHAIR: That is perfect.

Julie A: I will start speaking. As-salamu alaykum, or good morning, Chair and honourable members. Thank you for the opportunity to present to this inquiry today. My name is Julie, and we appear before this inquiry as one community from Al Siraat College – founders, staff, parents, students and families brought together by a shared commitment to protecting children, community wellbeing and our future. Our school is located approximately 7.5 kilometres from the proposed waste-to-energy facility in Wollert. Al Siraat College is not only a place of learning and worship; it is also a place where community comes together to celebrate, connect and belong. For example, during Eid prayers we welcome approximately 1500 people onto our grounds. These gatherings reflect the strength, scale and unity of our community. This is not an abstract issue for us. It directly affects the students we see every day and the families who place their trust in our care.

Our school serves a community of approximately 1630 students, with around 300 students living in Wollert itself and many more in neighbouring suburbs. We are a highly diverse community with 35 different languages spoken across our families and approximately 37 per cent of students coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While this diversity is a strength, it also highlights a serious issue in this process. Many families have not been able to meaningfully engage with the proposal due to technical complexity, limited timeframes and language barriers. This has resulted in parts of the community being unintentionally excluded from meaningful participation, raising concerns about fairness and accessibility.

We are also part of a rapidly growing region. The City of Whittlesea is one of the fastest growing areas in Victoria. With a significant proportion of children in the population, these are communities that will live with the long-term consequences of the planning decisions made today. In Islam we call the responsibility of looking after people, community and the environment an amanah – a trust that we are accountable for. This understanding shapes the values we teach at Al Siraat College and how our students learn to approach responsibility in their everyday lives. The values include: ‘it starts with me’, taking responsibility for actions, treading the earth lightly, caring for the environment, respectful relationships and caring for others and the community. These are not abstract ideas; they shape how our students live, learn and understand their responsibility to the world around them.

From our perspective, any proposal that introduces long-term environmental risks into a growing community of children must be approached with the highest level of caution. We are not here to oppose waste management. We are here to emphasise that solutions must not create new risks for the communities they sit beside. Most importantly, children should not carry the burden of decisions made about waste management elsewhere.

Today you will hear from five students who will speak to a different aspect of this issue. Nisa and Rayaana will speak about health, environment and animal welfare; Jana will discuss waste solutions and alternatives; Aicha will address safety, planning and risk; and Tamara will examine the fairness and consultation process. We ask that their voices be heard as genuine insight into lived experiences, not symbolic participation. I now invite Nisa to begin.

Nisa Y: Good morning. My name is Nisa. I am a year 7 SRC leader at Al Siraat College. I am 12 years old and I live on Summerhill Road in Wollert where they are trying to build an incinerator. I am here today because I am very upset and worried about the plan to build an incinerator so close to my home and my school. I made a submission because this is not just a big decision; it is something that will affect everyone in our community for many years.

I have two pet chickens named Pixie and Peachy. We hand-raised them from chicks and I take care of them. They are a Leghorn–Australorp cross. At school we learned that the pollution from incinerators can spread into the air and the soil and even affect the water we drink. We also learned that there is one place in France where they built an incinerator; the local eggs became too toxic for people to eat from all the microplastics from the incinerator. The community was warned not to eat the eggs from their own chickens. This made me think, ‘Would you feed your children toxic eggs for breakfast?’ This is not fair, and it will affect chickens and

children's health too. It shows the environment around us – the food we eat, the water we drink and even the air we breathe – could all be contaminated. We use tank water, so we would be drinking and using contaminated water and breathing in toxic air at home and at school. I am really worried about the health of all the chickens and children and families in our area.

Our community is growing very quickly, with lots of new families moving in every year. Why are they trying to build an incinerator so close to our homes, schools and kindergartens? Children are still growing. Our lungs are still developing. This is not fair. This is the wrong place to build an incinerator. I respectfully ask the government to find a better, safer and cleaner way to deal with our waste, a way that does not put children, animals and communities at risk, and to protect our health and our homes and our future. Thank you for listening.

Rayaan S: Good morning. My name is Rayaan and I am in year 7. I have the honour of serving as Indigenous outreach leader. Building on what Nisa shared about how pollution could affect her chickens and the food we eat, I would like to speak about how the incinerator could impact wildlife and the ecosystems around us. At school we learned that the incinerator does not just affect one site, it releases toxic fumes and microplastics into the air, which can travel far beyond the facility and settle into soil, plants and waterways. Over time this pollution can contaminate natural systems that animals rely on. When plants and small organisms are affected the damage moves through the entire food chain. This means insects, birds, reptiles and mammals can all be harmed. Like us, animals need clean air, clean water and safe food to survive. If these are polluted, their health, growth and ability to reproduce are put at risk. Unlike humans, wildlife cannot avoid exposure; they are completely dependent on the health of their surroundings.

As Indigenous outreach leader I have been taught the importance of caring for the country. Country is not just land, it includes water, plants and animals and the stories that connect us to this place. When the country is damaged, our communities feel that damage too. We have a responsibility to protect the environment so future generations can live and grow on healthy land. I am very concerned that the incinerator will harm native animals living around us. This is not just a short-term issue, it is a long-term threat. If the incinerator is built it will be there for the next 30 years, affecting the next generation and the country we all share. Protecting the ecosystems means thinking carefully about how our decisions today will shape the future. I ask you to consider the environmental risks of the proposal and potential harm to wildlife that depend on a clean and healthy environment.

Jana G: Good morning, and thank you all for the opportunity to speak today. I am Jana. My background is Egyptian, and I am a year 6 student at Al Siraat College. I am here today because I believe Victoria can take a smarter and more responsible approach to managing waste than building an incinerator near growing communities. Waste is a serious problem and I understand that solutions are needed. But I also believe that not every solution actually solves the real issue. To me, the biggest question is: if we already know we are creating too much waste, then why are we focusing on ways to burn it instead of ways to stop creating so much of it in the first place? I believe the strongest solution is prevention. The best way to deal with waste is not to destroy it after it has been already created. The best way is to reduce the amount of waste before it even exists. Prevention is always stronger than reaction. There is a simple order to managing waste properly. First, we reduce. That means limiting unnecessary packaging, reducing single-use plastics and encouraging companies to make products that last longer instead of breaking quickly. If less waste is created, then the whole system is under less pressure.

Second, reuse materials wherever possible. Many items do not need to be thrown away after one use only. They can be repaired, donated, refilled or used again. Reusing products helps reduce waste and protects resources. Third, we improve recycling systems wherever possible so more materials can be turned into new products instead of ending up in landfill. A lot of my friends buy plastic products online because they are cheap and easy to get, but many of them do not last very long. They break quickly, get thrown away quickly or are replaced quickly. That creates even more waste. We also see online websites like Temu and Shein selling large amounts of low-quality products designed for short-term use. As a result, huge amounts end up in landfill. This is not sustainable. It is waste on a massive scale.

Waste-to-energy only deals with waste after it already exists. It does not reduce over production, it does not limit excessive packaging and it does not challenge the culture of disposal we are seeing today. In fact, it depends on a constant supply of waste to remain. That means it relies on the very problem we should be trying

to reduce. That does not sound like a future-focused solution to me. Instead of investing in systems that burn waste, I believe we should invest in systems that prevent waste from being created in the first place. We already know change is possible. Reductions in plastic bags, straws and cutlery have shown that when governments introduce strong policies, waste can be reduced. That is where I believe our focus should be: prevention, recycling and safer waste management solutions, rather than disposal through incineration.

My main concern is that waste-to-energy gives the appearance of solving the problem, while allowing the real causes of waste to continue. It risks locking us all into a system that needs rubbish to survive. As a young person, that worries me. We cannot solve the waste problem by burning it. No disposal system can fix an issue that keeps being created every single day. When the committee is ready I will hand over to Aicha, who will speak about safety, planning and risk. Thank you.

Aicha H: Good morning and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Aicha, and as an environmental leader at Al Siraat College I want to talk about an issue that affects all of us, as well as how we manage growth in our communities while still protecting people and the environment. As our population grows, so does the demand for housing, jobs and infrastructure. Waste management is part of that challenge. Solutions like waste-to-energy incineration are often presented as efficient and practical, but just because something works does not mean it is the right choice for all communities. My view is simple: no community should have to accept unnecessary environmental risks, especially when there are safer alternatives available.

Firstly, the location really matters. The areas we are talking about are not just empty spaces, they are places where people live, where kids go to school and where families build their lives. These environments should be kept safe. Children in particular are more vulnerable to the pollution and environmental changes, which makes it even more important to think carefully about where industrial facilities are being placed. We also need to consider the everyday impacts. Even if a facility meets all safety regulations, it still changes the surrounding area. More trucks on the road, increased noise and ongoing industrial activity can affect people's quality of life. These are not just short-term issues, they become a part of daily life for the community.

Another key point is the environmental risks. Air, soil and water systems are all connected, so when one of the systems is affected, all the others experience the consequences too. While regulations are implemented to reduce harm, they cannot completely remove risks. Accidents can happen and long-term exposure can still have effects. When that happens, it is the local community, including Al Siraat College, that carries the consequences. People argue that strict regulations are enough, but reducing risk is not the same as removing it. That difference matters, especially when decisions will affect communities for many years to come.

That brings us to the long-term image. Facilities like incinerators do not just exist for a simple few years, they run for decades. That means the effects, both environmental and social, are ever long lasting. Future generations will live with these decisions, even though they never had a voice in them now.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the daunting cost of living. Many families are already under significant financial pressure, and planning impactful choices should not make things harder. Instead we should be investing in safer, more sustainable solutions like improving recycling systems and reducing waste overall. In the end, good planning comes down to making smart, responsible decisions. It is about looking into environmentally friendly infrastructure and making sure our health plus wellbeing as a nation are the priority.

To finish off, I want to reinforce my position. No community should face unnecessary environmental risks when it comes to places where people live, especially where children are growing up and going to school. Safety should always come first. Thank you for listening.

Tamara M: Dear honourable members, my name is Tamara and I stand before you not just as a senior high school student but as someone who will inherit the consequences of what you decide in this room today. I am here to speak about fairness not as an idea but as a standard that this process must meet and right now has not yet met. The proposed waste incinerator in Wollert is not just an environmental or technical issue; it is a test of whether decision-making in this state is truly fair, inclusive and accountable, because consultation has been offered, but we must ask: was it truly accessible, was it truly understood and was it truly equal? The reality is, for many families it was not. The documents provided are not simple. They are highly technical, often hundreds of pages long, filled with scientific language that even well-educated adults struggle to interpret.

Now consider this: in communities like Wollert where many households speak languages other than English and where families are balancing work, children and financial pressures, how realistic is it to expect full understanding? How realistic is it to call that informed participation? Because when people cannot fully understand what is being proposed, their ability to respond is not just limited; it is compromised. And when participation is compromised, consultation is no longer equal. It becomes selective, and fairness disappears. This matters even more when we consider the scale of what is being proposed.

Waste incinerators are not neutral. Even modern facilities release pollutants, including fine particulate matter and toxic compounds like dioxins, which are linked to long-term health risks. Globally, studies have found that communities living near incinerators can experience measurable increases in health risks, including up to 10 to 12 per cent higher rates of certain cancers in some populations. So this is not just about waste; it is about risk. And another question becomes: who is being asked to carry that risk? Because it is not evenly shared; it is placed on specific communities, on growing suburbs, on families and on young people – young people who did not create this waste problem yet will live the longest with its consequences. By the time the long-term impacts of this decision are fully understood, many of you will no longer be in these roles, but we will still be here, living with it, breathing it, explaining it to our own children. And yet, despite this, young people have had limited power in shaping this decision. This is not just unfortunate; this is fundamentally unfair. Because a fair decision is not just defined by whether information was released; it is defined by whether that information was understood by everyone, not just a few.

So I ask you: if a decision is too complex for the average family to understand, can their agreement truly be called informed? If language, time and access determine whose voices are heard, can we call this process equal? And if those who will live the longest with the consequences are the least included, can we call it just? Because fairness is not just a box to tick; it is a responsibility to uphold. Children did not create this waste problem, yet we are being asked to inherit its consequences without being given a fully equal voice in the decisions behind it. This is where this must change, because in the end, it is not just about an incinerator; it is about trust, and trust is built when people feel heard, included and respected, not when they are overwhelmed, excluded or left behind. So I leave you with this: a fair decision is not just made; it is understood by everyone it affects, and until that standard is met, this decision cannot truly be called fair.

That concludes the presentation from Al Siraat. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. That was awesome. We will move into questions from the committee. There are four of us here. I will give members, what does that work out to, about 6 minutes each, and then if there is more time we will go around again. We might kick off with Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your appearance this morning. Those presentations were fantastic and resonate quite loudly with us. I am interested to understand: at your school do you have a recycling program, and what does your recycling program look like?

Aicha H: We did have one. We had the SRC – student representative council – they worked with the student representative council teacher, and we did have one. It was a blue bin. It was recyclable. It was made out of cardboard or something, and you put your paper into it. It did last for a couple of years, but then students started using the normal bins, so it did not really work that well.

John BERGER: Yes. I pick up on your point about prevention, and prevention starts with everybody. I think if it was an opportunity to do it in your school, for example, what might that look like in terms of getting that program up and running to at least eliminate some of the issues that we face in our society? And that is the more packaging that we have around, whether it is in schools or whatever, we are going to have to dispose of it in some way, so I would encourage you to get your recycling program.

Julie A: We do have a recycling program; we have a separate paper recycling program. We are currently looking into restarting a composting program as well.

John BERGER: And the container deposit scheme – are you familiar with that?

Julie A: Yes.

John BERGER: And is that successful in your school by separating out the –

Julie A: At the moment we do not use that program, but it generally goes into the general recycling.

John BERGER: Okay. And I also heard about online purchasing. I think we are all guilty of buying something online. How do you think we could persuade people from other countries when they are sending stuff across to Australia, that we change that packaging from plastics to cardboards?

Tamara M: What I think is that we should focus more on informing the companies and the manufacturers instead of the people, because ultimately the people are going to care about the product, not the general packaging and boxes and stuff. So I feel like what we should do is we should target the companies and the main large manufacturers and change the way that they process things and change up their ingredients. So then if you focus on the big manufacturers, it is going to be like a domino effect, and it is going to go on.

John BERGER: Yes. Right, Chair, that is all I have for my part.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Mr Berger. Dr Mansfield?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you so much for your appearance today and for sharing all of those really insightful views about this project. It was really heartening to hear about your concern for the future of the natural environment, particularly around your communities and the potential impact that these sorts of facilities could have on them. I am interested in the decision-making processes around approving things like waste incineration. Do you think enough consideration is given to the potential impacts on future generations and the views of young people about these sorts of projects?

Aicha H: I feel like with decision-making we should allow everyone to have a voice. I feel like we do have representatives, but not everyone's voice gets across. Especially with what Tamara said about people when English is not their first language, I feel like to get the message across we should definitely have interpreters so they can have their voice heard. I feel like with the whole entire representatives and stuff, for some people their voices do not get heard, and it is kind of like a hierarchy system rather than everyone's voice being heard.

Julie A: Many of our children are very young, and their voices are not heard either, and they will not be heard. They may be heard once this facility gets built, but then it is too late.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. I think one of the things that has come through the evidence that you have given and what we have heard from other witnesses and read in some of the submissions is that there is a lot of concern about the long-term health and environmental impacts of a facility like this. You have given examples. I think some of you talked about what has happened overseas with some of these facilities and the impact on food systems and soil. If a facility is approved close to where the school is and where your communities are living around those areas, what concerns do you have for the local residents there and for the school students?

Rayaan S: The long-term threats for the environment concern how it may affect surrounding ecosystems and communities over decades. In the last 10 years, three species of animals have been confirmed to be extinct.

Julie A: Yes. I think when it comes to the effect on the school, I want you to think about students outside playing. They are outside playing sports; they spend a significant proportion of their time when they are at school outside, and they could be breathing in these pollutants at school. Over time that can accumulate inside their bodies, and it can affect their future.

Aicha H: Can I add on to that? I feel like with medical conditions, especially when we had the bushfires, there were a lot of people that developed asthma and chest infections. I feel like that will happen with the incinerator as well, because people might not have it now, but then it will actually be built and it will pass through generations. Then eventually we will all suffer from health issues. No-one will be healthy anymore, and I feel like that is a really big impact.

Tamara M: Just to add to what Aicha is saying, I did read that Wollert is expected to reach nearly 60,000 by 2040. Research internationally in other countries did show that for certain cancers the risk increased by 10 to 12 per cent, which is quite large when you think 10 to 12 per cent of that particular community will or may develop cancer later on in their life. I feel like that is a very serious thing to think about as well.

Nisa Y: Can I continue, Tamara? Also, it is going to be going on for the next 30 years, and imagine having to live with a polluted air system for the next 30 years. Also, again, cancer and having asthma or weak lungs will make just make everything worse.

Rayaan S: Could I please add on to Nisa? Because pollution does not stay in one place, it can affect waterways, soil, plants and animals and eventually impact humans too. We have many vulnerable species in Australia, and the toxins and ash that are produced by an incinerator is likely to affect the smallest animal right up to the food chain to humans.

Aicha H: I will add on to that. I feel like as we know the proposed incinerator does have filters, but only 99 per cent of that is filtered. There is that 1 per cent, and there are 10,000 tonnes being burnt all the time, and that will build up to a lot. I feel like also, if you think about it, if we continue going this way, our population is going to die out eventually. The birth rate is going to drop.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I think that point is really valid. One per cent of a large number is still a very large number. You have all highlighted a whole range of risks that – if these facilities get approved – have obviously been considered by the regulators to be acceptable risks. I can hear from what you are saying that you do not feel that they are acceptable risks. Why do you think these facilities are being approved? What do you think is driving the decisions? Given that we are hearing communities do not want them there and there are significant health concerns and environmental concerns, what do you think is driving the decision?

Nisa Y: Because it is a lot cheaper, because it is all local. I am thinking that it is obviously a lot cheaper to do it very local to people, but still, they should not be doing it next to people because it can affect them all as well.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Aicha H: I will add on to what Nisa said. Also, Wollert is still a developing area. It is easy to build something there – there are houses and stuff, but they close off the whole entire Bindts Road and stuff just for the council. I feel like with developing areas it is so easy to build something there without it – yes, it gets approved, but it will be easily approved because it is still developing. But let us say if it was a developed area, it would not likely get approved because they care about the people living there. But then also they should care about the people living in developing areas. Like Tamara said, there is estimated to be 60,000 people living in Wollert by 2040. They really need to consider that. I feel like it is really unfair that we have to suffer the consequences just because they do not want to build it elsewhere.

Julie A: I think it is also a very easy decision for the government, rather than looking outside the box and looking for alternatives that actually are safer.

Rayaan S: Could I please add on to this as well? I do not think there were many ideas for the government to invest in, but there is improving recycling systems and encouraging more sustainable production and packaging and getting creative. Where there is a will, there will be a way.

Aicha H: I will add on to that – if you think about it, research is expensive, and I feel like with this incinerator it is just a quick and easy solution. But research takes time. I feel like they have not properly researched all the risks. Even though there are risks, they are kind of trying to pass the bill, because they do not want to pay the cost of what an environmentally friendly incinerator would be, because obviously it is expensive. But if you think about it, we are paying our taxes for them to make these decisions. I feel like it is unfair that we have to pay our taxes for them to make decisions that are going to be affecting us.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. I think that might be my time.

The CHAIR: It is. Thanks, Dr Mansfield. I will go next. Thank you so much again. That was a brilliant presentation, and I just really want to make that clear to you all, because I know as young people it can often feel like decision-makers do not take you seriously or might not listen to you as much as adults. I think that was some of the best information that we have heard over the past few days, so thank you for sharing it with us.

I am from the Animal Justice Party, so I was really listening intently about the impact on animals and wildlife. I am just wondering if you could talk us through in more detail the long-running impacts that this project could have outside of the community, that it could go into across the entire biodiversity and ecosystem of our state.

Rayaan S: What I touched on in my speech was that pollution does not stay in one place. It can affect soil, waterways, plants and animals, and eventually impact humans too. In the last 10 years there were three animals that have been confirmed to be extinct – they are a small rodent and the Christmas Island pipistrelle, a tiny insect-eating bat. We have around 2000 animals on the endangered list. If the incinerators involve ongoing emissions, the long-term environmental concerns may affect the surrounding ecosystems and communities over decades. When plants and small organisms are affected, the damage moves through the entire food chain. When an animal gets affected, they do not have the choice to move through the surroundings – if they do, it could impact severely on ecosystems and the food chain.

Nisa Y: Also, can I add on to Rayaan's speech? I have chickens in the area – my chickens, Pixie and Peachy.

The CHAIR: I have to say, I love their names.

Nisa Y: Thank you. Imagine not eating your own pet chickens' eggs. And also the eggs in the community – how are you supposed to have that, or anything, because they are all going to be polluted. You would not want to feed your children toxic eggs for breakfast, would you, or anything, because that is not fair, right?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Rayaan S: I would like you to consider the environmental risks and potential harm to the ecosystems and food chain, and maybe we could find better ideas for the government to invest in, like improving recycling systems and more sustainable production and packaging.

Aicha H: I will add on to the concerns. I feel like also global warming is a really big one. It will not just affect Australia long term, it is going to affect neighbouring countries, if you really think about it. What is happening overseas is already affecting us in global warming. So I feel like it is a bit selfish for us to do this, not considering other countries and not considering our own citizens.

Rayaan S: I am very concerned that the incinerator will harm native animals, which make the country we all share special.

The CHAIR: Yes, very important.

Nisa Y: Can I add on to Rayaan's: also the environment around us, even the water that we drink, will be contaminated as well. All the microplastics will go in there, and you are basically consuming plastic. That cannot be digested in your body, so it will be terrible for your body as well.

Rayaan S: It does not just mean us. The wildlife cannot avoid exposure. They are completely dependent on the health of their surroundings. This means insects, birds, reptiles and mammals.

The CHAIR: Yes, and I am sure you know this as well, but we rely on many of the things wildlife do as well. Thank you. That is really helpful information. Obviously, we have heard pretty consistently over the past day that there was a strong feeling of a lack of consultation or conversation with the surrounding community. Could you talk us through in a bit more detail how that is compounded, being from a diverse community within the community?

Tamara M: As we know, Wollert is a suburb that is very diverse. There are lots of different ethnicities and people immigrating and all that. We know that obviously when you are coming to a new country, you are not going to automatically be at a very high level when it comes to knowing how to speak, read and basically become an Australian and talk English. But this is what we have to consider. If we know that this certain community, most of it or a big fraction of it, is not going to know how to talk English, we have to try and make it more accessible to them. For example, when it comes to consulting on getting feedback – let us say you are trying to do surveys – you should do maybe a hard copy and a soft copy so that the old and the young can both access it, as well as making it in different languages so that it is more accessible.

Aicha H: I will add on to that: I feel like also for people with impairments, making it in braille so it is accessible to everyone, not just one certain group of people.

Julie A: Not many people from our community are aware of the Engage Victoria website processes. In my conversations with our community, most of them are completely unaware of that process.

Nisa Y: Can I also add on to Julie's thing? I think they should also add like the most immigrants that came there in Wollert, and they have the most people that are from the immigrant country, I think they should also add the language that they speak in there to say, 'Do you want that or not?' as well, because a lot of them would not know how to speak English as well, so I think they should also add that as well.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. I agree. And for a project that is so big that could have such severe impacts, it is important to make sure everyone can engage in that process.

Nisa Y: Over 30 years it is going to destroy them, basically.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is my time, so I am going to go to Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. Wow – that was just so magnificent. I would mirror Ms Purcell's comments. You really blew it out of the – so well. Congratulations. I think it is really heartening for all of us that there are strong, thoughtful voices coming from the community. Can I pick up on that question that Ms Purcell started in terms of consultation and ask you: what consultation have you actually had with either Cleanaway or the government about the proposal?

Julie A: It is basically done.

David ETTERS HANK: Basically none?

Julie A: None.

David ETTERS HANK: None. Okay. So there has been no direct communication from Cleanaway as the proponents to the community?

Julie A: That is right.

David ETTERS HANK: And nor have any government agencies or the EPA or any of those organisations reached out?

Julie A: Not directly.

David ETTERS HANK: So it is just what is on the web and stuff like that. Okay. In terms of the Muslim diaspora, within your community how many languages roughly would be the first language for members of the community?

Julie A: Different languages? We have 35 different languages as part of our school community.

David ETTERS HANK: Yes. Okay. So it is significant. Actually the way you were talking before was so good I almost wondered whether you had read the parliamentary inquiry into consultation, because you picked up all of the key issues around this question – really good. And so I guess it is fair to say that apart from no consultation in people's first languages, there has also been no consultation directly with young people either?

Aicha H: Also, I want to add on to that. I did not know about the incinerator at all. I found out from Ms Asma at a school event. It is very not spoken about. There are posts, but you do not really see them. Normally it would be on the news by now. There is, like, nothing. It is like they want it to stay hidden so they can pass it.

Tamara M: Yes. Even me – I do not even know what this incinerator is. I would just probably walk around and I would probably hear a teacher talk about it and I would be, like, 'Oh my God, what are they talking about?' But teachers like Ms Asma here really brought it to our attention. I did not even know about this up until last week. So it just shows how much it is not talked about.

David ETTERS HANK: I hate to think what you would be able to do if you actually had time to prepare. That was terrific. Okay, so there has been no consultation. Everything you have had to learn has been what you have acquired through direct research that you have undertaken?

Aicha H: Yes. And also when researching, you find things from other countries, but nothing in Australia. It is like it is never really spoken about. Climate change is spoken about, all these things, but the things causing the climate change and things causing the pollution are never spoken about.

Nisa Y: Can I also add on to Aicha: even though they are building this, even though no-one is really talking about it, I feel like the people that are in the neighbourhood of Summerhill Road – which I live on, which they are building the incinerator on – would have known first. But the thing is, since there are not many people living on Summerhill Road, they would not really have to tell anybody as well.

David ETTERS HANK: Yes. Are you familiar with the term ‘greenwashing’?

Julie A: Greenwashing? Yes.

David ETTERS HANK: Do you feel like with some of this stuff that you have been subject to greenwashing?

Julie A: Yes. Most of their information has come from predominantly me, so they have received the accurate information. But from my point of view, yes.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. This might seem a bit unfair, but because you have been so articulate, could I ask you to take this opportunity – because this is a parliamentary committee, obviously, and there will be a lot of people watching this, and hopefully the Premier will be one of them – just to look in the camera and we will just work our way down. If you could just say one thing to the Premier about the waste-to-energy incinerator. Would you be so kind as to do that? Let us start up there.

Rayaan S: I wanted to ask the Premier one question. What does caring for country mean? Caring for country means respecting and protecting land, water and plants. Caring for country is incompatible with any waste-to-energy incinerator.

David ETTERS HANK: Great. Please.

Nisa Y: I have a question for the Premier. What would you say to people who do not know modern incinerators are completely safe? I understand the regulations, but even modern facilities still produce pollution. My concern is whether communities and children should carry any unnecessary risks at all.

David ETTERS HANK: Great.

Julie A: I believe that the Premier and our government should genuinely listen to the concerns of community and really take their views into consideration when making these big decisions.

Tamara M: Consultation has been offered, but we must ask: was it truly accessible, was it truly understood and was it truly equal? You have to remember that trust is built when people feel heard, included and respected. A fair decision is not just made, it is understood by everyone it affects.

Aicha H: I would ask him: how would you like it if you walked outside your door and you just inhaled pollution? You just walk out and the first thing you do is you inhale pollution. I feel like it is unfair that we have to suffer these consequences and you are just sitting in your chair, not caring about a word that has been said by the communities. And I feel like it is really selfish as well. You would not like it if I went and I built an incinerator right behind your house. Make it make sense.

Jana G: To me, my question is: if you know we are creating too much waste, then why are you trying to find ways to burn it near growing communities and young children? Just try and stop creating so much of it in the first place. Reducing waste helps protect resources and also animals and the air that we all breathe – waste will affect us and animals, so I believe that this is not a future-focused solution. It is a long-term issue.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you. My congratulations and my thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. That is perfect timing to finish up. I just want to say a really big thank you again, and I am aware that I was smiling a lot in this. It is a very serious topic, but I am smiling because it makes me so happy to see such an engaged group of students. I have just had a daughter myself; she is four months old, and it fills me with hope knowing that she has leaders like you in the future. So thank you so much for coming along. That concludes the public hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.