

**Submission  
No 114**

## **INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PRACTICES**

**Organisation:** Mansfield Shire Council

**Date Received:** 13 June 2025

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Mansfield Shire

13 June, 2025

Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee  
Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To Whom It May Concern

### **Mansfield Shire Council submission – Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices**

Mansfield Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices and appreciate the State government's intent to engage with various levels of government and the community. However, we feel compelled to express our serious concerns regarding the quality and intent of these engagement opportunities.

Council has actively engaged in numerous consultation opportunities offered by the State government in recent years. Despite our genuine efforts, these experiences have left Council officers and Councillors feeling increasingly frustrated and disillusioned due to the outcome. Council believes that the engagement is often conducted as a procedural formality and the lack of genuine engagement does not provide Council with the ability to influence the outcome of decisions that appear to have already been made by the State Government.

Local Government is best placed to understand the needs, priorities and aspirations of our own communities. We work closely with residents, businesses and local stakeholders to develop infrastructure, plans and initiatives designed to safeguard our Shire's future development and liveability. Wide sweeping statewide changes, when introduced without regard for local context, can have a significant impact on rural communities with the potential to undermine the effectiveness of guidelines designed to protect rural and regional areas.

Many of the changes introduced by the State also have a financial impact on Council and on our community, with the most recent of these being the introduction of the Emergency Services Volunteer Fund (ESVF). Our community is reeling from the likely impact of the levy which was a total surprise to Council, given there was NO consultation with Local Government. We are left to suffer the reputational damage on behalf of the State Government, in addition to the shocking and unfair financial impact on our community.

Another example of where this is having a significant impact is the recent *Plan for Victoria* and Planning Scheme Amendments made without adequate consideration or regard to how the changes would affect rural councils or our communities. The outcome of these decisions has constrained Council's ability to influence planning outcomes that directly impact the development controls shaping our Shire's future development and liveability.

After careful and thorough review of the draft *Plan for Victoria*, Council made a very detailed submission outlining a range of concerns, including Council's belief that the investment required from Local Government was disproportionate with funding capacity, the infrastructure from both council and state government is not sufficient to support the suggested level of growth and the lack of public transport with no future plans on expansion of this service compromises the long term sustainability of our community. Council received no feedback on our submission, reinforcing the perception that input from rural councils is not meaningfully considered.

We believe that the consultation processes used for development of the *Plan for Victoria* were highly unsatisfactory, with Council officers asking repeatedly for their feedback to be recorded in meeting minutes, and a meeting participant from another shire ultimately resorting to taking minutes for circulation as the meetings were not minuted by the relevant State department. No apparent action was taken to address the concerns raised by Mansfield Shire and other rural shires participating in these meetings. Council is happy to provide a copy of these minutes and the submission made by Mansfield Shire to the *Plan for Victoria* consultation.

Council officers were invited to a workshop to receive an update on the Review of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. Council was advised that "The review is an opportunity to create a more efficient, fit for purpose planning system that supports rural communities. Local Government plays a fundamental role and input from the sector to the Act review is essential", only to be informed at the outset that the Department was not seeking feedback on the intent or implications of the changes. This made the exercise appear terribly futile, and in our view, renders the consultation process pointless.

A further example of inadequate consultation is the mandated implementation of the four waste stream system. While Council is supportive of the objectives of improving environmental outcomes, the lack of collaborative planning and support from the State placed a burden on small rural councils with limited financial and administrative capacity, making the rollout particularly challenging. At one of the engagement sessions, Council's CEO had to request that her views be recorded in the minutes as they were submitted, not as the scribe wanted to interpret them. This request had to be made on multiple occasions throughout the meeting.

Ironically, the one thing that did assist Council in this instance was the comprehensive deliberative engagement exercise undertaken within our own community prior to the four bin waste stream rollout. Our own experience demonstrates the effectiveness of genuine and thorough engagement. Council actively encouraged our community to tell us what their needs were through online and face to face consultation. We listened to the feedback and as a result, adapted our approach to ensure the service met community need and expectations. As a result, the rollout was met with broad community support and minimal resistance; clear evidence of what can be achieved when engagement is sincere, and stakeholder feedback listened to and valued.

Council is proud of the trust that has grown within our community and with our stakeholders due to honest and open consultation. Through two-way conversations with local stakeholders on

matters of mutual interest or concern, Council has learned that official State government departmental representatives are often bypassed and not kept in the loop by members further up the chain, in relation to significant changes that are proposed. It is only due to the work Council has done to actively engage and build relationships with local departmental representatives that we are able to share information about the impact that impending changes and decisions proposed by the State will have on our Shire.

Council strongly urges the Inquiry to consider how State government consultation practices can be improved to ensure they are transparent, inclusive, and can genuinely influence policy development. Local government should be treated as a partner in decision-making, not merely an administrative arm for implementation. Our communities deserve an engagement process that respects their unique context and environment and can empower them to shape the future of the places where they choose to live.

Council welcomes the opportunity to elaborate on these matters further with the Committee.

Yours faithfully



**Steve Rabie**  
Mayor