

**WIMMERA SOUTHERN MALLEE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP SUBMISSION**  
**to the**  
**VICTORIAN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING COMMITTEE INQUIRY into**  
**COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PRACTICES**  
**June 2025**

**REGIONAL CONTEXT – WIMMERA SOUTHERN MALLEE**

The Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) region is deeply invested in shaping its future, as encapsulated in the WSM Regional Partnership's 5 Pillars of Partnership focus and associated Priorities and in the *Horizon Highway: Wimmera Southern Mallee 30 Year Vision & Roadmap (2023)*.

Our communities are active participants in consultations with government and its agencies on matters that impact the future of the region. However, the volume and style of government consultation often leaves communities feeling overburdened and underheard.

**A Shift in Regional Economic Drivers**

WSM is experiencing a significant shift from an agriculture dominated regional economy to an economy that will include significant renewable energy generation and critical minerals mining. This has led to a constant flow of communications and consultative engagements with landholders and communities on securing access to land for wind and solar farms, transmission lines, mineral sands mines and gold prospecting, both on the affected land holdings and adjacent properties and communities. It has not been unusual for some landholders to have had multiple contacts from different project proponents seeking land access for infrastructure or minerals prospecting over a few weeks or months.

Add to this the pushback against renewable energy development, the building of transmission lines, and mineral sand mines within sections of our communities means residents are also being overwhelmed with information and opinions on development projects – for and against. There has also been a parallel and steep uptick from government agencies also seeking to engage the community and local Councils in consultations on energy and mining projects.

**Increasing Interaction of Government Agencies with WSM Regional Partnership**

The WSM Regional Partnership has also seen a steady increase in requests to brief our Members on government policies or programs, to such an extent that we are having to limit the number of these briefings and consultations – to allow the Partnership the time to focus on its regional priorities. It appears that Regional Partnerships have been identified within government as a primary target for community consultation that enables agencies and infrastructure project proponents to 'tick the box' on the requirement to engage with regional communities.

**Major Regional Bushfires**

Unfortunately, the tragic impact of major bushfires in WSM over the last two years has only exacerbated this consultation overload, with impacted communities having regular interactions with multiple government and aid agencies.

## **A Contentious Merger of Regional Health Services**

WSM has recently also been through a major and contentious merger of three local health services and four hospitals into the combined Grampians Health entity led by Ballarat Health Service. This has been a hotly debated reorganisation of regional health service delivery that has caused significant rancour and division of opinion within the community. The community consultation process was arduous and left many residents feeling ignored and their concerns for the quality of future local health service delivery dismissed.

### **Consultation Fatigue**

Therefore, consultation fatigue within the Wimmera Southern Mallee community is very real, especially where engagement feels extractive, repetitive, or disconnected from the regional context. This submission offers practical recommendations in support of a more coordinated, respectful and empowering approach to community engagement in WSM and across regional and rural Victoria.

## **KEY CONCERNS**

### **Understanding Communities and Capturing Appropriate Data**

Capturing the data that matters to communities is key. Current consultation and decision-making processes do not always reflect what matters most to local communities. Socio-economic data is often underused or not understood in the local context.

### **Multiple Consultations, Minimal Feedback**

Communities regularly participate in consultations without ever seeing how their input shaped outcomes. The absence of feedback erodes trust and discourages future involvement.

### **Community Consultation in Context**

Communities are often asked questions about topics or issues, not outputs and outcomes, so feedback is open to being skewed and reduces the value of community insights.

### **Overreliance on External Consultants**

Consultants without local knowledge or relationships struggle to engage meaningfully. Reports are slow to be delivered and rarely close the feedback loop with communities.

### **Digital Barriers**

Platforms like Engage Victoria are not widely known or accessible. Digital connectivity is a challenge in a regional population with a higher aged cohort than the Victorian regional average, therefore excluding many older residents without digital communication skills or access from the opportunity to be heard. Participation often relies on communities having to 'opt in', which disadvantages already underrepresented voices.

### **Underrepresentation**

Engagement does not always reach key groups such as young people, volunteers, those with disabilities, or culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Formal advocacy groups and local government Councillors, while important, do not necessarily represent majority or minority voices. Reaching the diverse demographic cohorts within the regional population is important and should be a feature of how engagement with the community is designed.

## **Perceived Disempowerment**

Communities report feeling like things are *done to us* rather than *led by us*. Consultation is often seen as a required step in compliance, not a relationship.

## **Valuing Community Knowledge**

Communities are not subject matter experts — but they are experts in their own lived experience. Effective engagement respects this and integrates professional expertise where relevant.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are made to achieve the delivery of Coordinated, Respectful, and Empowered consultation.

### **1. Regional Consultation Coordination Model**

Establish a cross-government mechanism (e.g. via Regional Development Victoria) to map, sequence and align consultations across sectors to prevent overload and duplication, especially in WSM which is experiencing concurrent transitions (e.g. renewable energy, mineral resources, health services).

### **2. Reinvestment in Government Presence in-Region to Build Relationships**

Rebuild a face-to-face government presence beyond the regional centres. Trust is built through relationships and visibility, not just service access or digital tools. The communities in the dispersed smaller townships and rural districts of WSM are often not accounted for in community consultation.

### **3. Support Local Intermediaries**

Fund place-based organisations (e.g. Wimmera Southern Mallee Development Ltd, health alliances, education networks) to co-facilitate engagement, especially with underrepresented groups and in culturally appropriate ways.

### **4. Mandated Transparent Feedback Loops**

Consultations should publish how community input was considered and how trade-offs were communicated. Silence is not agreement. Transparency builds the credibility of community consultation.

### **5. Place-Based and Inclusive Design**

Engagement strategies should be locally tailored and co-designed with local stakeholders. One-size-fits-all approaches overlook regional diversity, and risk reinforcing disengagement.

### **6. Track Outcomes and Build Accountability**

Use simple public dashboards or community reports to show progress from consultation to action - building transparency and accountability.

## **CONCLUSION**

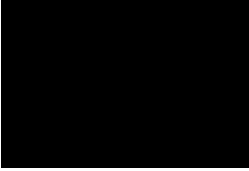
WSM is not disengaged - it is saturated. Communities and residents are ready and willing to help shape their future, but need a respectful, coordinated, and responsive engagement model that values their time, knowledge and the local and regional contexts. A place-based approach that integrates local context, trusted relationships and relevant expertise will deliver stronger outcomes and rebuild community trust in institutions.

This submission is offered to support a more community-anchored engagement model for regional and rural Victoria. The WSM Regional Partnership welcomes the opportunity to expand on the recommendations in this submission or support others to provide local evidence to the Committee, if further input is required.

The WSM Regional Partnership commends the recommendations contained in this Submission for inclusion in the Inquiry Committee's final recommendations on Community Consultation Practices.

**For Further Information:**

Please make contact with the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership Coordinator, Mark McKenzie, at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED] should the Committee require further information or provide a response to this submission.



**Dr Kendra Clegg**

Chair

Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership

