

Submission to the Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices
Prepared by: Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSMD)

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To: Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House, Spring St
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Please find attached the formal submission from Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSMD) to the Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. This submission draws on lived experience across five local government areas and offers detailed recommendations to strengthen the legitimacy, coordination and effectiveness of community consultation in regional Victoria.

WSMD is the peak regional economic development body for western Victoria's Wimmera Southern Mallee region. Our purpose is to lead and advocate for responsible economic growth, ensuring future liveability and prosperity for our regional communities.

We work across five local government areas to enable growth, remove barriers and build resilience through trusted partnerships with community, government, industry and Traditional Owners.

Our team is deeply embedded in the region and actively engaged on the issues reshaping it. These include energy transition, mineral sands development, housing, agriculture and food processing, early years services, workforce shortages, land use change and infrastructure planning.

We are often the first point of contact when community trust breaks down. We explain processes, interpret consultation efforts and help repair the relationship between community and government. We do not offer theory. We offer practical insight from the frontline.

Core Message

Community consultation in regional Victoria is no longer functioning as it should. Communities are not disengaged. They are overwhelmed. The sheer volume, poor sequencing, opaque platforms and tokenistic practices have created fatigue, confusion and scepticism.

Poorly structured consultation creates fertile ground for misinformation and political exploitation. It inflames community outrage and deepens division, even where consensus is possible.

Too often, consultation feels like it is designed to inform rather than engage. And when silence is interpreted as support, trust is eroded even further.

Key Recommendations

- Coordinate consultation regionally to avoid overload
- Assess engagement load before launching new processes
- Label consultation type and stage clearly (not all are equal)
- Support local intermediaries as co-design partners
- Create mandatory feedback loops with communities
- Redesign Engage Victoria for regional users

- Reinvest in local government and public service presence
- Improve accountability for third-party consultants
- Sequence cross-agency consultations more deliberately
- Establish a regional minimum consultation standard

We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence or speak with the Committee directly. Our submission is attached and grounded in the practical realities of regional engagement, drawn from the communities, councils and sectors we serve.

This is not simply a call for better consultation. It is a call for systems that build trust, deliver results, and give communities a genuine role in shaping the change they are being asked to live with.

Yours sincerely,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of Chris Sounness.

Chris Sounness
Chief Executive Officer
Wimmera Southern Mallee Development



OVERLOAD, FRAGMENTATION, AND THE CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF UNCOORDINATED CONSULTATIONS ARE BREAKING TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Too Much, Too Fast, Too Fragmented: Fixing Community Consultation for Regional Victoria

Submission Briefing Community Consultation Practices Inquiry

Prepared for Victorian Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

Prepared by: Chris Sounness, CEO WSM Development

June 06, 2025

1 Executive Summary

Community consultation in Victoria is not working as intended and nowhere is this more apparent than in regions like the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

What was once meant to be a way for communities to shape decisions has become a system that overwhelms, confuses and erodes trust. Consultation now often feels like a compliance step a way to inform, not engage. For many in our region, the phrase “have your say” has become a warning, not an invitation.

This submission sets out what is going wrong, why it matters, and how to fix it.

1.1 What's Going Wrong

Across Wimmera Southern Mallee, people are not disengaged they are exhausted. They are being asked to engage in dozens of consultations at once, often across unrelated reforms, with unclear timing, little coordination, and no visibility into how their input is used.

We outline how:

- **Volume** has replaced strategy; too many consultations at once;
- **Design** treats all processes the same, regardless of scale, purpose or urgency;
- **Timing** is often too late for meaningful influence;
- **Trust** has broken down; many now assume decisions are already made.

This isn't just a regional concern. It reflects broader system failures that push consultation toward form over substance, particularly in places experiencing layered reform: energy, planning, housing, health, climate, and emergency management all at once.

1.2 Key Evidence and Insights

Our submission draws on practical insight from Wimmera Southern Mallee Development's work across five local government areas. We have been involved in and often asked to interpret or mediate consultations on:

- Energy infrastructure (Victoria to NSW Interconnector West and Western Renewables Link, mineral sands projects, transmission plans);
- Early years reform (By Five and related program withdrawals);



- Planning scheme changes and housing development constraints;
- Public transport and service reviews;
- Use of the Engage Victoria platform for legislative, policy and service feedback.

We show how:

- Communities cannot tell what's real and what's already decided;
- Local volunteer groups and organisations are left to translate fragmented government processes;
- Systems like Engage Victoria collapse all consultations into a single stream with no clarity on stage, scope or stakes;
- Even Regional Partnerships, while promising in design, are struggling to deliver impact communities can see or feel.

We include a sample of community-developed resources that fill the gap government leaves such as a plain-language guide to council roles in energy project approvals to illustrate how regional actors are already doing the work of system repair.

1.3 What Needs to Change

We make 10 key recommendations, including:

1. **Coordinated regional consultation frameworks** that avoid overload and duplication.
2. **Engagement load assessments** before launching new consultations.
3. **Sequencing tools** so communities aren't hit with unrelated reforms all at once.
4. **Clear labelling** of consultation type and purpose (statutory, policy design, sentiment testing, etc).
5. **Minimum standards for regional consultation** timing, access, format and feedback.
6. **Mandatory feedback loops** that show what changed based on community input.
7. **Resourcing local intermediaries** not just to communicate, but to shape.
8. **Reinvestment in local government and public service presence**, not just digital tools.
9. **Stronger standards for third-party consultants** delivering engagement on behalf of proponents or agencies.
10. **A redesign of the Engage Victoria platform** to make it navigable, trustworthy and fit for rural use.

1.4 Our Offer to the Committee

We do not bring this submission as a complaint but as a contribution to system improvement. The Wimmera Southern Mallee is not afraid of change. But we cannot be expected to navigate it unsupported, unheard, or constantly asked to contribute with no visible return.

We welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence or speak directly with the Committee.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development
June 2025



2 About Wimmera Southern Mallee Development

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSMD) is the peak regional economic development body for western Victoria's Wimmera Southern Mallee region. Our mandate is to support regional prosperity, resilience and sustainability through partnership with community, government, industry and Traditional Owners.

We work across five local government areas and are actively engaged on major issues facing our region; Population attraction and retention, housing, migration and settlement, food and agricultural production and processing, energy transition and mining impacts and opportunities, infrastructure planning and the infrastructure needed for housing, to workforce training and skills development, land use shift and community resilience.

Our role places us at the frontline of community consultation challenges. We are not simply observers of government engagement we are often asked to translate it, mediate it, or repair trust when processes go wrong. We see firsthand how consultation is experienced by residents, councils, businesses and community groups.

This submission reflects the lived reality of our region. It is grounded in the practical experience of navigating overlapping consultations and system reforms. It is not theoretical it is the product of necessity.

We offer this evidence to help improve outcomes not just for our community, but for all regions facing rapid change and policy complexity.

3 Introduction: Community Consultation at Breaking Point

This briefing provides a regional perspective for consideration as part of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. It draws on our lived experience in the Wimmera Southern Mallee, where consultation has become a point of growing public cynicism, not community empowerment.

This submission draws on the lived realities of our community, as well as our organisation's experience engaging with:

- Project proponents in renewable energy and mining
- Local councils managing rapid, overlapping change
- State and federal agencies implementing reform
- Marginalised and often unheard community sectors and individuals
- Community groups navigating under-resourced engagement processes

We are not simply observers of community consultation; we are often asked to translate it, mediate it, or fix it. That gives us a practical and regionally grounded view of what's working, what isn't, and what must change to restore community trust and participation.

3.1 Our central proposition is this:

Community consultation, as experienced in the WSM region, too often reflects a government desire to explain or manage decisions, rather than shape them with community input. The result is



disengagement, fatigue, and a breakdown of trust even as the pace and scale of change accelerates across multiple fronts.

3.1.1 The Context: An Overloaded Region Under Stress

- The WSM region is facing simultaneous and overlapping structural transitions, including:
- Major energy infrastructure proposals (e.g. transmission lines, renewable energy zones)
- New minerals exploration and development (e.g. mineral sands and critical minerals projects)
- A regional housing shortage and land planning preventing investment and trunk and connection infrastructure barriers.
- Increasingly unsafe and underfunded transport corridors
- Health system reform and service withdrawal
- Climate resilience and emergency service restructuring
- Disruptions to agricultural and land management practices

Each of these changes is subject to consultation often led by different agencies, consultants, or proponents with limited coordination or understanding of the cumulative impact. Yet the burden to engage falls on the same small group of volunteers, community organisations, and time-poor residents.

The community is expected to absorb and respond to dozens of consultations while trying to live their daily lives raising families, running businesses, and dealing with drought, flood, or economic strain.

3.1.2 The Disconnect: Fragmentation and Fatigue

The WSM experience highlights a structural flaw in consultation practice: government and statutory authorities approach each project in isolation, but communities experience the consequences collectively. Poorly timed and poorly executed consultation doesn't just frustrate it creates fertile ground for misinformation, distrust, and political opportunism. When people feel blindsided or ignored, it creates a vacuum of credible information. In this space, community outrage is easily inflamed, especially when misinformation or organised opposition to change takes root. Consultation failure can drive social division and harden resistance, even to well-meaning or beneficial reforms.

Some of the key challenges include:

1. Consultation fatigue: Multiple, simultaneous consultation processes leave communities unable to meaningfully respond.
2. Fragmentation: There is no regional view of what's being asked of the community across agencies and issues.
3. Lack of resourcing: Volunteer groups and civil society organisations are not supported to aggregate or respond to consultations.
4. Withdrawal of services: The closure or centralisation of government offices and services to call centres or chatbots means people struggle to find someone who understands their context — often before consultation begins.
5. Broken trust: Communities are increasingly recognising that silence is taken as support, and input rarely influences outcomes. Consultations are seen as procedural hurdles, not genuine dialogue.
6. Poor consultation leads to increasing cynicism, disengagement and opposition to change. Poor process creates space for political undermining and misinformation to take hold



7. Fractured social cohesion: Mismanaged consultation can deepen divisions in regional communities, turning legitimate questions into entrenched opposition.

3.1.3 The Consequences: Loss of Legitimacy and Social Licence

This failure of engagement has real consequences:

- Public hostility and disengagement from future consultations
- Mistrust of agencies and institutions, especially where decisions appear predetermined
- Delays, cost overruns, and conflict in infrastructure delivery and planning
- Loss of regional legitimacy in the energy transition and land use change
- Weakening of regional resilience and coordination capacity

3.2 Recommendations: Towards Coordinated, Respectful, and Empowered Consultation

3.2.1 To reverse this trend and restore confidence, we recommend that the Inquiry consider:

A Regional Consultation Coordination Model

Establish a cross-government coordination mechanism (e.g. via Regional Development Victoria or Regional Partnerships) to sequence and map active consultations across sectors and prevent overload.

3.2.2 Cumulative Impact and Consultation Load Assessments

Require agencies to assess and disclose cumulative social and engagement impacts not just environmental or economic especially in regions facing layered transitions.

3.2.3 Reinvestment in Local Presence and Relationships

Rebuild face-to-face government capacity in towns not just for services, but for listening. Public trust depends on access to people, not portals.

3.2.4 Support for Local Intermediaries

Resource trusted local organisations (e.g. WSM Development, health alliances, education networks) to facilitate engagement in partnership with communities, especially for underrepresented groups.

3.2.5 Mandated Feedback Loops

Require every consultation to publicly demonstrate how community input was considered, and how trade-offs were communicated. Silence should not be interpreted as support.



3.3 Conclusion: Consultation Without Context is Not Consultation

The Wimmera Southern Mallee is not disengaged it is saturated. People want to shape the future of their communities, but cannot do so when the system treats consultation as a compliance step, not a conversation. The current approach is not just failing it is actively harming trust in public institutions.

This submission is offered to support a more coherent, community-anchored approach to engagement in regions undergoing complex change. We would welcome the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee or support others to do so.

4 Thematic Overview: When Consultation Breaks Down

What's Breaking the System

Across the Wimmera Southern Mallee and increasingly across regional Victoria community consultation is breaking down. The problem is not one bad consultation, but a system failing on four fronts:

- **Volume:** Too many consultations at once, across disconnected reforms and regions.
- **Design:** Each process is treated the same, regardless of urgency, scale or purpose.
- **Timing:** Consultations come late, after decisions are largely settled.
- **Trust:** People no longer believe their input will change anything and often, they're right.

Together, these failures have created a culture of fatigue, confusion and scepticism. The community isn't disengaged it's overwhelmed, and no longer confident that participation makes a difference.

4.1 A Region Under Pressure from Systemic Change

In the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM), change is not a distant concept. It is already reshaping how people live, move, work and plan. Across all major systems energy, housing, transport, land use, health and emergency response communities are navigating multiple, simultaneous transitions.

These include:

- Transmission line construction and renewable energy project development
- Emerging critical minerals and mineral sands mining proposals
- Severe housing shortages and unclear planning reform pathways
- Road networks that are degraded, slow and sometimes unsafe
- Centralised health service models and reduced local presence
- Emergency service reform in the context of climate shocks
- Tensions around biodiversity protection and public land access

Each area is treated as a separate consultation. But to local communities, they are experienced as one overwhelming wave of change. Not only are people forced to respond again and again, they are left wondering: What is all of this for? Why here? What is the vision for our place?



4.2 Consultation Without Purpose or Cumulative Vision

Most consultations arrive without a bigger story. The focus is often narrow asking for views on routes, guidelines, reforms or schemes with no clear connection to what the community stands to gain. The result is a growing detachment from the engagement itself.

People are asking:

- Why are we being asked about this again?
- What are we building toward?
- How is this improving life for my family, my town, or the region?
- Do the words match the decisions being made?

Without a clear purpose or visible benefits, each consultation feels hollow. The process becomes easier to dismiss. Even more damaging, communities feel used told that “this time is different,” only to experience the same pattern again: disruption, loss of services, and reduced local control.

It is like watching a long-running franchise where the ending never changes. Many in our region now approach new consultations with the weariness of Charlie Brown facing Lucy and the football. Once again, someone promises to listen, but just as people start to engage, the ball is pulled away.

4.3 Fragmentation and Overload

Every consultation process is designed as a standalone event. Each agency or proponent arrives with their own consultants, their own materials and their own deadlines. There is little coordination and no understanding of what else is happening in the region at the same time.

This places an impossible burden on the community. They are expected to engage in detailed policy questions, often back-to-back, without rest or clarity. Volunteers, landholders and local organisations are caught in a cycle of endless consultation. There is no room to recover, reflect, or strategise. Each process assumes the previous ones did not exist.

In practice, this leads to disengagement. People go quiet. Not because they do not care, but because they no longer see a point. Government interprets this silence as support, and the cycle repeats.

4.4 The Disappearance of Trusted Government Presence

Before a consultation even begins, trust is already shaped by the daily experience of government in people's lives. In WSM, that experience is fading.

Local government planning teams are stretched thin. Many state agencies no longer have staff based in the region. Essential services have been centralised. People are directed to websites, chatbots or call centres that do not understand the nuance of place.

Roads continue to degrade. Local health and emergency service infrastructure struggles to keep up. Residents are left to do more with less. These are not just service issues. They shape the credibility of any attempt to consult.

When public systems no longer show up in meaningful ways, communities stop believing in the sincerity of engagement. Any new consultation feels like a box-ticking exercise, not a genuine invitation to shape outcomes.



4.5 Communities Are Experts in Their Own Experience

One of the most consistent mistakes in consultation is assuming that regional people need more technical education, or that their views are less valuable because they are not policy experts.

In reality, communities are experts in what matters to them. They understand what builds wellbeing, what breaks it down, and what trade-offs they are willing to live with. Their knowledge is practical, intergenerational and deeply place-based.

Good consultation respects this. It does not burden people with jargon or limit them to reacting to fixed options. It asks meaningful questions, offers honest context, and invites people to contribute to a shared picture not just fill in a form.

4.6 Measuring What Matters

Many consultation processes are judged by superficial metrics. How many people attended? How many submissions were received? How many sessions were held?

These numbers say nothing about whether people felt heard, whether outcomes changed, or whether trust was strengthened. The real measures that matter to our region include:

- Did we shape the direction of the project or policy?
- Did we receive a response to what we shared?
- Were the trade-offs clearly explained?
- Were decisions altered based on what was heard?

When these questions are not answered, trust is lost and not easily regained.

4.7 The Result: Defensive, Disillusioned Communities

The final impact is not just individual fatigue. It is the collective hardening of a region's willingness to engage. When people feel they are constantly defending their way of life, consultation becomes something to resist, not participate in.

In WSM, this is not due to apathy or ignorance. It is the direct result of repeated poor engagement, disconnected systems, and the absence of a clear regional vision for why change is happening and how it benefits local people.

Until that pattern is broken, consultation will continue to fail and with it, the chance for genuine partnership between communities and government

5 Response to Terms of Reference (a): Current Consultation Practices by State, Local Government, Statutory Authorities and Essential Service Providers

The Wimmera Southern Mallee region has become a testing ground for consultation not by design, but by accumulation. Across state and local government, statutory authorities, and essential services, consultation processes are now a near-constant feature of life in the region. What was once rare and valued has become routine, fragmented, and increasingly distrusted.



5.1 Consultation Volume Without Coordination

Dozens of government-led consultations have occurred or are underway in the WSM region in the past 12–18 months. These include:

- Energy transmission projects (Western Renewables Link, VNI West)
- Renewable energy zones and community benefits schemes
- Critical minerals and mineral sands exploration (e.g. Avonbank)
- Housing strategies and planning reform consultations
- Victoria's Health Plan and local health service reviews
- Emergency services restructuring and CFA/FRV boundary realignments
- Regional infrastructure strategy reviews and freight network planning
- Land use planning on Crown land and biodiversity offsets

Each of these consultations is led by a different agency or department, using their own consultants, platforms, timelines and terminology. There is no visible coordination, sequencing, or attempt to manage the cumulative engagement burden placed on communities.

Residents are left wondering why the same groups are being asked to respond, repeatedly, with no clarity about the bigger picture or how their input fits into state policy directions.

In the absence of any plain-language explanation from government on how communities can engage with the approval process for major energy infrastructure, WSM Development developed its own guide: *Council Approval Process – Energy Projects (WSM Draft)*. The guide outlines where community input might occur, which agencies are responsible at different stages, and what role councils play.

Despite repeated attempts, we have not received formal confirmation that the guide is entirely correct a clear symptom of a system that lacks coherence, consistency and transparency. That a regional development body needed to create this resource speaks volumes: the consultation system is not designed to inform or equip communities. Instead, it relies on local intermediaries to explain fragmented processes without authority, resourcing or clarity.

5.2 Timing and Tokenism

Many consultations reach communities too late in the policy process. By the time a plan, reform, or infrastructure route is shared with the public, critical decisions appear to have already been made. Community feedback is then confined to minor adjustments rather than genuine choices.

This gives the impression that consultation is procedural, not participatory. It leaves residents feeling they are being “informed” rather than asked. Consultations are often framed as listening exercises, yet rarely include feedback on what was heard or how it influenced the outcome.

The result is deep community scepticism about whether engagement is real. This scepticism is not ideological it is learned through experience.



5.3 Poor Alignment Between Words and Actions

Across multiple consultations, communities are told their voices matter. They are encouraged to believe that “this time it’s different.” Yet outcomes often do not reflect the concerns raised.

For example:

- Energy infrastructure consultations have asked for community views on alignment options and social impact. But when residents propose alternative corridor routes or highlight unacceptable risks, they are told the technical process has already determined the best outcome.
- Health consultations invite input on access and equity. But after feedback is gathered, services are still withdrawn or centralised based on statewide benchmarks, not community need.
- Housing strategy sessions ask what kinds of housing are missing. But the resulting policy changes focus on urban infill or standardised targets, not rural solutions.

In each case, the community sees a mismatch between consultation language and government decision-making. That gap is where trust erodes.

5.4 Local Government Is Stretched, Not Absent

Local government in WSM continues to play a key role in connecting state-led consultations with residents. Councils often provide venues, promote opportunities, and encourage participation.

However, local councils are themselves under significant strain. Planning teams are limited in size and scope. In some cases, councils are asked to facilitate or validate engagement processes they had little input in designing. This puts local government in an impossible position expected to stand beside state-led consultations without having the power to influence the scope or outcomes.

State agencies need to work with, not through, local government if engagement is to succeed.

5.5 Consultation as Risk Management, Not Trust-Building

In practice, many state-led consultations feel designed to manage public relations and minimise objections, rather than build long-term relationships.

This shows up in:

- The use of engagement specialists who are not known to or embedded in the region
- Short consultation windows that conflict with harvest, fire season or school holidays
- Technical documents that are hard to interpret without formal training
- Feedback forms that limit responses to predefined options
- Project websites that do not reflect the tone or emotion of what is being raised in person

This approach may reduce short-term risk but increases long-term resentment. It treats community concerns as problems to be managed, not contributions to be understood.



5.6 Opportunities Missed Through Process-First Thinking

There are also examples of missed opportunities where genuine dialogue could have built lasting relationships, but was lost due to rigid process design.

In the case of the Avonbank mineral sands project, for example, local landholders were encouraged to participate in formal submissions through the Environment Effects Statement (EES). But the EES process is structured in highly technical, adversarial terms. It does not provide space for informal dialogue or co-design. Nor does it enable small landholders or volunteers to respond meaningfully without legal or expert assistance.

The end result is more confrontation, not better outcomes.

5.7 Communities Are Not Opposed to Change They Are Opposed to Being Ignored

What must be emphasised is that regional communities are not anti-development, anti-infrastructure or anti-reform. They are, however, opposed to being treated as passive recipients of change.

The failure of current consultation practices lies not in their intention, but in their design. Consultations that are too late, too technical, too fragmented and too top-down cannot create trust, legitimacy or local ownership.

There is a readiness in WSM to work with government on hard, necessary transitions from energy to land use to housing but only if the approach to engagement is rebalanced. Communities are ready to lead, but not to be sidelined.

6 Response to Terms of Reference (b): Use of Non-Government Providers in Government Consultation

Government departments and agencies increasingly engage private consultants, communications firms, or third-party contractors to carry out consultation on their behalf. In principle, this can support capacity and professionalism. In practice, however, in regions like the Wimmera Southern Mallee, it often results in greater confusion, weaker accountability, and deeper community frustration.

6.1 Communities Don't Engage with Logos They Engage with People

When a consultation process is delivered by a private consultancy, the face of the conversation is no longer the agency making the decision, but a contractor interpreting or translating it. Community members are left asking:

- Who is actually responsible for this process?
- Will the people I spoke to write the final report?
- Are they genuinely listening, or just taking notes?

There is a growing perception that third-party consultation is one step removed from power, and therefore one step removed from impact. Residents are less likely to trust the process when they cannot clearly link the engagement experience to the agency making the final decision.

In several recent energy-related consultations in the WSM region, landholders raised concerns that engagement teams did not understand the regional context, used technical language without



explanation, or could not answer questions about future consequences of the project. Their presence felt temporary, and the process felt transactional.

6.2 Consultant-Led Engagement Often Mirrors a Comms Strategy, Not a Listening Process

When third-party firms are contracted to undertake consultation, especially as part of a broader project communication strategy, the line between “informing” and “listening” becomes blurred. Often, consultants arrive with predetermined messaging objectives:

- “This is why the project is necessary”
- “We understand your concerns, but...”
- “We are here to raise awareness”

These are not consultation goals they are persuasion goals. Communities quickly sense the difference.

In the case of both Victorian North Interconnector (VNI West) and Western Renewables Link (WRL), for example, landholders reported that consultation sessions were focused on explaining the benefits of the project and managing objections, not creating space to shape outcomes. This dynamic deepens scepticism, especially when earlier stages of engagement used softer language such as “partnership” or “co-design.”

6.3 No Clear Line of Accountability

When a consultation is delivered by a non-government provider, it becomes harder to hold decision-makers accountable for what occurred during the process. If the process fails through poor facilitation, inaccessible materials, or a lack of transparency communities are left in a vacuum.

They are told:

- “The consultant was responsible for the engagement,” and
- “The department is responsible for the decision.”

But no one is clearly responsible for the bridge between community voice and policy outcome. This leads to resentment and the sense that feedback is being filtered or diluted by layers of bureaucracy and subcontracting.

6.4 Transience Undermines Trust

Many consultants are not based in the regions they are engaging with. Their presence is limited to workshops, forums or brief fieldwork. They are unfamiliar with local power dynamics, existing tensions, or the legacy of previous government decisions.

In WSM, this is particularly problematic. Our region has experienced cycles of extractive engagement before where outsiders arrive, gather information, and leave, with no visible change and no follow-up.

When consultants appear for a short period, without local partners or continuity, residents understandably ask: “Why should we invest our time again?”

Trust is not built in single sessions. It is built over time, through relationships. Current practice does not enable this.



6.5 Reinforcing a “Consultation Industry” Mindset

The overuse of consultants risks creating a self-perpetuating “consultation industry” where community input is collected, documented and filed, but not internalised by those making decisions.

Consultants deliver reports. Agencies move to implementation. But the community never hears how their views were received or what was done differently. This approach reduces consultation to a product not a democratic function.

The deeper cost is the erosion of faith in engagement as a public good.

6.6 Principles for Better Practice

If non-government providers are to remain part of the consultation ecosystem, there must be clear principles in place:

1. Transparency; Communities should know who is conducting the consultation, who is responsible for decisions, and how the two are connected.
2. Continuity; Local partners, including community organisations or regional stakeholders, should be involved from the start and through the process.
3. Responsiveness; Consultants must have mechanisms to feed insights back in real time and adjust the process based on what they hear.
4. Respect for Local Context; Generic engagement templates should be avoided. Every region has a history, and every conversation should reflect that.
5. Shared Ownership of Findings; Final reports and outcomes should be co-signed by the commissioning agency and the contractor, with shared accountability.

6.7 A Shift Toward Locally-Led Engagement

Rather than outsourcing to firms unfamiliar with regional realities, state agencies could better achieve engagement goals by:

- Partnering with trusted local intermediaries such as regional partnerships, catchment management authorities, or locally-based NGOs
- Investing in the capacity of regional leaders to facilitate conversations, rather than importing external teams
- Embedding consultation within broader regional strategies, rather than attaching it to isolated projects

This would build relationships, reduce duplication, and support capability within the region not just extract information from it.



7 Response to Terms of Reference (c): Standards of Conduct in Community Consultation

Effective consultation is not just about process. It is about trust, relationships, and respect. In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, there is a growing gap between the standards that communities expect from consultation and the conduct that is actually delivered. That gap is widening the divide between governments and the people they serve.

7.1 What Good Conduct Looks Like

At its core, good consultation is defined by a few simple but powerful standards:

- Early involvement. Consultation starts before decisions are made, not after.
- Clear purpose. People know what they are being asked and why it matters.
- Two-way respect. Communities are treated as contributors, not obstacles.
- Transparency about limits. It is clear what is open to influence and what is not.
- Follow-through. Participants hear back about what changed as a result of their input.

These standards are not abstract. They are what people reasonably expect when invited to take part in shaping the future of their region. When these standards are not met, the consultation does not just fail in that moment. It damages the credibility of future engagement as well.

7.2 What Communities Are Experiencing Instead

Across the WSM region, communities are seeing a different reality:

- Consultations that arrive after decisions have effectively been made
- Language that promises co-design but delivers pre-set outcomes
- Feedback channels that feel tokenistic or tightly controlled
- No clear link between what people say and what happens next
- A reliance on short-term engagement methods without ongoing relationships

This is especially noticeable in major infrastructure and land use proposals, where the stakes are high but the influence of local voice is low. Many community members describe a sense of being spoken at, not with. Others report feeling manipulated by engagement that seems designed to minimise dissent, rather than surface real concerns.

7.3 The Risk of Misleading Language

The language of consultation matters. Terms like "partnership," "listening," and "co-design" are now commonly used in government engagement materials. But too often, the actions do not match the words.

For example, asking residents to help "shape the future" of a project, only to find that key decisions are already locked in, undermines the intent of consultation. It leads people to conclude that engagement is simply a communications tactic, not a genuine invitation to collaborate.



This is not just a failure of tone. It is a breach of public trust. When consultation language overpromises and underdelivers, it fuels cynicism and reduces willingness to engage.

7.4 The Importance of Local Credibility

In regional communities, trust is built through relationships. It relies on continuity, local knowledge, and face-to-face conversations. When consultation is delivered by rotating teams, unfamiliar consultants or anonymous email inboxes, it lacks credibility.

Good conduct in consultation means showing up consistently. It means listening without defensiveness. It means acknowledging that communities may raise issues outside the official scope, and treating those issues with care and seriousness.

In recent consultations across WSM, people have shared that they often feel rushed, spoken over, or not believed. Others have noted that government staff or consultants were unable to answer even basic questions about how community input would be used.

These are not small issues. They signal a culture of engagement that treats consultation as a task to complete, rather than a responsibility to uphold.

7.5 Misuse of Process as Control

Another issue raised by community members is the way consultation processes are sometimes used to control, rather than support, participation. This includes:

- Highly technical framing that excludes non-experts
- Surveys with closed options and no room for narrative input
- Short timeframes during peak farm or fire seasons
- Forums held without providing adequate background materials
- Dismissing community concerns as emotional or misinformed

These approaches protect institutions from criticism but at the cost of building durable solutions. When people feel boxed in by process, they disengage. Worse, they begin to suspect that the process was designed that way on purpose.

7.6 What Communities Expect Instead

Communities in WSM are not asking for perfect engagement. They are asking for meaningful conduct. That means:

- Be honest about what is really open for discussion
- Make the process accessible to people who do not have time, training or digital tools
- Stick with communities after the forum or survey closes
- Let people know how their voice mattered, even if the answer is no
- Respect that communities see the full picture of change, not just one project

They also expect that government and service providers will lead by example. If the conduct of consultation does not reflect respect, responsiveness and transparency, the broader relationship with government suffers.



7.7 Rebuilding Conduct Around Accountability and Care

To improve standards of consultation conduct, the Inquiry should consider recommending:

1. A Code of Consultation Practice for all public engagement in Victoria, aligned to community values not just administrative guidelines
2. A mandatory response loop in every major engagement where communities are told what was heard, what changed, and why
3. Shared accountability frameworks when third parties deliver consultation on behalf of government
4. Stronger requirements for regional cultural competence in consultation teams
5. Ongoing relationships, not just one-off sessions especially in regions facing sustained change

8 Response to Terms of Reference (d): Underrepresented Groups and Regional Disparities in Consultation

In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, underrepresentation in consultation does not mean disinterest. It means people are systematically excluded by design, capacity or context. Entire groups and communities are missing from critical public conversations not because they are silent, but because consultation processes are not built with them in mind.

This is particularly visible in regions like WSM where long-standing service withdrawal, digital disadvantage and volunteer dependency make engagement fragile. The loudest voices are not always the most affected, and the people best placed to contribute are often those least able to do so.

8.1 Underrepresented Groups in the WSM Region

8.1.1 First Nations Peoples and Organisations

Local Traditional Owners, such as the Barengi Gadjin Land Council (BGLC), are frequently referenced in project documents but not always engaged in a way that reflects their leadership role in land management, cultural governance or regional planning. Consultation often arrives too late or is limited to statutory processes, rather than building genuine partnerships from the outset.

8.1.2 Young People

Youth perspectives are notably absent from most regional consultations, particularly in areas such as transport, housing, digital infrastructure and health. Young people face both structural and cultural barriers to participation, including limited access to information, exclusion from formal forums, and consultation formats that do not reflect their communication preferences.

8.1.3 Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities

New migrant communities, especially those participating in seasonal or regional workforce programs, are rarely included in engagement around infrastructure, health or housing. Language, unfamiliarity with government processes and a lack of targeted outreach are major barriers. Yet their economic contribution and social needs are significant and growing.



8.1.4 Renters and Low-Income Households

In rural communities, renters and low-income residents often feel disconnected from civic decision-making. Consultations are more likely to reflect the views of ratepayers or landholders. Yet renters are deeply affected by housing shortages, planning decisions and service access especially when temporary or seasonal accommodation intersects with workforce and infrastructure demands.

8.1.5 Time-Poor Volunteers and Informal Leaders

Many of the most trusted voices in the community are not professionals. They are CFA captains, Landcare convenors, sports club volunteers, or community centre coordinators. These individuals are routinely expected to stand in for wider community consultation but are rarely resourced, briefed or supported. Their insight is rich, but their time is unpaid and limited.

8.1.6 Digitally Disadvantaged Residents

Despite improvements, many in the WSM still experience poor digital connectivity and limited digital literacy. Consultations hosted on Engage Victoria or other online platforms exclude those without stable internet, confidence using web-based tools or the ability to attend virtual sessions. Paper-based or in-person options are increasingly rare, leaving a growing group behind.

8.2 Structural and Systemic Barriers to Participation

Beyond individual group characteristics, several system-wide issues contribute to underrepresentation:

- Consultation timing clashes with peak regional workloads, such as harvest, fire preparedness or school holidays.
- Short engagement windows disproportionately affect people who need time to seek clarification, talk with others, or work across language and access barriers.
- Location of events often privileges centralised towns, making it harder for those in more remote or smaller communities to attend in person.
- Engagement formats are typically designed for policy literate audiences, not community members with lived experience or limited formal education.

These barriers are not the result of malice. They are the outcome of a system that assumes participation is easy — and that does not ask who is missing until it is too late.

8.3 What Inclusion Would Look Like

True inclusion in consultation means building processes that:

- Begin with an understanding of the region's demographic, cultural and social landscape
- Ask who is missing and why not just who attended
- Recognise the value of local insight, even when it comes in the form of stories, resistance or unstructured feedback
- Resource trusted intermediaries to reach and support underrepresented groups
- Report publicly and transparently on who was engaged and how their views were considered



It also means that government must take shared responsibility for inclusion. It cannot be left to community groups or volunteers to do the legwork of connecting underrepresented voices to processes that affect them.

8.4 Recommended Approaches to Improve Inclusion

To improve representation in regional consultation, we recommend that the Committee explore:

1. Funding local organisations to act as engagement brokers, particularly with First Nations, youth, and CALD communities
2. Mandatory inclusion impact assessments for all major consultation processes identifying gaps before engagement begins, not after
3. Expanded use of mobile and on-country consultation models, including pop-ups, translated drop-in sessions, and locally hosted meetings
4. Building consultation schedules around regional work rhythms including farming seasons, volunteer fire duty periods and key cultural events
5. Investing in regional consultation literacy providing training and capacity support to community groups so they can participate more confidently and influence more effectively

8.5 Inclusion Is a Measure of System Integrity

A consultation process is only as credible as the voices it hears. When key groups are left out, the process cannot claim to reflect community sentiment, regardless of how professionally it was delivered. Inclusion is not an optional feature it is a core standard of democratic legitimacy.

In the WSM, the people who are currently missing from consultation are often the ones who are bearing the brunt of change. Their absence is not just a technical oversight. It is a sign that the system needs to change

9 Response to Terms of Reference (e): Use and Effectiveness of the Engage Victoria Platform

Engage Victoria is the Victorian Government's central online platform for public consultation. While it offers a uniform interface and consolidates multiple engagement efforts, it does not work well for regional communities like the Wimmera Southern Mallee. In practice, it is bureaucratic, overwhelming, and confusing built with departmental logic, not regional realities.

9.1 Regional Filtering That Fails the Region

One of the platform's promoted features is the ability to filter consultations by region. In theory, this should allow residents to easily see what is happening in their area. In practice, it does not work.

When WSM community members try to filter for local consultations:

- Many relevant projects do not appear.



- Statewide consultations are excluded, even when they directly affect the region.
- Regional boundaries are unclear or inconsistently applied.

This results in false negatives. People assume there is nothing relevant to them when, in fact, major consultations are underway just misclassified or listed elsewhere. The filtering system reflects how departments divide the state, not how communities live in and understand their place.

This makes it harder for residents to engage and easier for government to miss the mark.

9.2 Designed for Bureaucrats, Not Citizens

The overall interface of Engage Victoria reflects a bureaucratic mindset. It assumes:

- People are comfortable navigating departmental categories.
- Residents understand acronyms, initiatives and strategic plans.
- Consultation is something people seek out in their spare time.

The landing page is dense and cluttered. It reads like an internal communications tool rather than a public-facing gateway. For most people in WSM, it is not intuitive, not friendly, and not a place they would visit unless prompted by an external link.

Even then, the experience is often discouraging.

9.3 Format and Language Exclude Regional Audiences

Most consultations on the platform use templated engagement tools — surveys, Q&As, document libraries, and timelines with language and content that presume a high level of policy literacy. The materials:

- Are written in abstract or legal terms.
- Lack plain-English explanations.
- Provide no contextual framing for why the issue matters locally.

For example, planning reform consultations may reference state legislation or policy goals, without describing what will change on the ground. A landholder or volunteer group looking for relevance will find it hard to connect the dots. The result is disengagement.

9.4 The Digital Divide Is Real

Engage Victoria also assumes reliable access to:

- High-speed internet.
- Smartphones or laptops.
- Confidence using online forms and interactive tools.

These assumptions do not hold true in parts of WSM. Digital blackspots, limited data plans, and varied levels of digital confidence remain real challenges. When in-person or paper-based alternatives are not offered, the platform excludes a meaningful part of the population.

This exclusion is structural, not incidental. It should not be acceptable.



9.5 No Real Feedback Loop

A persistent concern across our region is that the platform offers no obvious mechanism to track outcomes. Once a submission is made, there is often:

- No acknowledgement.
- No public reporting on what was said.
- No visibility of how decisions were influenced.

This lack of feedback or consequence reduces trust. People feel like they are sending their views into a vacuum. It also creates consultation fatigue, as residents are repeatedly asked for input but never shown what it led to.

9.6 Missed Opportunity to Coordinate and Simplify

Despite centralising many consultations, Engage Victoria does not function as a tool to:

- Coordinate timing across government.
- Reduce duplication.
- Sequence consultation to avoid overload.
- Tell a broader regional story about what is changing and why.

Instead, it fragments the picture further. Residents are left to piece together multiple initiatives with no shared narrative. The platform could simplify engagement. At present, it adds another layer of complexity.

9.7 Not All Consultations Are Equal But They Are Presented As If They Are

One of the fundamental design flaws in the Engage Victoria platform is that it presents all consultations as if they are the same same structure, same framing, same urgency. A resident visiting the site might see the following side by side:

- An Environment Effects Statement (EES) for a major energy project;
- A call for feedback on V/Line bus schedules;
- An invitation to comment on a fuel price reform paper;
- A survey about gendered violence prevention in Ballarat;
- Draft planning scheme amendments from local councils.

Each of these processes serves a completely different purpose, is at a different stage of policy development, and carries vastly different implications. But they are all presented the same way with minimal explanation of:

- What decisions are still open;
- What the public can influence;



- Whether this is legislative compliance, policy consultation or political temperature testing.

For a community member, it is impossible to tell what's performative and what's participatory. This leads to confusion, mistrust, and ultimately, disengagement not because people don't care, but because they can't tell which consultations matter, to whom, or why.

9.8 The Emotional Load of Engagement Is Real

Even for people who want to participate, consultation through Engage Victoria often feels overwhelming. Every consultation releases dozens of documents, technical reports, and summary sheets with no clear guidance on what to prioritise or how to meaningfully engage.

Residents are left wondering:

- Do I need to read everything to have a valid view?
- Should I do the survey or make a written submission or both?
- What happens if I make my views public? Could that affect me or my community?
- Are private submissions taken seriously? Will they be counted or buried?

This uncertainty is paralysing. People want to contribute. They want to be heard. But the structure of the process makes them unsure how to proceed and anxious about getting it wrong.

It is hard work to engage with the government as a citizen. Not because people are apathetic, but because the system asks too much, explains too little, and provides no reassurance that it will respond.

That burden falls heaviest on the people least equipped to carry it: volunteers, carers, small business owners, parents, and older residents. These are the very voices government needs to hear. Yet current design risks pushing them out altogether.

9.9 Recommendations to Improve Engage Victoria

To serve regions like WSM, Engage Victoria must be reimagined. We recommend:

1. Fixing the regional filtering system so that consultations affecting a region are visible and correctly tagged.
2. Simplifying the landing page, with region-first navigation options and fewer technical pathways.
3. Presenting plain-language summaries for every consultation, written for everyday citizens — not for departments or experts.
4. Offering offline alternatives, including printable forms, phone-based submissions, and in-person sessions hosted through local councils or community hubs.
5. Building in a feedback function, showing participants how their input was used and what decisions resulted.
6. Treating Engage Victoria as a support tool, not the centrepiece of engagement especially in regions where relationships matter more than clicks.

9.10 A Platform Is Not a Strategy

Ultimately, Engage Victoria is a tool. It cannot replace the human relationships, local knowledge and long-term trust that define effective consultation. In regions facing overlapping reforms and limited



service access, a platform alone is not enough. It must be part of a broader commitment to accessible, respectful and responsive engagement not a box to tick or a link to share.

10 Response to Terms of Reference (f): Best Practice Community Consultation in Other Jurisdictions

In regions like the Wimmera Southern Mallee, there is no shortage of consultation. What is missing is consultation done well processes built on relationships, shared purpose and honest dialogue. Best practice cannot be reduced to tools or templates. It requires a shift in mindset from extracting feedback to sharing responsibility.

Across Australia and internationally, there are examples of effective, credible and community-centred consultation models. These approaches share common traits: early engagement, co-design, respect for lived experience, and a willingness to act on what is heard.

10.1 Key Principles from Better Practice

From the perspective of regional communities, best practice means:

- Starting before decisions are made. Engagement begins during problem definition, not after options are finalised.
- Making trade-offs transparent. Government explains what is negotiable, what isn't, and why.
- Using trusted intermediaries. Consultation is delivered in partnership with organisations that are embedded in the community.
- Prioritising lived experience over technical control. Communities are treated as partners in decision-making, not as a risk to be managed.
- Following up and following through. People are told what happened as a result of their input — and what didn't.

These principles are not new. They are well known and already used in some parts of government. The challenge is to make them standard, not exceptional.

10.2 Participatory and Deliberative Models

Jurisdictions across Australia and overseas are adopting deliberative processes to improve trust and legitimacy in complex decisions. Examples include:

- Citizens' juries and panels in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales, where randomly selected community members are given time, information and facilitation to work through difficult trade-offs.
- Scotland's onshore wind policy framework, which included regional roundtables and local authority partnerships to shape how large infrastructure interacts with local values.
- Victoria's own metropolitan citizens' panels on planning and environment issues, which offered structured mechanisms for sharing responsibility and learning together.



These processes are time-consuming, but they build credibility. In regions like WSM, where trust has been eroded, a slower, more deliberate model may actually be more efficient because it prevents resistance, confusion and backlash later.

10.3 Co-Design and Shared Ownership Models

Some agencies have adopted co-design frameworks that go beyond consultation and allow community members to shape policies and programs from the ground up.

For example:

- The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Victoria) has trialled co-design methods in child and family services, working alongside families, not around them.
- Infrastructure Victoria has involved regional leaders and stakeholders early in strategic planning, rather than only in feedback phases.
- Internationally, New Zealand's Treaty-based engagement frameworks explicitly recognise Māori governance roles and set clearer expectations for genuine, not symbolic, input.

In WSM, where community organisations are already taking initiative on housing, food security, and infrastructure advocacy, co-design is not a foreign concept. What's missing is a system that backs it with process, recognition and funding.

10.4 Learning from the Regional Partnerships Experience

Victoria's Regional Partnership model, including the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, was intended to give communities a structured, repeatable way to influence government priorities. In its early years, the model showed promise. It brought together cross-sector voices from within the region, worked with government officers across departments, and produced region-specific priorities.

However, as the WSM experience now shows, even structured engagement can fail if it lacks follow-through, consistency and feedback.

Over time, community confidence in the Partnership process has weakened. This is not because the Partnership lacks quality local input. It is because:

- Government engagement with the Partnership fluctuates sometimes strong, other times distant or selective.
- Key areas identified by the Partnership, such as affordable housing, early years programs like By Five, and enabling infrastructure for population growth, are not picked up in state budgets.
- Other regions appear to attract consistent investment, while WSM's case despite being well-argued is not matched with outcomes.

From the community's point of view, the result is confusion. People ask:

- What difference has this made?
- Why do we keep turning up if it doesn't change outcomes?
- If our region keeps missing out, who is listening?



This is a critical moment for the Regional Partnership model. The WSM Partnership has matured into a space where coordinated, thoughtful advocacy happens. But that maturity is not being met with matched seriousness from the state.

10.5 If Engagement Is Real, So Must Be the Return

Best practice consultation requires reciprocity. Communities are willing to contribute time, knowledge and local insight. But they must see the return.

This return cannot be symbolic. It must be material:

- Investment in infrastructure that enables housing and job creation.
- Continuation of programs that have demonstrated impact, like By Five.
- Inclusion in statewide reforms on equal footing with urban centres.
- Recognition of the growing inequality between rural towns and metropolitan areas not just in income, but in services, opportunity and influence.

Engagement cannot just be something taken from the community. It must leave people with the sense that their community is better off because of it from their point of view, not just a departmental scorecard.

10.6 What WSM Is Already Doing Well

Despite challenges, the WSM region is already demonstrating elements of good practice:

- The Housing Investment Forum (June 2025) is being shaped as a cross-sector, place-based forum where developers, councils and agencies engage on shared terms, not just project-by-project.
- Regional advocacy efforts on food security, freight corridors, health access and land use planning show how local voices can align strategically when government engages early and respectfully.
- Partnerships with Traditional Owners, like BGLC's energy plan, represent untapped opportunities for co-governance and strategic influence if the process is respected and resourced.

10.7 Recommendations for Adopting Best Practice

To embed better consultation across Victoria, the Inquiry should consider:

1. Establishing regional consultation advisory panels that review major engagement processes for cultural fit, accessibility and timing.
2. Requiring deliberative or co-design methods for long-term reforms or infrastructure projects with high regional impact.
3. Creating regional engagement compacts, where community organisations, government and service providers agree on shared protocols and responsibilities.
4. Investing in regional liaison roles, not just fly-in-fly-out consultants.
5. Funding local intermediaries and trusted networks to engage underrepresented groups.



6. Rewarding consultation processes that demonstrate impact, not just activity and holding agencies accountable when trust is broken.

10.8 Best Practice is Not a Checklist — It Is a Culture

The lesson from other jurisdictions is clear. Best practice is not just about better websites or more community meetings. It is about changing the relationship between government and community. It requires humility, clarity, consistency, and the willingness to be changed by what people say.

In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, we are not asking for perfection. We are asking for partnership and for systems that support consultation as a genuine tool of democratic leadership, not just risk management.

11 Recommendations

The Wimmera Southern Mallee community is not disengaged. It is exhausted. Engagement has become frequent but shallow, accessible in form but exclusive in function. To restore public confidence and make consultation meaningful again, the system needs structural reform, a cultural reset, and visible accountability.

Based on our regional experience, we recommend the Inquiry consider the following actions:

11.1 Reframe Consultation as a Long-Term Relationship

- Redesign government consultation practice to reflect ongoing relationships rather than one-off sessions or issue-specific campaigns.
- Establish clear minimum standards for transparency, timing, local knowledge and follow-up across all consultations.
- Require each department or agency to explain how a proposed consultation connects to others in the region and why the timing is appropriate.

11.2 Coordinate Consultations at the Regional Level

- Task Regional Development Victoria or another neutral convenor with maintaining a live map of active and planned consultations in each region.
- Sequence major consultations to avoid overlaps and fatigue, especially during peak farming or fire seasons.
- Introduce a Cumulative Consultation Load Assessment tool for all regions experiencing concurrent change (e.g. energy, mining, planning, housing).

11.3 Centre Regional Partnerships and Local Leadership

- Strengthen the role of Regional Partnerships by committing to consistent engagement, clearer decision pathways and annual public reporting on outcomes.



- Support Regional Partnerships to host regional engagement forums where departments are required to collaborate on shared issues.
- Ensure community-identified priorities are explicitly tracked in state budget and policy processes.
- Support Regional based Commitments Register to track commitments made by Government and Companies in the region as developed by WSM Development

11.4 Invest in Trusted Local Intermediaries

- Fund local organisations such as WSM Development, health networks, Traditional Owner bodies, neighbourhood houses and catchment authorities to act as community connectors and engagement translators.
- .Recognise the role of volunteers and informal leaders in carrying the weight of regional consultation, and resource them accordingly.

11.5 Make Engage Victoria Work for All Victorians

- Fix the regional filtering system to ensure residents can find relevant consultations easily.
- Simplify the platform design and require plain-language summaries for every consultation.
- Provide offline options for submissions, including printable forms and facilitated drop-ins.
- Build in a visible feedback loop so participants see how their input shaped decisions.
- Introduce consultation type labelling on Engage Victoria (e.g. statutory, policy development, community sentiment, public review) to clarify:

What is being asked?

How input will be used?

What decisions are open, and what has already been decided?

In practice:

Community organisations are already stepping in to meet the need for simple, accessible explanations of complex consultation processes. WSM Development, for example, created a draft guide explaining the approval process for energy projects and where community input might occur. The need for this kind of tool and the lack of official confirmation about its accuracy highlights a significant systems failure. If community-led organisations are being asked to fill these information gaps, they must be formally recognised, resourced and supported to do so. Better yet, government should take responsibility for producing and maintaining these tools in collaboration with local partners

11.6 Mandate Real Follow-Through and Public Reporting

- Require all government consultations to publish a clear report that outlines:
 - What was heard
 - What changed
 - What stayed the same and why



- Introduce a consultation register across departments, tracking not just activity but results and whether communities report that they were heard.

11.7 Elevate Standards for Third-Party Engagement

- Require agencies to publicly disclose when consultation is outsourced, and who is delivering it.
- Set minimum training requirements for third-party consultants engaging with rural communities, including place based cultural safety, regional context and trauma-informed practice.
- Make government, not contractors, responsible for closing the loop with communities.

11.8 Adopt Best Practice Deliberative and Co-Design Approaches

- Expand the use of deliberative processes for complex or contested issues including energy infrastructure, major land use changes and health reform.
- Fund regional co-design pilots to test long-term engagement methods that include those currently underrepresented in traditional consultation.
- Reward government teams who embed co-design or participatory budgeting approaches in regional delivery.
- Trial citizens' juries and deliberative panels in regions facing complex or contested reforms, to rebuild shared understanding and reduce misinformation.
- Adopt Best Practice Deliberative and Co-Design Approaches

Expand the use of deliberative engagement methods such as citizens' juries, people's panels, and structured dialogue forums for complex or contested issues including energy infrastructure, land use change and health reform. These methods allow for deeper exploration, diverse representation, and shared learning.

Government should fund regional co-design pilots to develop long-term, trust-based consultation approaches that include voices often absent from standard processes — including renters, young people, carers, new migrants and First Nations community members.

Victoria can learn from deliberative models used in South Australia, New South Wales and internationally, where panels of randomly selected residents work through trade-offs, examine evidence and make practical recommendations.

These models help shift consultation from short-term transactions to long-term relationships. They support deep democracy: where community insight and collective reasoning shape outcomes. Government teams that implement these methods should be formally supported and recognised for innovation in public participation.

11.9 Make Inclusion an Obligation, Not a Goal

- Require all major consultations to include an inclusion plan that:
 - Identifies underrepresented groups



- Describes how they will be reached
 - Reports publicly on who participated
- Introduce accessibility standards that account for digital divide, disability, language, time pressure and education level.
- Where appropriate, compensate participants for their time and expertise, especially when engagement relies on people with lived experience or members of marginalised groups.

11.10 Anchor Engagement to Regional Outcomes

- Shift the evaluation of consultation from process metrics (how many, how fast) to impact metrics:
 - Did the community feel heard?
 - Did trust increase?
 - Was the region better off as a result?
- Ensure that engagement delivers something tangible not just for the agency, but for the community.

11.11 Categorise Consultations by Purpose and Stage

Not all consultations serve the same purpose — some are statutory, some formative, some symbolic. But the system currently presents them as interchangeable.

On a single day, Engage Victoria might feature:

- An Environment Effects Statement (EES)
- A draft planning scheme change
- A gendered violence strategy survey
- A V/Line timetable update
- A feedback form on transport emissions

These all have different purposes, timelines and implications but they're all framed the same way. No wonder people feel overwhelmed. The system is asking them to navigate legislative processes, political optics and genuine input opportunities with no map.

This confuses users and diminishes trust. Consultation platforms must help the public understand:

- What is being asked?
- What stage the process is at?
- How public input will shape outcomes?

12 Conclusion

Consultation in Victoria is at a crossroads. In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, people are not disengaged. They are exhausted. They are still showing up to forums, surveys, planning sessions and community meetings — but increasingly they do so with low expectations, because they have learned that too often the outcome is already decided, the process is fragmented, and the return on effort is invisible.

This is not the product of any one policy or department. It is the result of systems that treat consultation as an administrative step, rather than a relationship to be nurtured. Communities are being asked to engage, repeatedly, without being shown what for. They are facing overlapping reforms and structural change, without coordinated information, meaningful choices or long-term partnerships.



They are told that this time will be different but the results feel the same. Projects continue, services withdraw, programs end, and the community is left wondering whether consultation was ever intended to shape the outcome at all.

We do not accept that this is the best Victoria can do.

Our region is not anti-change. We are not calling for fewer consultations. We are calling for better ones. We want a system that respects community insight, builds continuity over time, and results in outcomes people can see and feel.

That means:

- Giving Regional Partnerships and local organisations a real voice in shaping decisions, not just surfacing priorities.
- Sequencing consultations so they can be digested, not endured.
- Resourcing trusted local intermediaries to connect people, not just extract comment.
- Creating a feedback culture where people are told what changed because of what they said.

Most of all, it means recognising that consultation must leave communities better off from their point of view, not just the department's. The work of engagement must deliver visible returns in equity, infrastructure, opportunity and trust.

The Wimmera Southern Mallee is ready to lead in this space. We invite government to meet us there not just to consult, but to collaborate, co-design and co-invest in a new way forward.

13 Appendix A Community-Created Guide: Council Approval Process for Energy Projects

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development developed this guide to help local communities understand how and when they can engage with council-related stages of energy infrastructure projects. It is not an official government document and should not have to exist but it reflects the lived necessity of translating complex approval processes into something accessible for local residents.

13.1 Understanding Energy Projects in the Wimmera Southern Mallee: A Guide for Ratepayers

13.1.1 Purpose of this Guide

This guide has been developed to help ratepayers across the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) region understand how decisions are made about renewable energy and transmission infrastructure projects. It outlines who makes decisions, what role councils play, what information is available to the public, and how communities can have their say.

13.2 Project Lifecycle Overview

Renewable energy and transmission projects typically follow these steps:

1. Scoping and Early Site Investigation (*Developer term: Site Feasibility*)
2. Community and Stakeholder Engagement (*Developer: Pre-feasibility / Early Works*)
3. Planning Permit Application or EES Referral (*Developer: Feasibility & Approvals*)



4. Assessment and Decision (*Government-led process*)
5. Construction and Implementation (*Developer: Execution Phase*)
6. Operation, Compliance and Monitoring (*Developer: Operations*)

13.3 Who Makes Decisions and Who Provides Advice

Stage	Decision Maker	Advisory/Support Roles	Council Involvement	Community Input
Site selection	Developer	n/a	May receive early briefing	Generally not involved
Engagement	Developer-led	VicGrid, DEECA	May help facilitate	Encouraged to participate
Permit application	Minister for Planning (major projects) or Council (minor)	DEECA, referral authorities (e.g. EPA, VicRoads)	Referral authority: advises on roads, overlays, local policies	Can make written submissions
EES process	Minister for Planning (decision)	Planning Panels Vic, TRG	Can lodge a submission or appear at Panel	Formal submission opportunity
Permit decision	Minister or delegated authority	DEECA, Panel	May be heard by Panel	Community can attend hearing
Construction	Developer (compliance via permit conditions)	n/a	Monitors local road compliance and traffic plans	Can raise concerns locally or with DELWP
Operation	Developer	DEECA, EPA	Receives local complaints	Ongoing feedback via Council or regulators

13.4 What Role Councils Can Play

- Provide advice as a referral authority on local planning overlays and policy
- Assess local road use, traffic, and safety impacts
- May request or help coordinate Traffic Management Plans
- Participate in engagement activities (if invited)
- Lodge submissions on behalf of the community
- Act as a point of contact for local queries and concerns

Council does not:

- Approve large-scale transmission lines or utility-scale wind and solar farms
- Set noise, fire, biodiversity, or visual impact standards
- Enforce state-level planning permit conditions (this is DELWP or EPA's role)



13.5 Information Flow: What You Can Expect to See

Stage	Publicly Available Information
Site Selection	Usually limited; early concept maps sometimes shared
Engagement	Newsletters, info sessions, online Q&A portals
Permit Application	Planning reports, expert studies, site plans (via Council or DTP)
EES Process	Full EES documents, expert reports, Panel hearing dates
Decision	Notice of permit issue or Ministerial decision
Construction	Community updates (if required); compliance documents
Operation	Monitoring summaries, audit reports, complaint handling processes

13.6 How to Be Informed and Involved

- Sign up for updates at [VicGrid](#)
- Track projects via [Planning Vic's EES portal](#)
- Ask Council or DTP for permit application copies
- Attend community info sessions when announced
- Lodge submissions during public exhibition periods

13.7 Project Example (WSM Region)

A wind farm proposed in northern WSM:

- Would likely be assessed by the Minister for Planning
- Council would provide formal advice on local roads and land use
- VicRoads would assess state road access and upgrades
- Public consultation would occur during exhibition
- Residents and Council could speak at a Panel hearing if appointed

13.8 Final Note

The WSM region is playing a major role in Victoria's energy transition. This guide is designed to make the process more understandable and ensure communities know where they can engage. Councils are often not the final decision-makers on many of these projects, but they play a key role in identifying local risks, advising on infrastructure impacts, and voicing community views.

For questions or help accessing documents, contact your local Council or Wimmera Southern Mallee Development.



Project Layering: Developer Process and Community Touchpoints

Project Phase	Land Access	Cultural Heritage	Permits & Planning	Community Engagement
Scoping	Site ID only	Desktop scan	None yet	Optional briefing
Pre-feasibility	Exploration agreement	CHMP initiation	Pre-referral advice	Initial contact
Feasibility	Lease negotiation	Fieldwork & mapping	Permit prep & EES trigger	Community sessions
FID & Procurement	Final land contracts	Final approvals	Permit issued	Results shared
Construction	Construction access	Risk mitigation	Compliance begins	Traffic plan, updates
Operation	Ongoing rights	Monitoring as needed	Annual reporting	Feedback loop
Decommissioning	Exit process	Rehabilitation check	New approvals (if needed)	Legacy planning

