

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices

Melbourne – Friday 22 August 2025

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

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Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Lance Brooks, Managing Director, and

Adriana Pielak, Senior Engagement Facilitator, Brooks Community Engagement; and

Chris Sounness, Chief Executive Officer, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. Welcome to representatives from Brooks Community Engagement and Wimmera Southern Mallee Development.

I will just read out the opening statement. All the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

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

Welcome. If I can, for the public record, ask our witnesses to state their name and the organisation they are appearing on behalf of. I might start with you, Chris.

Chris SOUNNESS: Hi, I am Chris Sounness, I am CEO of Wimmera Southern Mallee Development. We are based in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region, and I am in Horsham at the moment.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Lance?

Lance BROOKS: Lance Brooks, Brooks Community Engagement, largely based in New South Wales and regional-rural areas.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Adriana?

Adriana PIELAK: Hi, I am Adriana from Brooks Community Engagement.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The way we run these proceedings is pretty straightforward. We will throw to you guys to make a brief opening statement each and then go to questions. Who wants to start?

Lance BROOKS: We will go. Sorry, Chris.

The CHAIR: Perfect. Thanks, Lance.

Lance BROOKS: You only want about 5 minutes to start up, is that right?

The CHAIR: That is exactly right.

Lance BROOKS: Yes, okay. We are a community engagement consulting practice. I have been personally involved in the industry for about 25 years, have been on the IAP2 board, which you would be aware is obviously the best practice organisation within Australia and internationally as well. We have had a range of clients over that time – a lot of developers, local government, some PPPs – and I have worked in housing renewal. I think that is predominantly it in that area. We have not used Engage Victoria, but I think we have been picked to talk about a different market. I think that is a brief introduction. I can talk a little bit more about things if you want, but –

The CHAIR: We can get to it in questions if you prefer. That is probably easier.

Lance BROOKS: Yes, okay.

The CHAIR: No worries. Over to you, Chris.

Chris SOUNNESS: We work in the regional community at the moment, and we are very passionate about this. I have worked in rural and regional engagement in agriculture, extension research at the ag department, Birchip Cropping Group and now Wimmera Southern Mallee Development. I think what we have got at the moment is a problem where communities are not disengaged, they are overloaded. There are too many and the consultations are fragmented, all landing at once. The fatigue is systemic, not cultural. So what are the root causes? Governments are leading by silo, not by place. Communities live the cumulative impact of this, and the leadership issue seems to be all about controlling rather than trying to coordinate. What is happening and what does that mean on the ground? Landholders are hit with multiple reforms in the same fortnight. The volunteers, local leaders and community leaders who live in place are forced to try and translate complex processes, and when government and corporations see silence, they misread that as support rather than disengagement or overload, which means trust is broken.

What is the way forward? We need place-based coordination across agencies, we need to assess the cumulative consultation load before new processes, we need to frame each consultation in how it fits within the bigger picture of what is going on in this particular place, we need local intermediaries that are resourced to be those trusted interpreters and we need to ensure there are mandated feedback loops. Communities do not want fewer consultations; they want better ones. Governments must lead by place, not silos – and that is the big challenge at the moment, everything is by silos. I will just mention the Victorian transmission plan is a classic example of that which is occurring at the moment.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks, Chris. We will go to questions, and each take it in turns. I might start with you, Chris, on this concept of the cumulative consultation load. Perhaps you could describe for us how that manifests for you and your community, what you see and what impact you think it has. Then, Lance, I might come to you on that same topic after we have heard from Chris, just to get your reflections as a practitioner on some of these issues. So, Chris, over to you to expand a bit more on the cumulative consultation load and what is causing it and what impact it has.

Chris SOUNNESS: What is causing it is, as I say, different government silos not understanding what the other silos are. I can talk about a real-life example: a Wimmera Southern Mallee Development former board member described to me one week she had in the middle of last year. On day one Resources Victoria reached out to her about the Victorian critical mineral sands wanting to talk to her about that as her region was going to be impacted. Day two, one of the wind companies she is negotiating with around a renewable energy project reached out and said, 'Oh, can you come and spend some time in the office with her?' Day three, VicGrid was doing a consultation in the region. Day four, one of the mining companies was looking to do some engagement with her. Then on the fifth day there was a follow-up call from Resources Victoria. This is while she is trying to run a \$50 million-plus business, which is a typical farm in the region. As I say, she was a volunteer on the Wimmera Southern Mallee Development Board and I was trying to get the best out of her, and she was just saying, 'The government doesn't realise that we just can't keep on being consulted when it seems to be a tick-a-box exercise.' Closing the loop is the other part. The government is wanting to do the right thing, but doing it not to consult, but just to inform.

The CHAIR: Yes. Lance, I might ask you, as an expert practitioner with considerable experience, obviously the cumulative impact clearly is real for these communities. It is probably borne out of, at least on some level, the agencies knowing that they should be consulting and trying at some level to be doing the right thing. In your experience and with your expertise, how do you think that governments should try and manage this, and do you have any reflections on these sorts of issues that you might have encountered in your practice?

Lance BROOKS: Yes, okay. Adriana, feel free to jump in as well. I think Chris sort of said it.

I think the quality of engagement – so let us take tick boxing. I think if people are genuinely engaged and there is follow-up – because the follow-up is really important; quite often we just go in, we listen, we take something and we do not actually go back – that is probably one of the most respectful things. Everybody is busy. I think engaging people in their extra time is really difficult. But this whole concept of the tick boxing – it is about the quality of engagement, and I think that is where the best practice has to come in. My feeling is that it is actually a process of building a relationship. I think if you genuinely build a relationship, you can keep going back to

people, but if you do not build a genuine relationship – and you know, the IAP2 principles and the core values are all about making people feel that what they are doing is contributing to the benefit. Then you get buy-in.

The CHAIR: Chris, just on this point, one of the things that strikes me is that Lance is talking about people who are doing the consultation building a relationship. It seems the issue you are confronting is that you have got different people coming and knocking on the door at different times talking about different things. Would that be a fair assessment, Chris, of how you have experienced the range of consultative issues that you have had to deal with?

Chris SOUNNESS: Yes, and I think there are a couple of things, and we might be at a particular place in time, which may be the issue. At the moment western Victoria is at the centre of a transformation that it has probably never faced before and might never face again, where energy and mineral sands extraction are all looking to happen at the same time for a drive of federal and state policies. There are a lot of state and federal agencies trying to get things done quickly to enable policy to be rolled out, and then companies are obviously following in the wake where there is a policy lead of where to go. But in the end, they are dealing with either the small business community, who are trying to run their businesses, or volunteers. There are whole agencies who are keen to try and do the right thing – I am not saying they are going in trying to do the wrong thing; they are trying to do the right thing – without any actual understanding of what else is going on in the region or acknowledgement of anything else going on in the region. They just want to do their job. But if you actually talk to the community members, what is most important to them is: is their hospital still running; what are the services like there; what is the likelihood of there being enough childcare staff so they can take their kids to childcare; and what are the conditions of the roads? This is a universal thing across Australia. The departmental people, who are professional people and are paid, and the consultants, who are supported to do this work and are paid, are expecting volunteers to do the heavy lifting. Volunteers are not resourced to do so. It is almost asking the volunteers to – to use the harsh word – ‘subsidise’ state and federal government policy returns without any acknowledgement of the time and effort we are asking of these volunteers and small business people who are trying to get by, get their kids to school, run their lives and everything like that – because these professional people have jobs to do and want to say they have consulted.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for attending this afternoon. When you are speaking, I am listening and thinking respect and trust is something that it feels like there is a deficit of in the regions in relation to engagement or ongoing engagement. One of our former speakers this morning from the Engagement Institute spoke about information and the amount of information. Is there too much information? Is the information not trusted, or is it measured out like Scrooge so that you are just getting enough to keep you there? Could you speak to when there is engagement with the government sector, how it is delivered, is it enough and is it trusted?

Lance BROOKS: Adriana, do you want to say something on that?

Adriana PIELAK: Yes. I would say to an extent it is not what is going out in terms of the information, it is how. I think there are issues with how information is being distributed most effectively, because communities are not a one-size-fits-all. There need to be different ways that you communicate with different communities, and that needs to be strategised very specifically. The way you would communicate with someone from a rural community may be completely different to someone from metro Sydney. I think those are some issues that need to be taken into consideration when engaging effectively with community, that it is not just what you are saying, it is how it is being said, who is saying it, and that is partly a reason as well why, as a consultancy, we tend to get hired or contracted by government agencies to do the community engagement, because it is coming from a middle body. We almost act as a mediator between the client and the community and, sort of what Chris was pertaining to as well with the silos, we end up being that one consistent person that is spoken to. That prevents a lot of community misinformation going out. We are the one point of contact. It also provides a buffer and a barrier for whoever our client is.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I really appreciate that. The other comments were about a single source of truth this morning but also misinformation and disinformation. As the facilitator, as the professional, from your aspect are you seeking more information sometimes than you are allowed to be given by government sources?

Do you feel that you have to distil it down? Are you still reaching back to government for more information that the community is asking for?

Lance BROOKS: Well, actually, it is a really good point. I think the initial part of the engagement is about getting out there with some basic facts. As a facilitator, as Adriana was saying, there is a difference – it is actually a really significant difference – between being a community engagement practitioner engaged as a sort of third party, as a consultant coming in, and being a community engagement practitioner employed by a company, a developer or the government. Because even though we are a client of and we are doing it, you actually have a different relationship. What we get an opportunity to do is build the relationship and then introduce more information in a subsequent meeting, so you build up to those really important meetings and you increase the amount of information. We do not need to be skilled. In fact we regularly say, because we are not part of that organisation, ‘Look, okay. We hear this. We will gather more information.’ We tell the basics and say, ‘Okay, we’re going to set up this meeting and these people will be here to do those specific things.’ It also allows that first engagement to actually be a bit of fact finding. You get to feel the temperature of a community, you get to feel the big issues of a community, so then you can go back and brief our clients, whether they are the developer or the department or whoever is needing to speak, so they are not going into the field completely blind. It does really help. Then I know you are looking, it seems to be from the question there, at the resourcing of regions with consultants if there are consultants in those areas. We can certainly be a really blended opportunity to work with a government community engagement team. You bring some skills, you bring some expertise in a particular timeframe when you need it, and you do not need those resources all the time. I hope that sort of answers it in some respect.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Great feedback. Chris, in terms of your submission, a redesign of Engage Victoria platform – it is not working at the minute. It needs to be more trustworthy – do you want to elaborate on that? I hear this from Gippsland as well. I live in Gippsland, so we have similar but different issues. What do you say about the Engage Victoria platform?

Chris SOUNNESS: I know when I wrote the submission – I must admit I have just been on a couple of weeks and I have not looked at it this week. But every engagement opportunity looks exactly the same. One might be responding to an EES which has 10,000-plus pages of documentation, and the other one might be about a crossing in front of a school. They are all presented almost the same when you read them, and obviously they are for very different purposes, so there is no understanding of that. As I say, Engage Victoria has tried to be, I suppose, all things to all people, but by doing that actually people do not understand the differences, and unless you have an understanding of government processes and are into the reeds, you are not going to work your way through that.

One question you asked before was around misinformation and disinformation and trust. I think that is a really important question. I think Lance’s answer was very good and enlightening. But I do think at some stage for a lot of people in rural and regional Australia, it is about trust and relationships. I work regularly with a range of consulting groups and individuals who come in, who do I think probably what is – I cannot say the same job as Lance because I am sure it will not be as good – a very similar job to Brooks consulting where you work with them. But they still generally need to get in through the front door to be able to do that introduction and that takes time and resources. I call it cat herding, and cat herding generally no-one wants to pay for, but it is quite an expensive exercise and you generally have to spend a fair bit of social capital because you are saying to someone, once again a volunteer or a small business person, ‘We want you to give up some time so Lance can have an initial conversation with you so he can then frame the job right’. And no-one seems to want to pay for that, where someone has to give up – so you tend to guard your relationships fairly closely. I know when I was at Birchip Cropping Group, you worked out there were a lot of people there keen to burn your social capital, so you tend not to –

Then the misinformation-disinformation piece, that is rife in our region at the moment. Is that to do with the consultation piece? Not specifically, but it is making the consultation piece almost impossible to work. I have had a number of discussions with senior government and organisations where there is rife misinformation flowing from some submissions or documents, and their preferred response seems to be strategic silence, which is probably a way to handle en masse communication. But when you are basically dealing with groups that use Facebook and WhatsApp groups and everything like that, strategic silence is seen as you are not disagreeing with the misinformation, so it gives that misinformation credibility because there is no pushback against it. Once again, who is resourced to do that? It is a whack-a-mole job, I will admit. But at the moment it is running

rife because there is no-one there resourced to tackle it. Generally most of the departments are very thin on the ground in rural and regional Victoria, and it is organisations like ours and local governments that are asked to do the heavy lifting, and there is no-one there doing it.

The CHAIR: All right.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell, I might go to you.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. Staying on the topic of trust, I myself and a lot of my colleagues here have witnessed that we have got a lot of communities that do not have that trust initially, and these companies or bodies are still struggling to try to gain that trust and the more that they try, the harder it gets and the bigger the walls that these communities are putting up. Do you think there is a way that we could amend that in any possibility, or do you think that is a lost cause?

Lance BROOKS: I do not, and Adriana, we will comment on this together. Look, I do not think it is a lost cause, but I think, picking up here what Chris said before, you have to invest money in that social side of it. It does take time. There are three ways you get engaged as a community engagement consultant. You get one, I will just say, when the shit hits the fan – something has gone terribly wrong and all of a sudden, ‘We need to try to fix that’. So that is one you get calls for. The second one, there is the statutory stuff like in New South Wales with the SSDs, and you just get contacted, ‘We need to do this and that’.

The third one is you have companies that have the insight to invest because they take it as a risk control. There are companies that, when we do a strategic community advo, we do a risk register. It takes a long time; you have got to get out in the community to do that. So then we can be very strategic and specific. By doing that, firstly you understand and have met the community – there is nothing worse than turning up to a meeting and you really do not know everything. That one thing about knowing where you are going builds trust. It does not get you the whole way, but there are a whole series of strategic steps you need to do to be in a position that you can beat it. The other thing about starting early is the fact you actually get to feed the communication earlier. If we do not start really early with what is going to happen, you get there and we are launching the whole thing and you do not get a chance to have the right people you have built the rapport with to actually give them the truth. Part of that strategic plan is you have your communication strategy done before you even go to market. You understand what the hot issues are. You understand the channels of people you can talk to. You try to find a few advocates. There is a specific pattern to do a really, really good job, but it does require what Chris was saying: you need to invest in time, and it is often not seen as a priority area. You know, we have got so many examples. When you cut a short timeframe for community engagement, you are lessening the success of it or the effectiveness of it.

Chris SOUNNESS: Could I add to that. There are a couple of things. I think trust. We are in a low trust environment. I think that is one view that some of the government departments are probably struggling with, because often in the past, as I say, there was a high respect for government. There is always a bit of, I suppose, mocking, but in the end there was a fair bit of respect for government and its policies, but in the last three or four years that trust has eroded, so we are in a low trust environment for a whole range of reasons. When you are in a low trust environment, what has worked in the past will not necessarily work like in the before. In rural and regional Australia, I have sort of got a bit of a saying: it is as if we are in a movie franchise, and the movie franchise we are seeing is *The Fast and the Furious*, where consultants and governments come in fast and the community ends up furious. What we are trying to change is the movie franchise to *The Fast and the Fair*. We still want things to happen fast, and I think that actually one of the challenges with the consultation process is the timelines. But in the end we want a fairer outcome, because what has happened over the last 30 years is initiatives have been made. Corporates are coming in and saying, ‘Well, these changes are going to be better for the community.’ But the lived experience is the hospitals have lost staff, the banks have lost staff, the schools have got smaller and populations have declined. So there is a level of lived experience, which often is not the fault of the agency involved, but it is just the reality of living in an agricultural community. We have got to actually realise that.

The other piece with the consultation is: is it actually a consultation, or is it an information session? Because I think a lot of the time at the moment – because I think there is a wanting control of the message – it is actually

an information session. The community come along expecting a chance to shape and change the initiative, when the actual people presenting are saying, 'Oh, we're here to tell you. You get what you get: don't get upset.' That is actually the message you are getting. Value is not wanted, except to tick the box to say, 'Here it is.' Then the other piece is actually the follow through. If you are going to do a consultation or an information session saying something is going to be delivered, has it been? Because I think that is why the trust is broken. Because people are saying, 'What's changed because of it?'

Adriana PIELAK: Can I just add on to what Chris was saying, if that is all right?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Adriana PIELAK: The one way to build trust with community, and I am not sure if anyone has seen the film *Erin Brockovich*, but you would understand that it takes a very long time. It takes a lot of face-to-face engagement as well. At Brooks, community engagement is not just sending out a survey. We doorknock and we are talking to people face to face, speaking to them. And from what Chris was saying, setting expectations from the get-go is really, really important. There are times when we have had projects where we have just had to go out and give community the information, and there has not been space for people to provide feedback. If that is the case, that needs to be settled first with the client to see where they are on that level, on that IAP2 spectrum of inform, consult, involve, and as well to even push clients to be able to say, 'Well, if we are doing this, there needs to be some wiggle room. What is that wiggle room? And let us be able to communicate those expectations to community.'

Again, it is not just a quick process. It needs to take time. The best ways to build trust with community is to have that face-to-face level of listening. We have found that in a lot of engagement now, particularly where engagement is mandated in New South Wales, it is webinars where people are behind a screen giving out information, and there might be a quick Q and A session at the end. That, I think, can be incredibly frustrating for a community in comparison to when you are going there face to face, you are speaking to people individually. You are then speaking to them in a group. You are taking in, and you are actually listening and getting things down and showcasing and highlighting what is to be expected. There is a great difference there, and you are then able to build that relationship and trust. It is not something that is just given.

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. Thank you very much. I am absolutely fascinated by the way you are articulating the issues here. They make sense to me – the whole notion of governments leading by silo and not place and the complexity of Engage Vic and then not enough place-based approaches. So I just wondered: is timeliness an issue too, coming in late?

Lance BROOKS: It is one of the biggest issues. I mean, in all that we have talked about to do good engagement, you need time. I just think in the way it is planned in big business and governments, the engagement is seen as something you do – like it is the last thing, and 'Oh, we're ready to go to market now.' If we embed engagement in the process early – I do not mean this in a bad way – it does not mean you have to do everything that comes out. But if we engage early, sometimes there are some priceless little things there that one, will save a lot of credibility later and, two, you can actually find a few wins. Sometimes we say look for the little wins. It just allows the whole process – it also builds into the team who are the project team delivering the project that it is an important part of the project. I mean, we all know there are literally billions of dollars of infrastructure held up in planning because it has gone out and it has just become too hot and it just gets shelved. But the whole process should start – to me, like the earlier you start, the better. In big business, what are some of the things that stop our projects? It is community. But do we do a proper community plan right up front? What we do in our strategy and community engagement plans is not actually an engagement plan of just delivering the meetings, it is a strategic plan to find out what all the issues are, to flag all the hotspots, to be able to brief our clients. And this is just part of best practice. This is just the way it should be done, if we have got time, Jacinta. So that is the big thing. Often it is left at the tail end. We are announcing everything, and then we find out some of the errors of the planning, and it is not respectful.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. So I am wondering too, just listening to you, if the consultation is a requirement in the context of a market-based activity or a private sector activity, then there are a bunch of laws

that require certain matters to be taken into account in an assessment, which would, I imagine, sometimes render community consultation a little bit tokenistic.

Chris SOUNNESS: It has meant the word has lost its definition, that is the issue. I think that is what I was saying before. The consultation is not actually consultation. If it is just to inform people, it is just to inform people. Or even in the EES process, what is the role of public submissions into an EES? So it is being clear what is actually the point of what is occurring.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, the parameters.

Chris SOUNNESS: As I say, 'consultation' is used as a word. The government say, 'We're consulting with the community,' but actually that is not the intent at all for that particular thing, and nor should it be. It is either to inform, or as Lance has been talking about, to build information so a better strategy or plan can be wheeled out to the community. They are all important things to do, so I am not saying one thing is more important than the other, but it is to be honest of what the purpose is and what resources there are. And in the end, just keep on showing up.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Does that mean that weak or tokenistic or late engagement sometimes leaves space for that misinformation that you were talking about and then as a result can allow that division to fester in a community?

Chris SOUNNESS: I do not think it is quite that simple, because – if we talk about western Victoria at the moment, transmission lines were announced, we have got renewable energy projects and we have got critical mineral sands. The reality was the transmission company, when they first did their engagement, did it very poorly. I actually do think they are doing a really good job now, and I will come back to that in a sec. But they dug themselves a hole to China and they are still only halfway out of it. But what I realised – the mineral sands companies had been doing a very good job in consultation and had not realised the world had changed around them, and now in our region I would say they are probably enemy number one. They have not been actually doing anything wrong; it was because they had not realised the world had changed and what had occurred, and nor had the government. The different parts of the government had not sort of been talking to one another. They each thought they were the only people trying to engage with the local residents. There are cumulative impacts being missed, because government parts are not talking with each other, and there are policy implications of what they are saying, of how it impacts on place.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. Chair, I did hear the bell. I am sorry. Can I just round it up with one little closing question, Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: In terms of a recommendation for this inquiry, what would you say: place-based approaches should include all multiple silos, or place-based approaches should be used in regional communities? What would you recommend?

Chris SOUNNESS: As I say, I have a register. So at the least, anyone that is going out to a consultation will have an understanding of what other live consultations are being pitched. Is it reasonable to expect the same communities and local governments to keep on responding to this? A lot of it comes to local governments, who in western Victoria are some of the least viable local governments we have got in the state – and similarly in Gippsland. We just keep on putting pressure on them: 'Oh, can you respond to this and that?' and they are very detailed studies. It is basically, I think, unfair for rural ratepayers to have to subsidise government policy work. So there needs to be some sort of thought before a consultation goes out, to understand what else is being asked of those communities at the time.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So consultation should be coordinated centrally by place and resourced appropriately?

Chris SOUNNESS: Yes.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for your contribution this afternoon. I am very interested in your insights, because I represent Northern Victoria. I am very aware of the transmission lines. I have heard people have been told that neighbours agree to the project, and then they find out that they are not agreeing, and that has led to mistrust; there are piles of paperwork which people are given very limited time to digest. Then when it comes to renewable energy projects, what I am hearing from people is they are quite difficult contracts to understand; there are caveats they have got to consider. There are insurance issues: how can they afford that? Neighbourhood agreements could change, because companies can also sell. The company that gets the permit may be different to the company that builds the project. There is the impact of batteries, the impact on water supply. What happens next? I remember talking to one farmer who was saying he had been approached by 13 different companies in a very short amount of time. Like you said earlier, Chris, you are trying to run a business, and then this is the reality of all the questions you are getting. When I talk to people in the Colbinabbin community, they have got a massive solar project there that has been given the green light. Local council does not agree. Local residents have been opposed to that. But the government has taken away the VCAT right of appeal. So there is a lot of frustration, I guess, that I am hearing out there in the community.

But what are your thoughts on that volume of information that comes at regional communities? What can be done better to provide that information? Because what I am hearing from locals is they have got to find it out themselves, or they have got to talk to someone in a different part of the state. 'What have you found out?' 'What have you found out?' You know, it is all word of mouth, whereas I think the government is rolling this out rapidly, but communities are just sort of left floundering. But I guess those are just my insights. I am interested to know what you think could be done better.

Chris SOUNNESS: I think you have given a fair summary of what it feels like for a lot of people in the region. A couple of years ago I took a group of regional leaders up to the Western Downs-Toowoomba region to reflect on how they went through the coal seam gas transition in the early 2000s. What inspired me was a paper called *Be Careful What You Wish For* by a researcher who looked at the first five years of coal seam gas, which went disastrously. Lock the Gate started and the communities were fighting with each other. It seems very similar to what is going on here. The insights I learned from that were when the companies started to trust one another and worked together with the communities, then good outcomes started happening and the government followed rather than led. When there is conflict like what was going on up there, and I am pretty sure like there is now, it is very hard for government to lead in that space. I would say that is reflected in what we see is going on. I do not think the government is doing a particularly good leadership role. What I think needs to happen is: how do we get the companies to trust one another so they understand there is a cumulative impact here? And if they start trusting one another, then the community can start trusting them. I do actually think that is the way you actually get through honest conversations that are open, talking about good, bad and indifferent, but set values and behaviours that people aspire to live by. I think that is something I really believe in. It is about a culture of how people treat each other. I have not met anyone from the companies, from government or from the community that wants the communities to be worse off. Everyone is actually trying to achieve the same thing; they are just talking past each other. So how we actually talk to each other is the hard part, and that is done by building trust and having open early conversations that are always ongoing, as Lance, I think, set the scene so well at the start.

Gaelle BROAD: Lance or Adriana, do you have anything to add to that?

Lance BROOKS: Adriana?

Adriana PIELAK: No, I am good, thank you.

Lance BROOKS: It is a difficult one. I think the place-based idea of being able to speak to that area is really important. Siloing is a problem across so many different sectors. It is a difficult one. I think that is where if we have that – as Chris was talking about – you know, whether it is a database or a listing where we could see what is going on where, particularly from the government's point of view, it would be really, really helpful not crossing over. But, you know, it is difficult.

Gaelle BROAD: Now, I did want to ask Chris. I guess your insights to establish a regional minimum consultation standard. Can you expand on that?

Chris SOUNNESS: I think I probably did. It is having the aspiration of what is expected, what sorts of values and behaviours. All the way through I have been saying: what is the purpose of the consultation? Why is the information being gathered? Is it to write a better policy? Is it to actually do something for the community et cetera? So be clear on what the purpose is, because often it does not seem to be clear why you are going to consultation except, 'Oh, we feel we have to do it to tick the boxes, so we consult with the community before we make the step', when they are actually not really wanting the community to consult. They just want to tell them, 'We're building a level crossing out the front of the hospital.' Just tell them. Say that is what we are doing, rather than consult with the community, because it is not a consultation at all.

Gaelle BROAD: I know my time has run out. I did want to ask you about the By Five program, how your consultations are going with that.

Chris SOUNNESS: We are really trying hard to get further support. As I say, the evidence came out a couple of weeks ago about how, I suppose, one region in Victoria has turned around their zero- to five-year outcomes, which was a win for Southern Mallee. The work that Jo and her team have been doing for Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, now the funding has been lost, we have vowed to keep that program going for the next 12 months off our own bat, so hopefully Jo can find some support to keep going. Because if we get the zero- to five-year-olds right – there was a report that came out just last week that shows if we get the zero- to five-year outcomes right, it sets the scene for the whole region and for the whole state, and we just cannot afford to have people born in a postcode left behind. Postcode lotto is not fair.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. It is great to hear that. I am a big fan of the By Five program and it is great to hear that it has still got some life in it. Earlier you said that there are some examples of particularly – I am in Western Victoria – where some engagement has improved, where it started out badly but has really improved. Can you elaborate on that, and what are the features of that that make it so much better than what it was before?

Chris SOUNNESS: I think it is the skills of the people doing it, the honesty and the realisation and acknowledgement that things were not done right beforehand, and there was a changeover of people. As I say, I was at the community reference group for the TCV meeting on Tuesday. All those meetings are tough, but the thing that really changed was when the leadership team of TCV made it clear to the farmers who are really opposing the project, 'Just because you're involved in this conversation does not mean you're in any way or shape endorsing this project. What we want to do is risk management for you. So you're free to oppose as much as you want, but we need your views, in case it goes ahead, to make sure of the project.' So that was one thing.

Then on Tuesday night one of the lead staff people at the meeting said she was leaving to join another organisation, and the farmer, one of the lead protagonists, who is generally quite aggrieved most of the time during the meetings, went, 'Can you please make sure you commit to coming to the next three or four meetings.' I can tell you now: she won't ever get a better compliment in her life. And the reason she got that compliment is she has been showing up at each meeting. She has always been honest in her responses. When she has the information, she says so. When she does not, she says she does not know and gets back to him at the next meeting. That showing up, fronting up, being honest is what everyone wants. It is being treated respectfully and not blustered and spun to. I think earlier on some of the people thought, 'Oh yes, we can spin people to death, and they'll be fine,' but it is not going to work. You have just got to be honest in what you know you know and what you don't know, you don't know, but I will find out an answer next time.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. That resonates with some of the things we heard earlier today about also being honest about what decision the community is actually being given the opportunity to have input into. So if there is a decision that has already been made, coming out and just saying you are doing consultation but they are not genuinely being given a choice about whether it goes ahead or not is quite misleading and it breeds mistrust.

Chris SOUNNESS: Yes.

Lance BROOKS: That is one of the basics about actually setting what the engagement is going to be. I should not even use the word 'consultation' because, as Adriana said earlier, the engagement quite often is information, but that information is going to hurt some people. We are working on a project that is about

widening of the highway, and there are some people who are really – you know, their lives are going to be changed. But somebody has to go and stand in front of them, tell them, talk them through the process and walk them through the process and be there through the difficult times. Now, also, sometimes people are just looking for that respect, but somebody has to do it. That is what good engagement is.

I think some of the best engagement jobs we have done are when we have gone and been with people who have been really stressed. They have heard rumours. They have heard things are going to happen. But what is actually happening? How long is it going to take, how is it going to impact me and when is it going to be finished? Those things are really, really important. It has come up a number of times. We should not call it community consultation: it is community engagement. I mean, that is why the IAP2 changed from ‘public participation’ – that is what IAP2 is – to Engagement Institute, because it is about engaging, on what level we engage and how honestly we engage, and then we are not doing the spinning. An advantage for us as a consulting firm is we actually sit down and say – we actually have to sometimes really work out with the clients, what are you going to do here? How far are you going to go? Well, let us be honest, then.

But the most important thing in community engagement, I think, in reducing a lot of the tension, a lot of that anxiety and a lot of that misinformation that gets out there is when people get angry. The best way for people – and I do not mean this as about controlling people. The best way for people not getting cut-out is somebody sitting in front of them and saying, ‘Look, this is going to happen. This is when it is going to happen.’

Chris SOUNNESS: Truth.

Lance BROOKS: We go out there and get a lot of the hits because that is what our job is – to be there, and then we bring the client in, and then to give more information we keep building the layers of information.

Adriana PIELAK: I will also just add, coming from what Lance was saying and talking as a young consultant in the community engagement sector, we cop a lot of hits, as Lance was saying. I think that can be really difficult for consultants in general, not just for young people. And dealing with that conflict is really, really hard. So thinking about consultants and as a recommendation, having some more training for consultants in dealing with people and conflict and mental health I think is really, really important, because people tend to shy away from it. That is why consultants will ignore an email or not look at it or not want to go to those community meetings because they do not want to have to deal with that conflict. They do not want to be yelled at, they do not want to take any more hits. That is, I think, another issue for consultants going into the field – is people are going to be angry and upset and dealing with that and being able to manage those situations and learn how to do those effectively is really important.

Chris SOUNNESS: You raised a great point there, Adriana. I would just like to mention – and this is a role for all leaders at all levels – the language we use when we are dealing with a group of stakeholders we might agree with who are absolutely angry. Inflaming that anger has consequences; it normalises violence. As I say, I have been in meetings where people have started talking about guns and I have raised that discussion point, saying that is going to mean we are not going to get listened to, because there are going to be times when someone who is facing mental challenges will feel authorised to act in a violent manner. We have all, I think, as leaders work out how we temper down this. When people are upset, how do we make sure we de-escalate rather than escalate? I think at the moment in Western Victoria that is not necessarily being thought through by a number of senior leaders in our society who are sort of amplifying the anger rather than lowering the temperature.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might go to Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you very much. Wendy Lovell. I am a Member for Northern Victoria, so a regional Member. I want to thank you very much for your submission because you not only clearly articulate the problems but you actually provide some solutions in that submission. I am really interested in 10.1, where you talk about better practice and starting before decisions are made, so starting consultation before decisions are made and engaging people rather than after the options are finalised. Just given what we have been talking about – how people do not trust government – how do you propose that we could go to a model where you could start the discussion on something that may not be popular before the decisions are actually made?

Chris SOUNNESS: I was just rereading it there. I think the most important thing is owning it. The hardest part of making unpopular decisions is at times I do not think people want to own the unpopularity, because, I

will be honest, if your job is to be popular, to make sure you get the job in three or four years time, it is very hard to make statements that are going to decrease your popularity. As I say, that is the challenge of political leadership at local government, state government and federal government. It is how we work through leading people so that they realise this is actually a great decision, which is something that takes time and effort and building trust, as I think Adriana and Lance have talked about it. It takes time. Yes, it is standing up, articulating clearly why it is being done and owning it.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. We had a guy this morning who said that, you know, you do not have a discussion with people about: do you want this? You tell them they are getting this and then ask them how they want it. It just seemed a little bit inconsistent with what he was saying about having consultation before a decision is made to impose something on the community, and you have sort of kind of just reiterated that now, where you are saying, 'Well, we want consultation before the decision is made, but you have to own the decision and say, "This is going to happen" for consultation to take place.' So how do we actually balance those two things?

Chris SOUNNESS: Lance?

Melina BATH: A hospital handpass.

Lance BROOKS: How do you balance the two things? We talked a little bit before about the information, but that is what I was saying about the timeframes. If we built into everything we were doing an early engagement, it allows you to float the concept early, before you are saying it is definite. I do not mean to be misleading, but if we have got a piece of infrastructure, or we have got a piece of something that is coming in, if we do it early, rather than say, 'Next month we're starting this,' or we are getting this in, I believe the respect starts early. It allows more flexibility, allows you to learn more about the environment. You learn about the communication, what is the most effective way to communicate in that community. It allows you to talk to local leaders and stakeholders. All that allows for good engagement. To me, well, what we believe in, is when we are trying to pitch to our clients, the benefits of that are, one, you are probably going to be on top of the messaging. Right? You will have pre-prepared all your Q and As, you will have pre-prepared your press releases, all those sorts of things that you can get out very quickly. You can inform the more sensible. You will have worked out who the most impacted people are. We do a matrix on most impacted and things like that. So you know that is the area where more intensity is going to come out of, then you see where the public benefit is of what you are bringing in. That all only can come with plenty of time, so the timing from our respect is the earlier the better. It prepares the ground, and from a risk point of view it improves. It also takes the stress off the team working on the project. It is really stressful when you are pushed – 'Oh, we've got to do this.' Like, to the project team, 'We've got to do the engagement now. We're going there.' It just sort of rushes and compresses the whole process and takes away the respect and the trust, I reckon.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

Chris SOUNNESS: One comment – Jo Martin. I was talking to Jo. I was doing this presentation from the By Five team. She said, 'One comment you should make' – and I think is – 'generally community members have expertise in place; they do not have technical expertise.' And often in the consultations when the people come out there, they are asking the communities to comment on technical documents and provide technical input. But the skill the community people generally bring is they have expertise in place about how things can work, so that is what needs to be talked about. If you want to use community consultation for getting their expertise, understand what their expertise is and ask them to comment on that.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Okay. Rikkie-Lee.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I just had one final question. Earlier on today when we were talking about this, the first board of ladies we had actually said, 'In community consultation, to work with the community, your government body or the project will go to the community' – this is how they should do it, actually – 'or they should go to the community and say, "Right, this is what we want to do. Now work with us to make it more palatable to fit into the community."' Chris, are you actually seeing this happening in your communities, or is this a big step that is being missed? Because I have not heard from, say, our advocacy groups that are fighting these projects. They have not once mentioned that this has happened for them.

Chris SOUNNESS: I am thinking particularly on the childcare and the education spaces at the moment, where, yes, I think there are opportunities. If there was a ‘This is what we want to do’ – if you talk to the community about that, the community generally understand how services could be done differently, but that means different government agencies would have to talk to each other and discuss things, and they are not designed to do that. I get that. That is the way the Westminster system is set up. But in the end, when we are dealing in communities where the infrastructure resources are generally thin and we are dealing with thin markets, there are ways of doing things in place that do not require more money but just require different ways of going about it. That is where you can use place-based expertise, but that is not happening because generally the government departments are trying to solve their own problem rather than actually the community’s problem.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We are at the end of our session for today. Chris, Lance, Adriana, thank you so much for the evidence you have provided to us. We really appreciate your expertise, and we will provide a copy of the transcript for you to review. That brings today’s session to a close. Thanks, everybody.

Committee adjourned.