

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

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Marion Short, Chief Executive Officer,

Amy Hubbard, Practice Lead, and

Donna Groves, Member, Advocacy Committee, Engagement Institute.

The CHAIR: I declare open today's public hearing for the Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. This public hearing is part of the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament, looking into consultation practices here in Victoria. The evidence that we gather will help inform a report we provide to the Parliament, which may include recommendations to the government. For those who are joining us in the room, could people please ensure their mobile phones have been switched to silent and minimise background noise.

I will begin today's proceedings by acknowledging that we are meeting today on the lands of the Wurundjeri people. I pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who are joining the proceedings of the committee today. I would like to welcome members of the public who may be joining us in the gallery or viewing online. These proceedings are being broadcast, and we remind any members of the public in the gallery today to please be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times. Thank you all for joining us.

All 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 to us today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during these hearings, 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 transcript following the hearings, which will ultimately be made public and placed on the committee's website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee. We really appreciate the time you have taken today to come and join us for the first of our hearings into community consultation practices. I might ask members of the committee to introduce themselves, and then we will hand over to you. I might start with Sheena.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for the Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Good morning.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: And joining us online we have –

David ETTERS SHANK: Good morning. David Ettershank, Deputy Chair of the committee, representing Western Metropolitan Melbourne.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. If each of you could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the Hansard record, please. I might start with you, Donna.

Donna GROVES: My name is Donna Groves. I am on the Advocacy Committee for the Engagement Institute.

Marion SHORT: Good morning. I am Marion Short, the CEO for the Engagement Institute.

Amy HUBBARD: Hello. My name is Amy Hubbard. I am a fellow of the Engagement Institute.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Basically the way we run these proceedings is we will ask you to make a short opening statement, should you wish to do so, and then we will take it in turns to ask you questions. Hopefully it should be pretty straightforward. If you have any questions at all about the way things are working during the proceedings, just ask. They are pretty relaxed. So I might hand over to you to kick off today and this inquiry.

Marion SHORT: Thanks so much, Ryan. It is a delight for the Engagement Institute to be here with you this morning. I am really grateful for the support of Amy and Donna as part of these conversations with you. The Engagement Institute is formerly IAP2 Australasia, and we are the peak body for the engagement profession. We have almost 16,000 members across Australia and New Zealand, over 5000 in Victoria, and we are part of the global IAP2 network. Our members operate in an incredibly broad range of sectors: all levels of government, infrastructure and construction, energy and renewables, mining and extractives, transport and roads, education, health – the list goes on. We are recognised for our standards for engagement best practice, capability building, continuing professional development, networking events and advocating for the sector.

Today we are going to use the term ‘engagement’, which is our broad term for all levels of engagement or consultation. For us as a practice, consultation has a very clearly defined promise and description as outlined in the IAP2 spectrum. I just wanted to be clear we are probably going to say ‘engagement’ a lot, because we see the intent with that, and ‘consultation’. Joining me, as you know, we have Amy Hubbard, who is a fellow – both Amy and Donna are long-term members of the Engagement Institute – and Donna Groves, who is a very active Member of our Advocacy Committee here in Victoria. I would like to pass over to Amy to introduce herself.

Amy HUBBARD: As I said before, my name is Amy Hubbard. I have 25 years experience in community engagement, mostly in the planning, environment and transport sectors. Ninety per cent of my work is in Victoria, and I think I can confidently say I have worked with every local government in Victoria and every iteration of state government departments over those 25 years, so I have got a little bit of experience in this space. Thank you.

Donna GROVES: My name is Donna Groves. I have been doing this for 33 years, which really tells my age. I am originally from western Sydney, but I have been in Melbourne for 14 years. I have worked in every state in Australia. I have worked in community engagement overseas, in the UK, the Middle East and a number of European countries. For the last 16 years I have owned my own consultancy. Prior to that I was in-house in the Victoria, Commonwealth and New South Wales governments and spent a little bit of time working with the Queensland government. I have also worked in construction companies. I predominantly deliver projects, although I have worked in planning projects as well. I am very passionate about the wellbeing of communities and infrastructure and renewables being delivered for the community’s benefit. I have worked closely on the community benefit planning framework in Queensland, and I am now embedded in a renewables company. They construct, develop and operate renewables in Victoria and throughout the east coast of Australia.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I am going to start the questions off. This inquiry has been established so that we can understand how community consultation practices are undertaken in Victoria and really what we should be expecting and whether current practices are living up to those expectations – that is the crux of what we are trying to do. And then there are various tools that we can use. Maybe I can start with foundational principles: why does government need to do engagement, and how should it do it well?

Marion SHORT: Gosh, they are two questions.

The CHAIR: I know, but – Chair’s prerogative. I kind of slipped it –

Marion SHORT: It is when you get to three or four we are going to get confused. No, it is an interesting position. From the Engagement Institute’s perspective, we believe that engagement, when done well, increases community’s trust in government, in their decision-makers and in democracy as well. We believe that it is the foundation to good decision-making. Amy, Donna, do you want to add to that?

Amy HUBBARD: I will go back to the first part of the question – so why we are doing engagement, Ryan. There are a whole lot of reasons. I started my career as an urban planner before very quickly moving into

community engagement. The *Planning and Environment Act* is one of the first pieces of legislation that has consultation enshrined in its foundation. That is one reason – there is a statutory requirement for some projects and programs and policies. But it is also about providing community with the opportunity to add to the government's pool of evidence before they make decisions. When we talk about that pool of evidence, it is about hearing from all corners of the communities that may be impacted or may be interested in a project, not just those that might be more resourced or more connected, who may dominate that conversation. But we also are lucky enough to live in Australia and we are lucky enough to live in Victoria, and it is a democratic right to participate in democratic processes. I think why also we engage – people over the last decade, they have changed in the way that they communicate with government and with each other, and we are in a world where communication is everywhere. That brings about an opportunity and also a tension in how we engage. So there are many reasons why we do engage. But the starting point is really about those statutory requirements.

Donna GROVES: And after the statutory requirements you engage with people that are impacted by projects. For example, I headed up North East Link early works stakeholder and community engagement, and the impacts were astronomical. So you engage with people to minimise the impacts, to deliver a project that has already been decided because we have gone through the planning process. But that engagement is just as important because those people are being impacted dramatically by the works but they are for the benefit of the greater community. So obviously that creates divides in community, and good engagement can mitigate that.

The CHAIR: Not everyone agrees with everything that happens. Is the purpose of community engagement and the best practice community engagement to convince everyone that they need to agree?

Donna GROVES: Absolutely not, and if I get called a salesperson by one more engineer, it is not going to go well. We are not salespeople. It is not our job to make people agree, but it is our job to give transparent and honest information and to take people along the journey to explain the decision-making. As government, what you could do for us is let us give more information, because often people will be more accepting of a project if they understand the reasons behind it. It is really that simple. We listen, we sit down and we talk to them. We really engage, and we say, 'We understand you're going to have an impact. This is the reason why.' Ninety-nine per cent of people are reasonable if they are given honesty and transparency and openness and a chance to actively participate. We are never all going to agree – we are all different sorts of people – but we can mitigate this process and we can have a better process if we are open and transparent.

Marion SHORT: I think one of the really important points here – and this is one of our policy calls to action – is a really clear definition of 'engagement'. Our definition of 'engagement' is: engagement is an intentional process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders or organisations in relation to a problem, opportunity or outcome. It is very purposeful, but it is purposeful in the context of and in relation to a problem, opportunity or outcome.

Amy HUBBARD: I just want to make a comment about the term 'engagement'. It is problematic, and we use it as an umbrella term, but engagement means different things to different people. If you are a person that has been part of an engagement process where there are very clear negotiables and the community ultimately are making decisions, something that might be deliberative engagement – more intensive – we call that engagement. But then some people, where there is a predetermined outcome and they write a fact sheet to communicate with the community that that is going ahead – that is also engagement. The process and the intent of those different engagement tools are very different things. In the community there is a high level of misunderstanding and a low level of literacy around public engagement. This is something that we come across every day as practitioners – that this term 'engagement' can mean so much that it means nothing at all.

The CHAIR: Thank you. My time is up. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much. This is fascinating. I have written some words down that you mentioned, Donna, and I would like to take you to that. It is a big topic, but you said, 'As government, let us give more engagement and let us provide more information.' Could you expand on that? Because the whole premise of engagement is about building confidence on both sides. If information is being inhibited, why is it being inhibited? Are we, the society, getting told what we need to know for government purposes? What is the right amount of information, and are you having to withhold some information because it is not good for the public to hear?

Donna GROVES: Yes, absolutely. It has been a while since I have been in-house in government, but there are so many things that I have not been allowed to say. I headed up the Monash Freeway upgrade community engagement as well, but I worked for the contractor. But there was a lot of information that I just did not have, like: 'Why is the route option here?' 'No, we can't say that.' We are often not allowed to release the costings for projects. There is lots and lots of information, whether you are with the contractor or the government, that we are not allowed to release. Then the community, when they are not told this information or they are not told why decisions are made, say, 'Why that route option?' I had one part of a road I worked on where the route went through a number of houses and we had to acquire them. The reason was that there was contaminated swampland, but because we did not want to create community outcry, they were not told that. If we could have given the information better, they would have accepted that: 'Okay, we understand. Are there any health concerns?' They were worried about there being further health concerns. That is one example.

I understand that there are times when information has to be kept quiet, but communities are smarter than we give them credit for. I was just consulting at a council in Queensland that was quite irate. We went into the council expecting them not to want this project, and they spent 20 minutes telling us, 'We want you – not consultants, the in-house team – to come and front the community. I'm the mayor. I stand at public meetings and tell people the truth. We want everyone to hear the information. You come and tell us, and then we'll support your project because we'll get the truth.' That really resonated with me when I was thinking about what we are saying today. Let us tell people the truth, let us give them context, let us of course not create public fear. But give them the context, explain the process, and engage early if you can – Marion is going to have a strong point on this. If you can, engage early and tell people what is negotiable and what is not negotiable. If we engage early and say, 'Where would you like the road? But it can't go in a number of places,' that is going to create community angst. But if you say, 'We've got these four options. That will be right.'

Melina BATH: Routes.

Donna GROVES: Yes, route selection. Twenty years ago in roads we used to do that quite often. It does not happen too much now. We do not often bring the community along on the process. I know it is expensive, I know it is time-consuming, but if you have a say in the development, you are not going to be so upset about the construction.

Melina BATH: It may diminish angst and cost in the long term.

Donna GROVES: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. My time is limited, so I am going to ask for a recommendation, so you can put it on record in a minute if you do not mind. Also to Marion: shaped decisions. One of the things that we hear in the regions – I am from Gippsland, Eastern Victoria Region – is many people feel like they are being consulttold. Part of the shaping of the decision means that my voice has resonance, has value. Many feel like they did not know about the engagement – now, that is community awareness. But also how is it a cyclical impact of engagement, listening and communication? Could you walk us through what good engagement for shaping decisions looks like?

Marion SHORT: I think this goes back to the purpose of engagement and the intent of engagement. We are actually launching an incredible case study around a recent *Act* that was introduced. For those of you that are aware of this *Act*, it started off moving through the house really smoothly, supported by all parties, and then went out for engagement, where it sort of went into disarray because the purpose of the engagement was not strategic enough. Therefore it drilled down and the questions we were asking did not align with the purpose and did not align with the negotiables and non-negotiables. In this case the decision had already been made, but the questions were asking, 'Do you support this? How can you influence the decision?' They were the wrong questions. Given the disarray, a new strategic approach was considered and the questions were shaped to align with the purpose much more tightly: 'What else do you need to know? What impacts are there that we haven't considered? What resources do you need?' This got it back on track.

This ties into the points that Donna is making, but it also ties into the points that we are making around having a really clear definition of 'engagement', being really clear of the purpose of engagement and having the engagement strategically shaped to align with all of that. There are going to be some engagement projects where it is about keeping the community really well informed and therefore operating at that end of the

spectrum, the inform end of the spectrum. It is about how you do inform really, really well. There are going to be other projects, which you want to start at the right time, for the right purpose, with the right people, which are going to be around things like route selection: 'These are the options that we have, and so we're consulting with you.' Because when you are talking about option selection, you are at the consult level of the spectrum. Like we said, engagement is a really big thing, but we have to be really, really clear at that strategic level: what is the purpose and what are we here for?

Donna GROVES: And the relationships – you need to own the relationships. I could not agree more that you should have more staffers that own the relationship. Sure, use consultants with back end knowledge. There are not many of us that have 25, 30 years experience anymore. We are probably not likely to come back and work for government, but we are happy to help out in the background – not that there is anything wrong with working for government, but we have done our time.

Amy HUBBARD: Can I just add one thing about good engagement. Engagement is about a relationship, and every time the community, the general public, step into a conversation, which is called engagement, it is like a new process. There is a start date and there is an end date. Every year Victorians are presented with hundreds of opportunities to participate in these things called engagement. Where does that data and information sit, and is there a golden thread between those conversations? At any one point in time, can you go in and have a look at the types of public conversations an individual or a lobby group might be having with the state or local governments? You cannot. So at the moment we are in an environment where engagement is very fragmented, and the community find it very challenging to navigate. Ninety-nine per cent of Victorians do not participate in public engagement processes. But where does that data and information go? We should be building on those conversations, not starting afresh every time the state determines we are going to go again.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Mrs Tyrrell, did you want to ask a question?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, thank you. Leading on from that, Amy, you just said 99 per cent of Victorians do not participate in public engagement. How can we get them to engage more?

Amy HUBBARD: How can we get them to engage more? We go to them.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay.

Amy HUBBARD: We go out to the community. We do not expect them to go to an online platform. A survey is a great research and feedback tool. Is it engagement? I do not think so, and I am a social scientist. So it is understanding who our community is. In every community there are louder voices, but people living with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse people, people in remote and regional areas, young people, First Nations people – they are the people that we are not seeing stepping into these public engagement processes, because we do not create them in an accessible way. For most people, attending a public forum is fairly off-putting.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Definitely. Thank you. You mentioned before that engagement has changed over time. Do you think we still have a lot more to go before we can reach these individuals, and how do you think we can do that better?

Amy HUBBARD: Before COVID, as practitioners I think we were being really creative in how we went out and engaged in different areas, and we would have conversations with communities about how they wanted to participate in government decision-making. People were really extending themselves. Then the pandemic happened and everything went online. I can remember at one point in time a client of mine was saying that their community could not get online, because quite a few Victorians cannot get online, so we used a very creative tool called the telephone. In COVID it really narrowed, and I think since then we have not come out and embraced innovation and creativity and we have not taken the time to go out to communities and ask them how they want to participate. I think we were progressing, then there was a relapse, because the whole world for a couple of years – you know. I think we have got a fair way to go.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

Marion SHORT: Just building on what Amy is saying, though, I think there is an important point around building on data with communities, because in terms of consultation fatigue, quite often communities are just

frustrated because they do not know what happened with the last piece of advice and guidance or input they provided. Closing the loop on communities' input into decision-making is equally important. I do think that there is the opportunity to create community wikis of all the consultation that is going on in my community at the moment. What are some of the challenges and impacts, where are our heritage sites, our cultural sites, our protected trees? If you raise community awareness and you give them access to a single source of truth about what is going on, you are going to manage a whole stack of things: you are going to get better engagement, you are going to manage misinformation and disinformation and you are going to build education and awareness of what is happening in my community. But also, what is engagement?

Donna GROVES: Can I just also add that it is about building those relationships. If you have staffers within government that are community engagement specialists and they continually engage with the same people, you are getting them the first time and then you are getting them back – you are getting those hard-to-engage-with people.

Also, best practice is asking the community how they want to be engaged. There is nothing worse than going out to the community and saying, 'This is how you will be engaged.' Ask them, and they will tell you. There are different regional communities; different regional communities want different things. Give them the options, tell them about our tools, but ask them: how would you like to be engaged, how can we best represent your community? I would argue as well, as politicians, you know your communities well – I mean, you are out there campaigning, you are doorknocking, you are speaking to them, and that data should form part of the project data, in my opinion.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, ladies.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: I want to go to the question about consultation fatigue, and I want to just explore that. What are your findings, research or evidence around consultation fatigue? Because whilst I understand that some groups are left out more broadly, that has been recognised by governments, and then those groups are overwhelmingly consulted on many, many things. I am interested to understand best practice findings, research and evidence around consultation fatigue and what recommendations you might have around that particular phenomenon in the engagement.

Marion SHORT: I just want to open with saying consultation fatigue does pick up those people that are just choosing not to be consulted with because they are disenfranchised with the consultation processes. Amy and Donna, would you like to jump in on this one?

Donna GROVES: Yes, I can talk to this. You have got Professor Sara Bice coming this afternoon from the Crawford School at ANU, and they have just done a massive survey on engagement professionals in infrastructure. Consultation fatigue is a big part of that, and the data is pretty clear. A lot of the consultation fatigue unfortunately is talking to those talking heads that we see over and over again. They are being overconsulted partly because they want to be overconsulted. Then when we come to infrastructure – areas like the Monash – there is construction fatigue because there are so many different projects in the same area because you have got big growth. So you have got the two drivers as well. But I know Amy has some research around that as well.

Amy HUBBARD: Yes. Consultation fatigue means different things in different communities. It can boil down to mistrust: 'Too many opportunities', 'My contribution going into the black hole'. So there are many reasons. As I mentioned before, it is overwhelming for members of the public to try and navigate these spaces. I think we always have to acknowledge that at the start, and there have been some really creative responses to that.

The Major Transport Infrastructure Authority, pre-COVID, created a framework for their engagement which was place-based, because there were so many transport conversations going on in communities. Instead of having eight different projects in the one suburb or activity centre, with eight different lines of communication and public forums, they rolled them up into a single conversation. This is much more user-friendly, because I think we forget about the users or the participants of these engagement processes. There is another example in Launceston. When the City of Launceston mapped out their engagement over the year, they had nearly 50 engagements across all their different plans and policies. They bundled that up into four conversations

across the year. There were higher level themes, and again, it was much more user-friendly and much more accessible to the community.

Fatigue is different things in different communities, and there are different ways to respond to it. But again, it is about looking at engagement creatively and finding those innovative opportunities, and not just the rinse and repeat, talking to the community.

Marion SHORT: I think also a growing area of awareness that we have is cultural load. We do not have much data or research on this, but we are very aware of, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the increasing cultural load of engagement and expectation for them to be interested in engaging on everything. What I really like about Amy's example from the City of Launceston is looking at engagement as a strategic part of, in that case, the council's responsibilities to the community. They elevated it and considered it in terms of what it is that they really want to engage on and how they do this more strategically. Amy is using the word 'creatively', but I hear strategy there.

Donna GROVES: Can I just add, Amy is talking best practice; that is not happening generally in the field. As someone who is delivering the projects, that is not happening, I would get on the phone from the Monash or North East Link to other people to find out what was going on and occasionally we had cross-departmental working groups, but that is the exception. That is best practice; that is beautiful. We should all do that, but we are not at present.

Sheena WATT: Which spoke to my question. Thank you, I appreciate that. I will cede the rest of my time, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries, that is fine. We are just about up here. I might go to Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for coming today and your contribution to this inquiry. I represent Northern Victoria. There are a couple of practical things I would appreciate your insights on – practical examples. VNI West is a major transmission project, and there have been communities that feel it has been such a difficult process right from the word go – changing routes without explanation, wrong information in guides that went out or a lack of information about compensation, for example. Just today in the paper there is a story about Barry Batters, who is saying he is willing to go to jail over some of these things, he is so frustrated. Piles of papers are being given to people with very little time for farmers to digest the information. I went to an information session where there was a security guard. I went to another information session where they had a closed door. I asked to go in, and they said, 'No, you can't go in there.' They had individuals set up at tables that you were allowed to go to. There have been protests, and government politicians have not attended those. I consistently hear from the community that level of frustration. I am just interested in your insights as professionals. As we look to this inquiry, what recommendations can we give to improve community consultation? As Barry Batters said in the paper today, it feels like they are ticking the boxes when it comes to consultation, but I think there are a lot of people who feel like they are not being listened to. I want to hear your practical insights into how to improve that or what you are seeing.

Marion SHORT: I think there are two key challenges there. You have got current projects that are underway, and then what do future projects look like, because trying to manage that level of opposition and outrage in current projects is a challenge. But there is the opportunity to ensure that future projects start off better, although you will have to manage community mistrust in them. Certainly at the Engagement Institute we have been working on and are about to launch an organisational engagement maturity assessment tool – launching in September, so we are very close. We will be able to certify organisations' engagement maturities so that when government make decisions around proponents, organisations or even themselves – what their level of engagement is – they can make better decisions. Certainly working with people who do engagement well is going to be a really important first step, but where you are now is tough.

Donna GROVES: I have been on projects that have blown up. My practical solution is you draw a line in the sand, you redo your plan, you look at your team, you look at your information and you are honest with the community. In the best project I ever worked on we went out to the community and said, 'We've stuffed up. We've made a mistake.' They got cross-government and opposition officials. They sat down and they said, 'We actually want to deliver this project. It's really important.' It does not matter if I say what the project is, because it was in Sydney. It was WestConnex, so you had half the city being impacted. A third of the

population of the state was being impacted. They very clearly said, 'We've made mistakes. There's been problems. These are what they are. Let's draw it in the sand. Let's start again.' That was the history, we were being transparent and we turned it around. The project was delivered on time, on budget and mostly with community support. When we did not have support, we had people understanding what had occurred. Sometimes I really think it is that simple. I think it is being open, transparent and agreeing that we have got issues. The Murray–Darling Basin and consultation on that is another one. Let us talk about it. You have got federal and you have got state governments – I get it. I understand we have all got different agendas. Communities are like that as well. But we can deliver things better, and we can do better community engagement. I really think openness, transparency and the wellbeing of the community are the most important.

Amy HUBBARD: Just a couple of comments there: it sounds like the projects are on the run, so there is there is not enough time there, and that is what we are seeing. I observe across government that projects are all time-sensitive for whatever reason, and I do understand that. My advice would be that government really need to reflect on when they do engage, because if – what is the metaphor? – you are building the plane as you are flying it, then that is what the engagement looks like as well. Engagement is a strategic process. Best practice would be you plan for 60 per cent of your time. You deliver your engagement for 20. The other 20 per cent of the time you are closing the loop – you are looking at the information you are getting back to people. I do believe that if you have to engage security for a public event, it is probably not the right time to engage or it is not the right tool to be using. But there are other issues. For me, that is like disengagement

Marion SHORT: And perpetuating it.

Amy HUBBARD: But it is the time factor.

Marion SHORT: I also think one of the engagement profession's superpowers is to be able to translate great screeds of technical information into language that communities can understand, and you have got to give your engagement teams time to be able to do that. There is no point giving community a whole stack of technical information in a short amount of time – and even if you gave them a long amount of time, would they understand it? So let the engagement teams do their job. They partner really well with allied professionals. You know, planners, project managers, engineers – they are very good at this. Give them the time.

The CHAIR: That is time. I might go online to Mr Ettershank if he is there.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. It is much appreciated. And thank you to the folks for their submissions this morning – very thoughtful. I think at this stage in the inquiry we are trying to just be clear on exactly what we are talking about and understand the subject. So could I perhaps ask: is there a difference between engagement and consultation? Because the two terms seem to have been used virtually interchangeably. Perhaps if I could just toss that question first for hopefully a fairly brief response.

Marion SHORT: Reading the materials from Victoria, it feels like 'consultation' is being used as we intend 'engagement' to be used. It is being used as an umbrella term. To give you an example, the IAP2 spectrum provides a definition and a promise for 'consultation' that is really about working with the community on options. If you then think about your deliberative engagement requirements here in Victoria, they would sit at the higher end of the spectrum, which is around 'collaborate' and 'empower'. The spectrum is a tool for decision-makers regarding the level of influence a community has in a decision. From a practitioner perspective, when we look at words like 'inform', 'involve', 'consult', 'collaborate' and 'empower', we look back to the definition that sits in the spectrum. That is why we use the word 'engagement' as our umbrella term. But given, when you talk about 'consultation', the disconnect between the spectrum's definition of consult and your expectations around deliberative engagement, our interpretation of how you are using this 'consultation' is more as an umbrella term.

David ETTERS HANK: In terms of just recent practical experience, I am looking at the Melbourne Water consultation, where it seems to have been largely individualised. There are these pop-ups. They are basically very nice and well meaning but low-level staffed to provide some information. I think in the case of the Melbourne Water ones, everyone was rather staggered in that it is about, obviously, flood mitigation, and there were eight plastic tubes, each of which had a heading, like 'biodiversity', 'your home', 'infrastructure', 'community and culture', 'water assets'. Everyone was given a ball, and they had to put into one of the eight tubes which was your priority to save in the event of a flood. Now, when staff were asked, 'Well, surely that

depends on who, what, where, when, how,' it was like, 'Oh, no, no. We're just counting this, so we need to find out what the community thinks.' It strikes me that in many of these circumstances 'consultation' has been reduced to issue management. I think for many in the community their 'consultation' appears in lovely little infographics, which then look a hell of a lot like gaslighting. I am wondering your thoughts on the pop-up and the individualised approach to engagement.

Donna GROVES: The mayor I dealt with in Queensland quite recently said it was a 'divide and conquer' mechanism, and she felt like it treated the community disrespectfully. She did not use the word 'gaslighting', but I can see your point of view on that. It can be tokenistic. Some of our engagement is simply around ticking the boxes, and that is not best practice and not what any of us would advocate for. I have worked closely with Melbourne Water over the years. I was not involved in the balls, I am glad to say, but I can see your point. That is simplistic, and communities are smarter than that and do deserve better information. That is personal opinion of course, but that is certainly the way I operate in the field.

Amy HUBBARD: I just want to make one comment about the individualised approach. An element of leading practice engagement is to bring the diversity of voices together. Whether they are in a physical room or an online forum, they need to be able to hear each other's views, because until they understand that people may think, feel or value things that are different to their own, they are not able to accept that perhaps the government might think, feel or value something different to what they think. Fundamentally, in engagement people need to have access to the views of others in the public domain. How that is done – there are many different ways. But when it is that sort of vacuum approach, it is very much a risk management approach – 'We'll keep everyone separated; we're not going to share anything, and then we'll make a decision.' We want to leave communities in a better place than when we got there, we want to create connections and we want to build knowledge and understanding, so keeping people separated is poor practice engagement.

Donna GROVES: Yes. I would say that Engage Victoria, being a survey mechanism now, is probably doing the same sort of thing. It originally had a lot more functionality. There are some great tools in the market where you can engage online in a meaningful manner, where you get good feedback and where you can share that feedback among communities. People are less likely to be vehement if they understand other points of view as well and they understand other motivations.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks. Mr Ettershank.

Marion SHORT: I just want to add to that question. So a pop-up is a method, as is a survey or a town hall or a deliberative engagement. We currently have over 70 methods. I think this relates back to the point around the strategy behind engagement and the purpose of engagement. You need to choose the method that suits the complexity, scale, resourcing and timeframes of the project. I think sometimes there is a mismatch between how we want to engage, the method, and the complexity, scale, resourcing, budget and timeline even.

David ETTERS HANK: Can I ask then – I am conscious of time – recognising that consultation is not engagement, it is a subset: can you provide the committee with something, and I am happy to take this on notice, which actually defines what represents good consultation practice, as opposed to the more generic engagement?

Amy HUBBARD: I am happy to provide examples. It would be selecting a range of tools to engage the community that reflect their needs in the participatory process and their values. Consulting the community using a single online tool like Engage Vic is not good practice. But you could use Engage Vic combined with, you know, establishing a reference group, having some public workshops or focus groups around specific cohorts – those that are under-represented in the public process. But every engagement process is different, and you need to give people different options at different times to participate. If they do not like the outcome, they attack the process. The first thing they say is 'Your tools were not accessible', so you need to use mixed methods in your engagement. So that is what is important, those mixed methods. And when we say Engage Vic, it is very much 'consult Vic'. It should be rebranded, because that is what the tool is at the moment. Previously it was a lot more.

The CHAIR: All right. I might go to Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks very much. I am just looking at your core values here for public participation and best practice. I am going to just pick out a couple of those. You say that public participation:

is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.

The second one is:

includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

Another one is:

seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.

And the last one is:

communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

Do you think that that is happening with consultation by the state government in Victoria?

You can say yes or no.

Amy HUBBARD: You have pockets of excellence in Victoria, but –

Wendy LOVELL: Can you give us an example of a pocket of excellence, because I have not seen any.

Amy HUBBARD: Wannon Water authority. There are pockets. But it is coming back to that issue of time and strategic thought and understanding communities, having that conversation with them about the engagement process before we actually engage, building that awareness – all those things in the core values. If you deliver on those core values, that is leading practice in this state. We do not have a lot of that at the moment. Let me reflect on where the pockets are. But it really is about the leaders in the organisations, and it is about the shared responsibility –

Wendy LOVELL: Isn't it about the leadership from government? You talk about Wannon Water. That is a government authority, so really it is leadership from government. Let me give you an example of consultation that Mrs Tyrrell and I are involved in; in fact it is how we first met. We were told in Greater Shepparton that the government were going to close our four secondary schools and we would have one secondary school. We were not consulted – the town did not want that – and the facilitated discussions and consultation were actually insulting to the community. The one in Mooroopna was held at school pick-up time; the one in Shepparton was held over family dinnertime. For every two members of the public that were at them, if you sat at a table of eight, there would have been four teachers, two people from the department and two members of the public at that table. It was then: 'Oh, write everything, your ideas and what you want, on Post-it notes, go and stick it on a bit of butcher's paper or on the wall somewhere, and then we'll pick which ones are discussed.' It was an absolute disgrace. The so-called independent member at the time backed that plan and lost her seat over it. But there was really no discussion, no taking the community with you. It was just: 'We know what's best for your kids, and this is what we're imposing on you.' It was an absolute disaster, and we see that so often.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, it has turned out to be an absolute disaster.

Amy HUBBARD: It does not sound like engagement, it does not sound like consultation, and this is where people are hiding behind those terms and it is very much a 'tick the box' process. It is really disappointing and devastating your communities in particular.

Marion SHORT: And you can see how it does not align with our core values. You just almost spoke to all of them as being what went wrong there.

Wendy LOVELL: But so often when there have been discussions with individuals in communities about big projects, there are, built into those discussions, confidentiality clauses that they cannot discuss with their neighbours what they are discussing with the proponents of the projects and things like that. This just seems to be standard procedure in Victoria at the moment.

Marion SHORT: I understand there is a bit of a shift, particularly with the energy transmission, to take some of those confidentiality provisions out, which I think will be a very good thing moving forward, because communities do talk. They all do know, and it just creates this distrust and mistrust. As an organisation, we have really started to say the single source of truth is going to be really important for some of these significant projects that we need to deliver.

Wendy LOVELL: So how would you suggest that a government start if they have a project that they know is going to be terribly unpopular but needs to be done, whether that is a road that is going to go through a community where properties have to be acquired, whether it is transmission lines that are going to go through farming properties, where people are not going to be happy but we need to get the electricity from one place to another? How do you begin those discussions without setting a fox amongst the chickens?

Marion SHORT: I think – and we have been saying this a lot at the Engagement Institute in all of our government meetings at various levels – that if you can only do one thing, and I am actually going to ask you to do more, it would be to embed an engagement professional, like one of these two wonderful women who have joined me today, as a technical expert onto your advisory groups. It would significantly shift the dial in terms of engagement practices.

Moving on from there, I think a clear and consistent definition of engagement is absolutely critical. We all need to make sure we are talking about the same thing, don't we? We need to set and maintain minimum standards for engagement. We have to be really clear what those expectations are. All today you would have heard me talking about elevating engagement to that strategic level. It is quite often an afterthought or 'Oops, we'd better do this'. Your school example sounds like that. And there is the opportunity to link the requirement for engagement to funding. You just make it a mechanism of government right there.

The CHAIR: Okay. I might go to Dr Mansfield

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. That has all been really interesting. I guess further to what you are saying and some of the comments that have been made by others, so often we see poor community engagement – or at least perceptions of that amongst the community – ending up slowing down or frustrating the progress of different types of projects. It seems to happen quite often, and it also just reduces community acceptance of different projects and potentially causes them to be wound back. I mean, you have outlined what sound like some quite logical tools and some structural changes around engagement that could be made. Why do you think it is so often done poorly?

Marion SHORT: I think in terms of all of our policy calls to action, they are the things that we are seeing – that is, that we are not seeing engagement being considered at a strategic level by organisations. They are starting late. There is misinformation and disinformation. There is a sentiment of community distrust already because of the school engagement. It does not matter that it is an energy transmission project or not, it is already there. There is lack of transparency, of quality information. Screeds of technical information being provided to you a week before a town hall that you are just not going to understand makes it feel like organisations have got something to hide.

Now, you will hear from Dr Sara Bice later today. We are an investor in their research program around the social value and social risk, which does put a financial cost on community opposition and outrage to projects. So we know that they are having a significant fiscal impact on projects. Its impact on Australia's GDP is also high. Better-functioning towns and cities could increase our GDP by 29 per cent. We need to do it better in the first place so that we do not cost more money, but there are equally as many case studies for really wonderful projects that are delivered on time and on budget because the engagement has gone well.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, and that was actually going to be my next question: do you have some examples of really good engagement that you can provide for the committee?

Wendy LOVELL: That would be good.

Amy HUBBARD: We can do that.

Marion SHORT: We can absolutely do that. We have an extensive case study library of past engagement excellence award winners. We call them our core values award winners. We would be very happy to provide them to the committee.

Amy HUBBARD: Can I just say one thing?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Amy HUBBARD: There is no oversight of our public engagement processes in Victoria. As I said, it is fragmented. Different organisations go about it in a different way, and at any time in the state there are literally thousands of public engagement processes going on, when you have got 79 local governments as well. Imagine a world where we had a community engagement advocate that sat adjacent to the state government, like they have in the financial services sector, someone that just across government could see what was happening, could set those standards and work with the likes of the Engagement Institute or other organisations to have that oversight. Because at the moment, where does the buck stop? What do you do if you have a complaint, you know, about the process? I have been reflecting on that a lot, because in other sectors that does work really well. So I just wanted to put that out there.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, great. With these examples of good engagement, are there common features? Have they done things like some of those structural changes or policy changes that you are suggesting where they have embedded engagement in the overarching strategy or sought advice early? What are some of the common features when it is done well?

Marion SHORT: That is a great question. These are some of the elements of engagement that we have built into our EngageMark, which is our certification tool. What is true of excellent engagement is that there is a culture, leadership and governance of engagement embedded in organisations, so it is from the very top. And it is beyond that – these organisations have systems and resourcing to support their engagement practice. Their capability is high, they build relationships and they have got excellent First Nations capability embedded within their organisation, so these nine contemporary elements of engagement sit in our certification tool. This is true of all of our past core value award winners: they have leadership, culture and governance of engagement, together with great engagement processes, good impact analysis and good evaluation. It is a suite of things, and we say there are nine.

The CHAIR: We are out of time for this session, unfortunately. Thank you all so much for coming in today. I think it has been a really great way for us to start the inquiry. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript following today's proceedings for review. With that, the committee will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.