

# **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

Professor Carolyn Hendriks, ARC Future Fellow (*via videoconference*), Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University; and

Professor Sara Bice, Director, Institute for Infrastructure in Society; Co-Founder and Director, Next Generation Engagement, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. Welcome, Professor Bice and Professor Hendriks. Thank you so much for joining us here today.

All the evidence that we are taking 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 hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this 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 hearings. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Welcome to you both. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of this committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask my fellow committee members to introduce themselves.

**Wendy LOVELL:** I am Wendy Lovell, and I am a Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Hello, I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

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

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

**David ETTERS HANK:** Good morning. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** If I can ask you both to just state your names and the organisations you are appearing on behalf of for the Hansard record.

**Sara BICE:** I am Sarah Bice from the Australian National University.

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** My name is Carolyn Hendriks. I am also from the Australian National University.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to you both. It is a pretty straightforward format. We will hand over to you, if you would like to make an opening statement, and then we will get into questions from the panel. Who wants to go first?

**Sara BICE:** Carolyn is going to first on our team.

**The CHAIR:** There you go. Thanks, Carolyn.

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** Great. Thank you for this opportunity. I am joining you from Canberra, and so I pay my respects to the Ngunnawal people here, on whose land I stand. I want to thank you for the opportunity to share some of my research and educational perspectives. I am a professor at the ANU, and I have been working as a researcher for over 25 years in the field of community consultation and broadly on democratic aspects of public policy. I have worked as a practitioner as well in community consultation, designing and facilitating deliberative processes for state and local government around Australia and internationally. An essential theme of my research has been to better understand how community consultation practices, especially innovative ones, can productively work alongside other forms of political participation such as advocacy, lobbying,

community organising and voting. In this work I have examined participatory practices in a variety of spaces, including government, the private sector, civil society organisations and also parliaments and their committees, including research on this Parliament. I currently hold a four-year ARC Future Fellowship project examining how elected representatives engage and connect with their communities.

The other perspective I bring to the committee is that of an experienced educator of public participation. I have taught foundational elective courses on the practice and politics of public participation at several universities, educating well over a thousand masters students, most of whom are public servants. My students have taught me many things about the challenges and possibilities of doing effective consultation, particularly from their perspective as public servants in middle management.

As a longstanding researcher and educator working in this field, my overarching recommendation to the committee is that we do not need more handbooks on how to do community consultation, more innovative methods or more best practice guidelines. These all exist and have done so for decades. Instead we need to work on changing the way public servants, decision-makers and consultants value, understand and approach community consultation.

For the Victorian government, I recommend three core areas of change, which I will now briefly outline. The first one is to think about and work on embedding participatory values and knowledge into the public sector. We need to shift from understanding consultation as something that a particular person or a consultant does to something valued and recognised in the public sector for delivering that core public value that the public expect of our government organisations. Like OH&S, community consultation needs to be embedded in all levels of the public sector, from senior executives right down to frontline staff. This needs to be done through strong leadership, champions and staff training. It requires a commitment to building infrastructure – that is, teams and systems – to not just design and commission community consultation but also systems for listening and processing public input. This is a long-term process about building systems for community consultation and ownership in the outcomes, addressing the common criticism from the public that no-one pays attention to the outcome of their efforts.

The second area of change is to boost participatory design capacity in the public sector. Governments often outsource consultation to external consultants for their expertise and for independence, but the public sector need internal capabilities to know where consultation fits into their programs, what questions to ask and how to commission, select and evaluate consultants. Skills in design rather than method selection need to be the focus here. Too often decision-makers, public sector agencies and consultants run directly to the innovative method before thinking broadly about purpose, promise and prospects of consultation for a given issue or context. The fundamentals of participatory design include bringing leaders on board from the start and co-designing, ideally, the process with them; determining the level of influence and your promise; getting agreement on the fundamental question you are asking the community; understanding the people and the context of the issue and the opportunity; designing objectives, inputs and outputs at each stage before moving on to methods; and following up with the community about the process.

The third and final area of change is to think about participation as building participatory relationships. We need to shift from a mindset of consultation as a tool or a mechanism to viewing consultation as a relational exercise. Effective public engagement requires building relationships with the public, especially in low-trust environments. Relational work involves understanding the social and community fabric and working with that fabric and building that capacity. To do this effectively, we need to appreciate where communities are at. Are they hopeful, angry, disinterested? We need to understand participatory history – so is there a legacy of problematic consultation before we even go out and consult again? – working with and empowering existing community groups and communicating intentions and managing expectations as well. Without building relationships with communities, governments risk solving the wrong problem and thus getting the wrong outcome, or they risk involving the wrong people. Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Bice, do you want to make a statement?

**Sara BICE:** Yes, for sure. Thanks, Carolyn. Of course Carolyn and I are good colleagues, so we have had a discussion and we will try to complement and not repeat each other. I would like to also begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land where we are meeting, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. Thank you for having me. It is wonderful as a professional working in Canberra to be here but also

personally as a Melburnian. Despite the accent, I have called this my adopted home for more than a quarter of a century – strength of character.

Today I will be speaking from the angle of the Institute for Infrastructure in Society. Next Generation Engagement is our research implementation arm. It is where we go out and we actually put into practice the co-designed and co-produced research that we develop with government and industry. The institute exists to transform the relationship between major projects and communities, and we have been doing this work now since 2017. I myself have been a professional in practice in social, gender and human rights impact assessment, having led the global membership organisation the International Association for Impact Assessment as their president for a number of years and also previously worked with non-profit and parliamentary authority groups, including the Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust, around community and international development programs, all involving extensive community consultation and engagement.

The work that we do at the institute directly engages government, industry, civil society and communities, and there we co-design, co-produce and implement research outcomes. Indeed the Victorian government, through what was originally the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority and now VIDA, the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority, is one of our institute's founding partners, and we continue to work together. These founding partners work with us alongside other governments, including state governments in Queensland, South Australia and the ACT, and also private sector firms including Transurban and Lendlease, among many others. The state of Victoria makes a sound and I believe genuine effort to engage community members across a wide variety of public concerns. As a Victorian I see this regularly, and as a Melburnian I receive many 'Participate Melbourne' emails, so I do think that there is a genuine effort to better understand and advance best practice consultation, and that is to be commended.

To support your efforts today for improvement, I am going to focus on my area of expertise, which is major project delivery, and that includes renewable energy projects. I will today suggest five recommendations based on the institute's longstanding research and in direct response to the inquiry's key areas of interest. Our recommendations are, first, to adopt place-based approaches to consultation – and I am sure some of these will very much reflect what others have said already today; secondly, ensure quality of consultation through certification, and I will detail all of these a bit in a moment; thirdly, remove requirements for non-disclosure agreements wherever possible; fourth, prioritise inclusive human interactions and long-term relationships; and fifth, Carolyn and I are in deep agreement that we should encourage and expect principles-based consultation, not compliance-based. I am going to speak very briefly to each of these recommendations to ground them in evidence, and then I will welcome your questions.

Adopting place-based approaches to consultation – people live in places, not projects. Just yesterday the New South Wales Parliament released their inquiry report into their renewable energy zones, and again this is an aligned area that is in conversation now in Victoria. The report found that REZ consultations have been inadequate, and it focused heavily on the need for cumulative impact assessments. I2S's 'Australian Perspectives on Infrastructure' national study found that where communities are experiencing six or more projects in their local government area – and we did study metropolitan, regional and rural communities here in Victoria as part of that major study of more than 7000 members of our Australian community – those community members are far more likely than their counterparts experiencing fewer projects to report that they have poor relationships with government and developers. They are far more likely than others to say that their treatment has not been transparent, so they are less likely to agree that there has been transparency in processes. They are more likely than their counterparts to have a really good understanding of formal planning processes, and what this means is that they are then better equipped to engage effectively in opposition through things like public submissions. And finally, they are far less likely than other members of our communities to agree that there is a good overall planning picture for their communities.

What does this tell us? It tells us that there is a real need to begin approaching the way that we consult communities beyond project-by-project approaches and meeting communities where they are at by adopting place-based approaches. Cumulative-impact assessment is a very well developed approach. Fortunately, as Carolyn mentioned, there are lots of principles and frameworks available. We do not need to lay the groundwork or build new tools and frameworks; what we need to do is make better use of the existing standards, frameworks, tools and assessment approaches available to us already. For example, with cumulative-impact assessments, our institute offers social due diligence, which is a cumulative-impact assessment approach that is evidence based, where we work with government, communities and proponents to understand

communities' priorities; to identify social risks, which are non-technical risks on projects within communities; to pinpoint opportunities to boost resilience; and also to create social value, which is incredibly important.

In terms of then ensuring the quality of these consultations, community engagement should be embedded within projects, and consultation should be delivered to a standard and with a regularity that we would expect of our engineers or our risk managers. We should be expecting that same consistency of quality from what we often think of as the non-technical work as we do of the technical work. Currently there are a number of available certification schemes which government guidelines or requirements could use to ensure that there is appropriate certification of the individuals and consultants doing community consultation. The Engagement Institute, formerly IAP2, was here previously. IAP2 certification is very widely known and acknowledged as a leading standard for certification. You may also not know that the certified environmental practitioner scheme, which is based here for the country in Victoria – they are just over in Box Hill – recently launched the world's first social impact assessment practitioner certification scheme. There is an opportunity for the Victorian government to work with groups like the environmental practitioner scheme to consider whether you might require social practitioners to be certified in the same way that we require it of environmental practitioners, and that certification is now available.

Removing requirements for non-disclosure agreements wherever possible – public submissions to this inquiry make it very clear that NDAs, or confidentiality agreements, are being widely used by consultants carrying out consultations, and we know that is true particularly in the renewable energy sector. This is not appropriate, and it really should be discouraged. NDAs do not protect community members. Usually what happens is that they sow seeds of community division, limit transparency and close down critical opportunities for robust discussion within communities. Trust and social cohesion are vital to thriving communities, and NDAs, intentionally or unintentionally, undermine this.

We should also prioritise inclusive human interactions and long-term relationships. So again, public submissions to this inquiry regularly note the lack of relationships between those undertaking the consultations and the local community, and our research bears this out. Trust which is formed over time via high-quality relationships is vital to meaningful community consultation and – I have heard this term has come up earlier today – a social licence to operate. Place-based approaches further require consistent contacts who understand and respect the communities with whom they are working. That does not necessarily preclude the use of external consultants, let me make that clear. Instead, like place-based approaches, it encourages a rethink of subcontracting and innovative ways to support that the same appropriately qualified people are building relationships in particular communities across projects and consultations.

Finally, it is encouraging and expecting principles-based consultation, not compliance-based. Community members do not have consultation fatigue. They have bad consultation fatigue. Our research shows this. Our research demonstrates that over one-fifth of the most consulted community members – so those individuals with the most projects happening around them simultaneously – would actually prefer more information and consultation about what is happening in their communities. And the majority say that they do want information and consultation, but they do not want ingenuine or disingenuous consultation. They do not want box-ticking processes that deliver little or no feedback, require them to interact repeatedly on similar issues with different people and are project-by-project focused. So yes, engagement should be articulated in compliance. It should definitely be there, and we should set at least a minimum threshold, and this includes through work like Victoria's gateway review processes. But our communities expect and do deserve more.

In closing, i2S runs Australia's largest longitudinal study of the community and social aspects of major project selection, planning and delivery. For almost eight years now our data shows that stakeholder and community pressure has been ranked by infrastructure sector professionals as among the top three most impactful factors for project delays and cancellations. So as Victoria continues to pursue its Big Build – and I really look forward to the Metro Tunnel opening because I live in Carlton – we need to think about how we better deal with consultation and to understand that community and stakeholder pressure is not only important so that we can deliver the social value through major investments but also, from a government investment perspective, it is vital to cost reduction and to avoiding costly delays and cancellations. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Professor Hendriks, I might start with you. You mentioned that one of the things you do is essentially professional development or work with senior public servants. How would you

describe the capability of our public sector cohorts with an understanding about what best practice engagement and consultation looks like, and what strategies have you found help improve that?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** That is a good question. I guess, as you would appreciate, it depends on which level of government you are sitting at. I definitely think the capacities at local and state government level are higher than at the federal level. I think that just reflects the distance between the public servants and their relationship with the public. Having said that, I also think some of the more innovative or experimental forms of engagement, particularly more community-led consultation, tend to surface in local and state governments. I think the capacity is bigger there than in the federal level. I do think there is genuinely quite a cautious approach taken to the community, and I still think there is quite a lot of the sense that we need to control the community – we need to have this process so that it does not get out of hand.

**The CHAIR:** Just on that, what do you think the driver of that caution is?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** I think it is a lot of history of antagonism being created by poorly designed community consultation. Just picking up on a lot of the things that Sarah said, I think communities feel often overwhelmed – there is a cumulation effect. Also, I think there is a fatigue with the lack of listening. I think that people from the get-go are quite cynical about what governments are trying to do. When there is a genuine attempt by an innovative project or a new department to do something that is embedded in all the principles that we have looked at today, I do think that it is difficult for well-meaning public servants and their consultants to do their work, because the public has such a legacy that they are dealing with. So a bit of history, and I do think that it is also that people in your position, elected members, tend to have a lot more faith and connection to everyday people. Unfortunately, I think some of the most cynical, cautious and probably elite perspectives come from that middle- to senior-level bureaucrat, if I am honest.

**The CHAIR:** That is a very interesting observation. I reflected recently to a group of people I was doing some work with in a workshop that often when sitting around some of those big decision-making tables the elected representatives have got a better connection to the communities than many of the senior public servants. How do you think we improve that? How do you think we change that?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** I do know of champions within the public sector in Victoria and other jurisdictions that really have driven a culture of valuing participation. I think that is where it starts. It is very much like OH&S and inclusion ideals. I think this has to be really led from the top but also valued right down at the street level. I do think some of those frontline workers are now dealing with a lot of angst in the community and that distrust is the thing that they receive when they are trying to deliver services. I think it is both a work health and safety issue – so making sure our frontline workers are actually valued and safe in the work they do – and also that from all levels of the public sector there is a recognition that this is about delivering public value. If we do not have a relationship with the public that is constructive and values their knowledge and their input, then the service delivery and all the things that government is trying to do will be harder.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I am going to go to Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you to both of you. I am interested in non-disclosure agreements. I am trying to get my head around: do you have any analysis of the quantum of their use and the level? Where a Parliament inquiry is making recommendations to the Victorian state government, how widespread are they? Where do we see them most? You might need to take that on notice, Professor.

**Sara BICE:** That one we would have to take on notice. I am even struggling to think where we would find out centrally the extent to which different consultancies or projects are requiring those. There is, I suppose, a level of confidentiality as to whether NDAs are being used, which can make them difficult to –

**Melina BATH:** To ascertain.

**Sara BICE:** Exactly. We face similar challenges around impact assessments. Often in impact assessments there will be a claim made that the report is commercial in confidence, so communities may not be able to access the information in the way that would be most helpful. We can certainly take it on notice and we can have a think about it, but I am not immediately sure that it is something that we could discover.

**Melina BATH:** There is a shadow.

**Sara BICE:** I would say so. Carolyn, would that –

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** The only thing I can think of is we have colleagues that are doing a lot of work on renewable energy in New South Wales. Rebecca Colvin is an associate professor here in our school. She may have insights, because she does a lot of grounded work and renewable energy work up in the Hunter, for example. I would say it would probably have to be through that in-depth groundwork, where people actually talk about their experiences, like they do in the submissions to this inquiry. It would probably have to be through that avenue that you would get a sense of it.

**Melina BATH:** That is fine. Thank you. It is a really important thing. I have got examples in my electorate of Eastern Victoria and one in Bass in Inverloch where there is coastal erosion, and they are having meetings with the consultants and with the department of environment et cetera. My feedback from the community groups that are on them is that it is very frustrating when you have somebody in WA drawing lines on a diagram about the place that you are standing in right now, making professional comments. They are feeling they cannot trust that person, because there is not a relationship established – they are too far away from the place in which the issue is being raised. There is time and all of those sorts of things. But how does that improve? How can you improve that, and how do you manage the costs versus the community outcome?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** I can say something and then I will hand over to Sara, because that was one of her big points. I do think there is a lot of best practice in Indigenous engagement that we can draw on for other areas of Australia, particularly around working with the existing community elders, you might call them, or in a community like yours I am sure there are organisations and even the local government itself that could provide a brokerage role and that could introduce external consultants into the community. I think it is about using the relational fabric that is there and building trust through those networks, because what happens often is you get, exactly as your community has described, these external consultants that come in and people are retelling their stories, so to speak. This has been an ongoing problem in Indigenous communities, so I think there has been quite a lot of work in that space in Indigenous engagement to try and get around this fly-in, fly-out and also disrespectful engagement. And I do not think it just applies to Indigenous communities; I think it is the local communities.

**Melina BATH:** This one was in relation to coastal erosion, but I take very much on point your example as well. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might go to Mr Ettershank, if you do not mind.

**David ETTERSHPANK:** Thank you, Chair. Firstly, thank you. This has been an incredibly stimulating presentation and has really struck to a whole lot of the issues that I think many of us are wrestling with. In terms of trying to set a standard – because certainly I have been involved in a lot of different consultations and have certainly been pressured by government to sign NDAs, which I have refused to do; I think they are just abhorrent and totally antithetical to democratic consultation processes – a proposal was put up by one of the earlier presenters about having some sort of person or agency to oversee the quality of consultation that is being conducted by government or government agencies or consultants. What are your thoughts on that as a proposal, as a proposition? Is that actually a way to establish levels of standard?

**Sara BICE:** I will respond initially, and Carolyn will have some really good advice on this as well. I think on the one hand, immediately it seems like, yes, quality assurance is always something that can be very helpful, particularly if it vests within a trusted authority. But the flip side to that is that there will always then be public doubt as to the extent to which the government-based quality assurance is really acting in their favour. It goes to the root challenge of trust in government. That is really where I would encourage the Parliament to focus: how can we establish systems and processes which generate trust in government? The trust is the foundational key. So yes, you could put in oversight, but without public trust in that oversight you are probably only creating more onerous bureaucracy and potentially exacerbating the problem.

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** Yes, I tend to agree with Sara. I think maybe 20 years ago it would have been a great solution, but I think we are operating in such a low-trust environment, and not just towards government but also towards civil society organisations. This low-trust environment makes it very hard to then ask people not just to participate, but to then get them to believe that you are listening. So I think a better way to go is through this building of relationships, because trust comes from that relational network. I think work with the people in the

communities, the public that you are trying to connect with trust, and go from out that way. The other idea is also within professions, so working with the standards of the people who are doing this kind of work, with the Engagement Institute and others who have members. Let them set the standards so there is a community of practice that evolves around this kind of work. It is a marketplace. I have written on this; you are basically buying and selling democratic goods, so there are problems with it. But in my opinion, in Australia the marketplace has been very ethical in its conduct and the consultants are doing good work, but they are often situated in complex projects where they are not able to realise their full consultation exercise and they are sort of shoehorned into a particular part of a project.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Thank you. Could I ask, Professor Bice, given your earlier comments: is there a role or can you see any situation where NDAs would be acceptable in government consultation?

**Sara BICE:** That is an incredibly challenging question. I think if we look at some of the more sensitive issues where we may have community consultation – for instance, today with the announcements around CCTV in childcare centres – perhaps. Again I would differentiate between an NDA, which I would see as the proponent or government imposing on the person being consulted, and a confidentiality agreement, where the individual being consulted might say that they would value the opportunity to speak on condition of confidentiality or anonymity. That is quite important in instances where we would have sensitive community consultations. But whether an NDA is the appropriate tool – I would strongly question that in most instances.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you, Mr Ettershank. Ms Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you very much for your contribution to the inquiry. This is a little bit more specific, and you have not covered it, so I am just interested if you can make a comment. The Engage Victoria website is used a lot, and I guess there are concerns. I know we had a community group in Riddells Creek that had put in quite a number of submissions, but then the government came out and said there were 118 submissions, and then they went, ‘Hang on, no, no, that’s not right,’ and then it was later revised and over a thousand extra submissions came to light. I asked for an independent review; the government did an internal review and said the system is working fine. The earlier witnesses mentioned Engage Victoria could be ‘consult Victoria’ because it may not be fulfilling that purpose. Have you looked at that at all in Victoria – how you think that could be improved at all? What are your thoughts?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** Sara, do you want to have a go at this? I mean, I have some thoughts just based on the criticisms, but do you want to have a go as a Victorian?

**Sara BICE:** As a Victorian – yes. I think most Victorians are aware of Engage Victoria as a platform. Generally what we see with digital consultation is this challenge between the promise of being able to reach more people and engage more voices and the reality that what then occurs mostly with these digital platforms is very superficial engagement. Particular people tend to be the regular users of these types of platforms, so you are not necessarily getting more voices. If you look at some of the submissions to this inquiry, there are also groups and individuals who have said, ‘Where I live there’s not always reliable digital access, and so even though this is meant to expand participation, I’m feeling excluded.’

Another component of this, apart from concerns about whether all of the submissions to the digital platform have been received – and I cannot speak to Engage Victoria particularly – is that these types of platforms lend themselves to this aggregate amalgamation of concerns, and that can actually wash out very critical issues. Key questions, critical questions, can become lost. Very specific points that need to be addressed can become lost because they might be singular amongst many. What these platforms tend to do is to consolidate and aggregate and then provide a kind of summary picture. So I would agree with our colleagues’ earlier comments – I was not in the room – it is a form of consultation. I would not classify it as engagement per se. Carolyn?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** My understanding and knowledge of how it works is it really is a platform to then send people on, so it is more informing people about the opportunities for connecting and maybe consultation. But it only works if it is updated and if people can get access to it, and from the submissions that I have engaged with and read, I get the sense that that is quite patchy. Either the platform is not something that the community engages with or that they have difficulty accessing or there has been a history where it has not worked and so people no longer connect with it. There are lots of examples I am sure you have got from other speakers around other ways to do this. I know, for example, South Australia has a similar kind of platform,



which I think has been quite successful. So there are other jurisdictions in Australia that could provide a way forward there.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Another insight I am interested in your thoughts on is regional and rural versus metropolitan. Are there any challenges there in community engagement and consultation? Because I am in northern Victoria – it covers the top half of the state, a lot of those rural and regional areas and some regional cities like Bendigo. But it is challenging. I keep hearing from people feeling like it is just ticking a box with the consultation, and it is more like government is going ahead doing things and removing their ability to engage. I am interested in your thoughts about that. Also local councils – when I speak to them, if you have got any advice, because they seem to face a lot of challenges engaging with government. There are lots of decisions being made by the state and imposed on local councils, like the emergency services tax being introduced and collected by local councils, but they have got nowhere to move in being heard on that. But, yes, just your thoughts.

**Sara BICE:** Yes, this is a really important question. Our research into Australian communities' experiences does disaggregate metropolitan, regional and rural communities. One of the key things that research looked at was what the drivers are of project acceptance within local communities but also what the drivers are of resilience in those communities. One key distinction that we found between our metropolitan and outer communities is that in regional and rural communities a key driver for them is: 'How is this initiative or project going to directly benefit my community?' They are very, very concerned: 'How is this going to affect my local area? Will it change my quality of life? Will it change our community's identity?' And what we see with some of the opposition around renewable energy zones at the moment are concerns about: 'How is this going to change the identity, the look and feel of our community?' So that is a distinction between the metropolitan and regional and rural communities that is quite important.

The other question around local councils – we have two very good colleagues who are experts in local government authorities: Associate Professor Mark Chou, who is at the Australian National University in the Crawford School with us, and also Associate Professor Rachel Busbridge, who is here at the Australian Catholic University. They would be excellent to speak to in terms of local government engagement. One of the things that we are doing in the institute with local governments in Far North Queensland – so again, quite a remote area – is working with the state government through the Department of Transport and Main Roads to bring together a coalition of project proponents in the Burdekin area alongside the local government agencies. We are doing and have been doing cumulative impact assessment for that region, and with the government involved as a key player, the aim of that is to share that information then across all of the projects that are happening within those relevant LGAs. So it is not about one proponent holding the consultation information, it is about the government supporting a process which then creates contemporary data which can be shared by any and all proponents in a local area. It reduces consultation fatigue, it ensures that you have a broad understanding of a community and it empowers local government to have access to information that they might not otherwise be able to initiate or afford.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I might go to Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. I really appreciate all of the information you presented today. I guess one thing that I would be curious about, and you possibly touched on it in different ways, is that one perspective might be that if a government have been elected, they have a mandate to proceed with X, Y or Z. Perhaps the community that is being affected does not have significant electoral impacts for that government. From a government's perspective, what is the incentive to do better in terms of engagement if there are not those electoral incentives?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** I can come in here first, perhaps, Sara. I understand your question, and it is a good one, because I think sometimes the community wonders that as well: 'Why should I engage with this politician if I did not vote for them or this government?' I guess when it comes down to those place-based and even those service concerns that people have – or if it is infrastructure, the success of that project – those services are going to rely on the willingness and the legitimacy of people to hand over that legitimacy for that project. In China, for example, which you would think would not be a home of consultation, they do a lot of community consultation for these implementation issues alone. That is not to say that consultation should not be led by democratic ideas, but I think there are a lot of pure implementation and instrumental reasons for engaging the

public in order to get the best value out of the investment that you are making. Sara talked particularly about the private sector loss due to public outrage and antagonism, and I think it is even on that level.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes.

**Sara BICE:** And it is really tied up within a challenge. Our research demonstrates that approximately 74 per cent of members of the Australian public would agree or strongly agree that their opportunity for genuine consultation and engagement is reduced or even non-existent when a project or initiative is a political announceable. The feeling is that once it has become part of a campaign promise or a political agenda, there will not be genuine consultation. We have got about three-quarters of the Australian public having that feeling. There is also this question of how a government can act with mandates and at the same time build the trust necessary for genuine consultation.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I suppose you have asked that question, but I would be curious to know what the answer is to that, because so often we do see these big announcements, new infrastructure projects: 'We are going to be doing X, Y or Z.' We heard earlier from witnesses who said in an ideal world you would present a community with the problem you want to solve and let the community help to find the solution. The reality we are faced with is that we often have the solution or the announcement or the project already there. With that as a starting point, how can we work to rebuild that sense of trust or genuine participation and engagement with communities?

**Sara BICE:** I think Carolyn's point is very helpful to that, and that is thinking through how you can genuinely engage communities around the implementation process – that is critical. The other thing that our research demonstrates, which sometimes people find surprising, is that the vast majority of Australian community members we have surveyed say that they just want to know what the non-negotiables are. What is it that cannot be changed, that is not going to change, and can we then talk about the things that we could have some impact on. Often in project world there is a real reluctance to discuss non-negotiables; there is a concern that if we put these out there, people will become upset. But actually the public tell us that they just want to know what the playing field is and what they can move and not move. If they can start from that point, they feel more empowered, and I think you are more likely to get a better result.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. We might go to Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks very much. I think your presentation has been absolutely amazing this morning. Professor Hendriks, as a former minister, I totally agree with you about the disconnect with the senior public bureaucracy and the people. When I first became the housing minister I said, 'I want to go and I want to visit every housing office and speak to the frontline workers. I want to go onto the estates and speak to the tenants.' I had the secretary and the directors go the full Sir Humphrey on me as to why I could not do that, but we eventually turned that around and did it. There have been a lot of questions already asked, so it is sort of getting towards the end now. But I just wonder if you can give us some examples of where you think best practice consultation is being done, whether that be internationally or locally, and also your view on where Victoria would rate, maybe from one to 10, on the way we do consultation currently.

**Sara BICE:** Yes. I am conscious of time. A quick example locally is in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region. The Energy Charter has been working with the local government, local proponents and local community members there to develop something called the regional collaboration framework, and that goes exactly to place-based approaches for renewable energy. That framework is now being developed to be rolled out nationally by the Energy Charter, and they are launching it on 28 August. So that would be worthwhile.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Who put that together?

**Sara BICE:** The Energy Charter. They are a coalition of mostly private sector renewable energy corporations who are working together to encourage best practice community consultation and engagement for their projects.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. And where do you think Victoria rates?

**Sara BICE:** I am not into ranking, Wendy. I think it is a really tough question, because when we talk about community consultation it is an incredibly broad field. So where do we rank? Globally, Australians generally have an excellent opportunity to participate and engage and we are a socially democratic society, and that is important. I do think we are looking for improvement here, and that is good.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Are there any international examples we should look at of how they conduct consultation that is different to ours?

**Sara BICE:** I am trying to think of similarly sized populations. Singapore has some really, really interesting ways of going about public planning, but again not quite the same kind of government that we have here. They do take, and can do as a small island country, a very place-based approach. What they do is work with local communities over a period of usually about three years to establish a broad strategic vision for what needs to occur in local areas. Once that vision is established, the government then has a mandate to roll it out.

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** I will just come in here, because I do think Australia's geography is something we have not really touched on, and if we are drawing international examples, that is a really important thing to keep in mind. I tend to find Canadian examples are pretty useful, because they are also grappling with very diverse populations over large distances often, and that speaks to the rural–urban dimension. A couple of years ago I did a large project in the Goulburn–Murray. The thing that is so innovative, I think, that is coming out of that region is that the communities themselves are leading their own planning processes due to their own frustrations with being consulted on. I do think there are innovative approaches emerging, particularly in Victoria, but they are being driven by the community. Just before COVID your Parliament had a community inquiry on community responses to climate change, and many of you may remember the enormous examples that came out of that inquiry of just what communities are doing to lead problem-solving. I think more of that kind of consultation, with government coming in and facilitating and coming behind community-led responses, is really the direction we should be looking at.

I had a reflective conversation with the Victorian practitioner yesterday about where Victoria sits, and she was saying, 'I think Victoria is kind of the canary in the coalmine at the moment.' There are a lot of big infrastructure projects, it is feeling pressures and the public sector may be shrinking. There are a lot of issues, I think, that are in the Victorian government at the moment, and that may well be the way that some other jurisdictions are going to be going. I think there is an opportunity here for the Victorian government to really think about how we can continue doing best practice in this complex environment that we are governing in.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Mrs Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. Carolyn, in your opening statement – I hope I heard right, and I took this note down because you were saying a lot of very informative things – I think you mentioned that we need to improve on listening to and processing public input. Am I correct in saying that?

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** Yes. This has come out of some research actually from Brexit in the UK, when they did a lot of consultation and they were overwhelmed with public input. They were so overwhelmed that they had no systems in place to process the public input. So it was not just that they were not consulting, it was that they were not prepared in terms of infrastructure and systems to be able to get the information, distil it, work through it and make sure that the public then could see on the public record that their input had been received and crystallised in some way. I am sure your Parliament is wrestling with this a lot, with lots of submissions that it receives. It is a big issue as we move into AI. There are opportunities for AI in this space, but there are also problems because the volumes of public input, particularly in more submission-based processes, are overwhelming. It is something that a lot of parliaments around the world, a lot of governments, are really trying to work with: how can we use information systems and AI in productive ways to help process public input?

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Do you have anything to add to that, Sara?

**Sara BICE:** I will just go with what Carolyn says.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay, that is good. I think we may have touched on this a little bit with Dr Mansfield. Building relationships in low-trust environments: do you have any advice on how we could really dig into that a bit better? Because we are seeing, especially in regional Victoria, that there is a lot of trust lost in the government at the moment with these processes, so just trying to make it a little easier on everybody.

**Carolyn HENDRIKS:** I have been observing a community-led process in north-east Victoria for the last three years. What has been so interesting there is that there are place-based public servants. They might be working for what used to be RDV or the environment department, but they are of place – they are from that area in Victoria – and the people on those committees respect that. So I think it is about not just having place-based knowledge but place-based human beings in the room, because that enables people to see, ‘Okay, they understand the pressures that our community’s under, or the issues, or how we like to live’. There is a sort of immediate trust that is there. So I think it is about working with community-led approaches and bringing people from the community that people respect into the room from the go-get.

**Sara BICE:** Yes, I think that is absolutely critical. We are currently doing a project with Regional Development Australia in Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast. They are adopting exactly this approach, using local people, local experts and a broad definition of who is an expert – sometimes an expert is someone who has just been in a community a very long time – and involving them in a scoping exercise to discuss opportunities for new industries in the area. But we could apply this to any type of government policy, initiative or major project. What is critical, and comes out of our research as well, is that there is a very early opportunity to work with communities and trusted relationships to determine what it is that they prioritise in terms of livability factors for their local area and what benefits they are most looking for. What our research demonstrates is that where a project, policy or initiative can be shown to have direct or indirect improvements to those things they care about most, not only does that likely improve the acceptance of the particular project, it also raises the levels of resilience within that community. So taking that time to really understand what they prioritise and value through local people and local activity is quite important.

**The CHAIR:** All right. We are out of time for this session, Ms Bice and Ms Hendriks. Thank you so much for your presentation today. It was really valuable. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of the evidence today to review. With that, the committee will take a break for lunch.

**Witnesses withdrew.**