

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices

Melbourne – Friday 5 September 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

Farah Farouque, Chief Executive Officer,

Hayat Doughan, Ageing Well Lead, and

James Houghton, Senior Policy Adviser, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome, everybody. I declare open today's public hearing for the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices.

This Environment and Planning Committee is 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 be used to provide a report to the Parliament which may include some recommendations to the government.

Just a bit of housekeeping – can everyone, including me, ensure their mobile phones have been switched to silent and minimise background noise for the broadcast.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on here today, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, and pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who are participating in the proceedings of the committee today. I welcome, too, any members of the public who may be joining us in the gallery or online and request that everyone who participates in today's proceedings remains respectful of them at all times.

Welcome to representatives from Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria. All the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide us during the hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

As you can tell, all the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings, which will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

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

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

Wendy LOVELL: And I am Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

David ETTERS HANK: Good morning. David Ettershank. I represent western metropolitan Melbourne.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region.

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

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. As we begin, could each of you state your full name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of to assist the Hansard record, then I will invite you to make an opening statement.

Hayat DOUGHAN: Hayat Doughan, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

Farah FAROUQUE: I am Farah Farouque, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

James HOUGHTON: James Houghton, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. Today's proceedings are pretty straightforward. We will invite you to make an opening statement, and then each of the committee members will have the opportunity to ask you some questions. I will hand the floor over to you.

Farah FAROUQUE: Thank you. Thank you to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee for the opportunity to speak with you today. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attending, either online or in this room today. Thank you. I would also like to thank the committee for this invitation to present. I think it was a demonstration of inclusive practice, because we had not put in a submission and then were invited to present. The Ethnic Communities' Council really appreciates that inclusion.

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria is the peak body representing people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria. We are a membership body, and our organisation comprises over 250 member organisations across the span of ethnic groups and service providers catering to ethnic groups. It includes ethnic associations and multicultural service providers, and we have a strong regional ethnic presence via the regional ethnic communities' councils, because we want to acknowledge that diversity is not a subject of merely metropolitan interest. Since 1974 – we are 51 years old – ECCV has been a strong advocate for freedom, human rights, respect, equality and the dignity of Victoria's migrant and refugee communities.

I speak to you in a week where some of those values have been questioned via a rally that came to the steps of this Parliament. I just want to say that that is an anathema to everything our members stand for and the contributions that our members bring. As we like to say, migrants are us. In fact other than our First Nations people, everybody here in Victoria is from a migrant background. I want to thank the members present in the room who have collectively made a strong stance against the violent activity and the racialised commentary we have seen that arose from that rally. Not that the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria rejects rational, evidence-based debate on issues such as the composition of migration numbers each year, as set by the federal government. But we utterly reject race and hate-based dialogue and threats and physical violence of course, whilst respecting the right of peaceful protest. I just wanted to make that point. I do not want to go on and grandstand, but I think that every time the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria appears in any kind of setting such as this, I think the point needs to be made.

We welcome the opportunity to speak today. We work towards a socially cohesive and inclusive society and have a longstanding record of informing practice and influencing all levels of government to ensure culturally responsive approaches, equitable access to services and anti-racist, socially just policy. At the heart of that of course is inclusive consultation, because many of the people we represent and the organisations we represent are not necessarily the first port of call when framing policy, especially our small grassroots organisations, because we are a member body – we are the voice of multicultural Victoria. Often that voice can be muted – not necessarily by systemic discrimination as such, because it is understood that Victoria is an inclusive state, but just because those opportunities and processes are not there.

We welcome the opportunity to provide input into the committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices by state and local government statutory authorities and essential services providers. Our comments today reflect the lived experience of the multicultural and multifaith communities we represent. How do we represent them? We are in constant dialogue with our membership, and that includes formal processes whereby we have stakeholder committees, where we have quarterly meetings and where we consult. We have member forums, we conduct surveys and we do individual consultations prior to making a submission, for example. There are a range of methods that we use internally, because, of ourselves, we do not pretend to know the aspirations and wishes of our membership. We are in a constant dialogue with our membership, so I think I can say with confidence that what we say today reflects the understandings of the multicultural communities.

Engagement in government consultation processes is central to fostering belonging and inclusion in Australia and Victoria. As a member-based organisation we are a conduit to the multicultural Victorian community, and we are funded in part to do this work. However, as I have noted, many grassroots, ethnic-specific and multicultural organisations operate without core funding and are often volunteer run. There is a great quality to that civic activity, that volunteerism and that community strengthening that happens when people come together. But these groups often lack the capacity, time and resources to participate in formal consultation processes. It should be standard practice to provide financial compensation to community members who contribute to consultation outside their professional roles. That is indeed what Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria do when we are dealing with individuals from ethnic communities – for example, to inform

consultations around issues such as elder abuse or a youth matter. We provide compensation and a very welcoming and culturally safe environment when we engage in those practices.

In addition to the barriers of language, literacy and isolation, members of multicultural communities may have reason to mistrust outsiders, especially institutions, due to past experience or discrimination. Effective consultation must be culturally sensitive, inclusive and intentional in its design, and it must not rely on tokenistic engagement or assume that one spokesperson of an organisation can represent the diversity within a cultural or faith community. Communities are not monolithic, and consultative processes must reflect this. As mentioned, the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria reflect that in our own work. We are the voice of multicultural Victoria, but if we actually break it down, there are many, many voices in multicultural Victoria. It is vital that there be this kind of considered consultation. There is a perception, particularly amongst grassroots organisations, that they can be shut out from consultation processes. Even if those pathways are there, there may not be an awareness, and that is something we will take up later.

To ensure equitable participation, consultation bodies should – I provide a little summary here – offer multiple modes of engagement, online and in person. I cannot emphasise enough how important in-person consultation is, because as we migrate into the online world – it is a theme we will present on with a little bit of detail later – that is very exclusionary, particularly for our older cohorts and people who have language barriers. Written and verbal should be offered, with options for anonymous input. Of course many of our multicultural communities come from countries where engaging with authorities – police or government – can be a frightening and hostile experience. They might come under scrutiny, and there could be consequences. Particularly for our refugee background populations, the guaranteed anonymity and the trust is vital.

Consultations should also be scheduled at accessible times and locations, considering work hours, caring responsibilities and transport access. Because of course, you know, the demographics of our migrant communities, especially our new and emerging migrant communities, they are not in the cluster of the parliamentary triangle or the inner city. They are located in the outer suburbs in larger numbers and, as is well documented, transport and access can be difficult. Even like a 9 am hearing could be very challenging if you were living in the outer south-east or the outer west to get there on time, to negotiate the train pathways and such. I just make that as an aside.

Translated materials must be provided to ensure all content, both English and translated, is written in plain, accessible language free from bureaucratic or technical jargon. I have been – as CEO of ECCV for the past 10 months, and even though I come from a multicultural background – surprised to see how important the provision of translated materials is, because so many of our migrant communities, particularly our older cohorts, do not have that facility with the English language. We recently provided five new brochures on elder abuse in translated materials – we now have a library of 24 of those brochures, simple brochures – but there has been already a great deal of take-up of those resources, so it is just a small demonstration of how important the provision of translated resources is.

It is also important to create a safe and culturally appropriate space for participation, supported by community facilitators where possible. We have a policy of engaging bicultural workers, and by bicultural workers – we do not define them as merely translators. They do not just translate; they understand the material and provide sort of a wraparound support for people engaging with services they are not so familiar with. Our Senior Policy Adviser will take up that theme shortly.

As much as possible, consultation should be an ongoing process, not just a one-off event. Consultation bodies should have processes to close feedback loops and communicate outcomes and results to consultation participants. That is a theme that has come up a lot in our work: that people are consulted – there is a sense that sometimes that is just a tick-box exercise – and then there is not that feedback loop back to them. It is just as important that, as much as you gain the input from participants, it should be publicly acknowledged and reflected in outcomes as much as possible, but at least the acknowledgement and the feedback of the outcome of the process is returned to the grassroots participant.

Improving consultation processes with multicultural communities is critical to strengthening democratic participation in Victoria. This requires targeted, well-respected and culturally appropriate strategies that recognise the unique contribution and challenges faced by multicultural communities. I might add that I note COTA has a recommendation about the use of community organisations and NGOs rather than consultants for

government to include a larger cohort of populations and that there should be a mechanism or a recommendation to that effect, and that is something that Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria would endorse. From time to time we are also engaged in that process as a paid intermediary or sometimes a volunteer intermediary, and it has been successful. We do not have necessarily a sort of a regular platform in that regard. We do respond as much as we can – because we, you know, are keen to represent our communities – to invitations to engage in consultation practices, and we are actually on many, many advisory bodies and such.

Thank you for the opportunity. I would just like to ask my fellow presenters to just make a few remarks on particular matters. Firstly, I will turn to Hayat, who is ECCV's Ageing Well Lead.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much.

Hayat DOUGHAN: Thank you, Farah. I would like to share some of my work experience because I work with the community. You have the theory and the practice; I represent the practice. We have had a very, very good, positive experience in consulting with the community. Like Farah said, some organisations approach us to run consultations for them, and I have some examples of very positive experiences. In April 2023 Metro Trains were producing their new strategy and they wanted to find out how to include people from CALD backgrounds, how to give them positive experiences and hear their issues. They approached ECCV and we ran a consultation with 21 community leaders from diverse backgrounds, established and newly emerging. The way we did it proved to be very successful. The outcome was very good for Metro Trains, and they showed their appreciation.

How we do it is we have this consultation. When we approach the community members we make sure to approach diverse communities, not only one or two, because we want to hear the voices of as many people as we can. We have this trust that the community trusts us, and this trust does not come easy – it takes time. We build this trust with the community, and migrant people, once they trust you, they are willing to support you and to give their best, especially when they feel they want to be heard. If someone is interested in listening to them to find out their issues and try to support them, they are very happy to come and talk and engage very well. We give them the right information, what to expect from the consultation, and we try to make to everything culturally appropriate. Even when we book the venue, I consult to find which venue is best so they can access it. We give them information on how to get there: if you are going by car, where to park; if you are using the train, which train to take. Food is always culturally appropriate. We know about everyone's culture. If there is someone from a new culture and I am not aware of their food preference, we ask them and we try to cater to suit everyone.

The best part of how we do our consultation is we always have this practice of providing them with vouchers as a token of appreciation for their work, their support and their ability to come. In this consultation ECCV provided the participants with \$100 vouchers and Metro Trains provided them with a transport Myki card for the amount of \$20. They were very appreciative, and we show them appreciation. After the consultation was done, I made sure to send an email thanking everyone. Also Metro Trains, when we had the results of the consultation, I shared with them the results. This is something very important. From my experience, not as a worker but as a community leader, it is very important to be acknowledged, to be heard and also to have some follow-up after – not just doing the consultation and after you never hear from them what happened and what the outcome is. Sometimes there is not even acknowledgement in the report about the people they consulted with. This is my experience, so I try to always implement this when we do the consultation. We have other examples – I do not know about the time.

The CHAIR: Maybe we will come back, maybe in the course of the hour.

Farah FAROUQUE: We will talk later. yes. But may I add tomorrow we are doing something with La Trobe University, with the Pasifika community, and we have consulted them on a very delicious Pasifika lunch. Over to James Houghton, our Senior Policy Adviser, to talk to our research.

James HOUGHTON: I can mainly echo just in general terms what Hayat said. She talked about the really important t-word of 'trust'. That is just central to absolutely everything that goes on with engaging with communities. Could I add, another t-word, 'transparency', is also very important. That basically comes down to being absolutely clear about the purpose and the expectations when it comes to consulting with community members: being clear about why you are there, what you are hoping to achieve and what the purpose of it all is

so that people understand, they do not feel that they are in a bewildering environment, they know what they are there for, and they know why they are being asked. As Hayat also said, as much as possible consultation should be part of an ongoing process, so people are not just called into a room, asked some questions and dispatched – they know that they are a valued part of the process which is going to lead to some tangible benefits, they are motivated to share what they have and that once they leave the room there is something ongoing. I know that might sound sort of resource intensive sometimes; at the very least, at the end of a consultation process, they should be aware that the process is concluded and the results fed back to them. If possible, it is really good to hold those consultations as part of ongoing relationships and build partnerships with communities, although there is a bit of a balance that needs to be struck too to make sure that you do not sort of play favourites with particular people and particular community organisations. You do need to be mindful of that too in making sure that individuals do not constantly speak on behalf of whole communities. There is diversity of views in communities, so there is that balance to bear in mind.

The other thing Farah also alluded to was research ECCV has recently published on what we call the ‘digital divide’. As more and more services and processes have moved online in recent years – particularly during the pandemic, that happened – there is a certain cohort, and they are mostly older people and they do tend to be more often from migrant backgrounds, who are really getting left behind by that. That is a divide that is widening at the moment. We looked at it particularly from the point of view of people living their lives – accessing services, getting health care and aged care, doing their banking and things like that – but it also equally applies to civic engagement and consultations. There do need to be alternatives to digital, and as wonderful as many resources are, with platforms like Engage Victoria being there, there are certain people who can be the most isolated and vulnerable people who are getting left behind there, so that also always needs to be borne in mind.

The CHAIR: We really appreciate that. We might go to questions. That is a really good point. Can you provide a copy of the research to the committee, just so we have got it and can feed it into our report? That would be really helpful. Farah, I just want to go to the concept of cultural safety in consultation practices. One of the terms of reference that we have got for the inquiry is to figure out how we improve engagement with under-represented groups. How important is cultural safety in consultation practices? For governments who consult or governments who use third parties to consult, how sophisticated is their awareness of culturally safe engagement practices?

Farah FAROUQUE: Can I just say that ‘cultural safety’ is a term that is now used, but essentially, if we unpack what does that mean, it is at the heart of inclusion. That terminology is not in general use in the community, but it is that sense of being able to say what you want to say without fear of repercussion. It goes to trust, and the surrounds and the atmospherics around the presentation allow you to speak and voice your position; that is at the heart of cultural safety. You cannot have inclusive consultation practices if you do not have, at the foundation, cultural safety. I think there is a technical definition of cultural safety. I do not know whether you have that on hand.

James HOUGHTON: No.

Farah FAROUQUE: We can provide that.

The CHAIR: That would be great.

Farah FAROUQUE: We would be happy to provide that. But I note that many government organisations – I was having a look prior to the hearing – do have handbooks, guidebooks, many, many processes developed and considerable time spent on internal advice et cetera, but really the proof of the pudding is the practice. I would say that the Victorian public sector has quite sophisticated processes around consultation and documentation, but where the challenge is is the degree of practice, and we have seen variable practice. I think the tendency to engage consultants can provide not always welcome disruption to those processes that are developed. I was having a look at Safer Care Victoria, just out of interest to see what agencies have, and I saw they have quite a sophisticated bunch of documents around engagement and even advisory committees, and very good advice. Our hope is that the practice is in practice. I turn to my colleagues here. Did you have any insight to offer further? Do you feel that the community feels culturally safe in all opportunities? Perhaps not.

Hayat DOUGHAN: No.

Farah FAROUQUE: Hayat is a plain speaker, and that is why I wanted to bring her here. I do not want to filter.

The CHAIR: We very much appreciate plain speaking.

Farah FAROUQUE: Yes, that is right. Yes.

Hayat DOUGHAN: From experience also, migrants sometimes do not feel safe during the consultations. And like I said, it feels like someone is consulting us, to tick, to say, 'Okay, we asked this community, we asked this community.' The approach – I know people, they try their best, and sometimes they think they are culturally responsive but they are not in reality. What we think is not what really is. We need to try to put it into practice. How can I –

Farah FAROUQUE: That is good, yes.

The CHAIR: I might pass over to Mr Ettershank, the Deputy Chair.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. You caught me by surprise there a bit. Thank you very much for your presentations today – they were really thoughtful. I had a couple of questions. I had the pleasure of working with the ethnic communities council, the Australian network, a couple of years ago on culturally appropriate aged care, and it was certainly an eye-opener in terms of the complexities of engaging appropriately with ethnic communities on behalf of the Commonwealth. I was one of those consultants, I suppose. I am interested, perhaps, if you could share for the record and the viewers a little bit of the realities of what it means when you talk about ethnic communities not being homogenous and the role that the ECCV can provide in terms of getting that to the next level for consultations as opposed to just picking one or two peak bodies.

Farah FAROUQUE: Yes. We have a very diverse population. Over 200 nationalities are represented in Australia, and even within particular ethnic communities there is a multiplicity of cultures. If you are, say, South Sudanese, there are many different groups within those communities, and that would be so for Arabic-speaking populations; Hayat it is very familiar with that cohort. An Arabic-speaking migrant from Africa would have a different perspective to someone from a Lebanese background even though they speak a common language, and their experiences of settlement also are very different.

In the context of aged care we have our post-war migrant population, and if you are talking about aged care they are accessing aged care in large numbers now. The Greek experience and the Italian experience and even the sort of cultural elements around their daily lives are different, so I think that is what we mean by the multiplicity. I think that it is important to consult the peaks, but the peaks in turn have to be deeply in touch and in constant dialogue with their membership. So I do not think that merely speaking to a peak body in a complex consultation is enough, dare I say it – I am with the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, but I want to give a frank response.

We recently had a really good model of public consultation in the Lekakis review. George Lekakis, of course as you all know, and his committee were tasked with a review of the multicultural framework here in Victoria. An advisory body was appointed of well-known people in the multicultural sector and from the leadership, including an academic presence – so that was an advisory body. Then the committee went and had public hearings around their consultations, and those were in locations, including regional locations. They had support from the Department of Premier and Cabinet around the coordination. It was an exceptional sort of review, but I just thought it was a really good example of multicultural best practice and, happily, it was a multicultural review. That review also consulted extensively with particular organisations. We had 2 hours in our office with the advisory body and several of the support people, and they came to us – I think they even caught the tram, some of them. It was a very best practice model of consultation. Of course there is a fiscal element to that, as there are constraints of time, so we do acknowledge that obviously consultations have deadlines and constraints. But I think that is a really good example of best practice.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

David ETTERS HANK: Can I ask, in the context of –

The CHAIR: Time is up, mate.

David ETTERSHANK: Sorry.

The CHAIR: Sorry. We just hit time, Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERSHANK: Could I get my question started?

The CHAIR: No. We might have some more time at the end, and if we do, I will come back to you.
Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. We have really appreciated already what you have contributed, so thank you for coming in. What is your view of the Engage Victoria platform? How effective is it? You mentioned it earlier, but are there any areas you see that could be improved? Do you use it often? What are your thoughts?

Farah FAROUQUE: Well, I will throw it to our senior policy adviser. We do use it often, but we are professionals, so over to you.

James HOUGHTON: Yes, well, I think that is the point, Farah. It is great for people who have digital skills and are used to being involved in consultations and things. That is my job, so for people like me – policy professionals – it is good, it is quite user-friendly and all that. It is a one-stop shop, so that is very useful. But I do worry about how much it is being used or how visible it is to people who do not have digital skills or are volunteers or are what we might call ordinary community members. That has been our experience, that people are just not very aware of it often, so it often misses the real voices of the grassroots. I know it has been using surveys a bit more recently, sort of straightforward questions and answers, so that makes things a bit easier and a bit more user-friendly so that people who do not have experience in consultations perhaps can find the right answers to questions. I think it just needs to be more visible and not be the only platform – they are the most important things – because there will be a lot of people who have really valuable ideas to contribute when a consultation is underway and it is not on their radar at all; it is just going to pass them by entirely.

Gaelle BROAD: We have heard some comments about the platform just summarising people's responses rather than perhaps publishing a diversity of opinion. Have you got any insights into the format of it?

James HOUGHTON: No, not particularly. I think it is very good in the sort of summaries it gives, and that is very helpful. I would not have a lot to say on whether it should be providing more on that. I use it to input information a bit more than to get information out of.

Farah FAROUQUE: And of course James is a policy practitioner and a professional. For a grassroots community person, it would be a different equation. And for someone who is an older person of ethnic background whose facility in English is not of the nature that they could respond easily, the digital divide is very accentuated. We cannot emphasise enough that, as governments migrate to online platforms, the older population can be left behind. With the additional barrier of language and cultural constraints, that is very significant.

Gaelle BROAD: Farah, just earlier you mentioned voices can be muted and processes are not there. Can you explain what processes you feel are missing?

Farah FAROUQUE: In the broadest possible sense, I think that one of the best ways of – and this is a very macro kind of view. But if our public sector at its highest levels reflected the broad base of our diverse populations, I think we would start to resolve some of these issues, because we saw during the COVID times, in the initial phase, that lens around diversity was missing and so some of those populations' needs were not attended to. I think that is the broader macro lesson. As to processes, there are the guidebooks – they are all there. They are written down, but it is in the practice, it is in the conversion. Of course I do acknowledge the fiscal and time constraints involved. But it goes to the heart of what Hayat was saying around the experience of the people who are being consulted – it is also part of the process, and that is, I think, where we have significant challenges.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I might go to Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you so much for appearing today and for all of that information you have provided. This may be putting you on the spot a bit, but I would be curious to know: are there

examples of projects or things that have gone ahead where poor engagement with multicultural communities has potentially led to poorer outcomes for that project?

Farah FAROUQUE: Can we take that one on notice and come back to you? I do not want to sort of name and shame.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I understand that. I suppose a broader way of asking that would be: putting aside, I suppose, just the moral imperative to make sure we are including everyone in engagement in a meaningful way, what can be, in broad terms, the consequences of failing to engage with multicultural communities effectively?

Farah FAROUQUE: Multicultural communities are not a substream of our society. Close to 50 per cent of Victorians are either born overseas or have a parent born overseas. The issues around inclusion of people from multicultural populations are actually at the heart of mainstream service delivery. That is the point, I think. If you are not thinking about people in diverse cohorts, you are not responding to the community. That is the principal point I would like to make. James, would you like to add to that?

James HOUGHTON: I have been talking about consequences. I suppose during the pandemic there were obvious health consequences, particularly in the early days, for migrant and refugee communities, when rates of infection and fatality were higher than for the mainstream population, until I think there was a conscious decision by government, the Department of Health and everybody to engage with communities and say, 'Okay, information about how to stay safe doesn't seem to be filtering down to all communities. What can we do differently?' ECCV was very much part of that conversation. That led to a real change of process whereby communities were asked to speak to themselves about how they could best spread information to their communities, and suddenly – the Department of Health was putting information on its website, for instance – communities could say, 'But nobody in our community is going to go and see that. We get our information from WhatsApp,' or WeChat for the Chinese community, or these sorts of things. In consultation with those communities, we were able to develop resources that actually involved perhaps creativity and artistic things from different communities about how to get information in a way that was made by people from the community, in language, by people who looked like members of the community, because they were presented in a way that was much more accessible and designed to be spread around on the platforms that communities actually access.

Farah FAROUQUE: That is right, and the lessons were learned. But I wonder, and it is something that people speculate on, have those lessons carried over into the current context? Sometimes communities said no. We started in a challenging environment and then we migrated to a really good space, but perhaps those lessons have not been fully absorbed.

Sarah MANSFIELD: No. And that was what I was going to ask. Do you feel that those lessons have been learned and applied more broadly, and perhaps in that context, particularly in a health context, it becomes quite apparent, the consequences of poor community engagement in general. But yes – is that my time, sorry?

The CHAIR: It is.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. I am conscious there are other members that need to ask questions. I will hold my question and come back to it if there is more time at the end.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you for your presentation – it was really interesting. Ms Tyrrell and I are both from Shepparton, so as you know, the poster child for multiculturalism. We work really hard at it to make it work. I was interested, when you were talking about basically what the politics are within groups, that there is a diversity of voices even within one culture and that nobody speaks for all. When you do consultation, sometimes you need to do it as a group because one-on-one consultation would take an extremely long time; we could get really bogged down in consulting with everyone – and like, you are here today speaking on behalf of ethnic councils as a whole and, within that, all the multicultural groups. We all know there is more politics within a culture than there is in Parliament House. We certainly know in Shepparton there is more politics within the Indigenous community than there is here in Parliament House. How do we manage consultation so that everybody feels consulted but we do not get bogged down in the weeds of having to talk to every voice?

Farah FAROUQUE: I think one method is to go to the relevant ethnic community's council – we know that Sam in Shepparton et cetera does a fantastic job – but to use them as a coordinating body. That could be one mechanism to assemble the relevant groups for that single consultation. I go back to the point I made in the initial submission about the use of local ethnic communities' councils, or the peak, such as in Victoria, and those NGOs that have those cultural connections that can enable a kind of a representative consultation, acknowledging the point that you cannot speak to every community member. Also, the use of simple surveys that can be widely distributed, including in language, can be a useful mechanism. James, do you have anything to add there?

James HOUGHTON: I think just things that are widely promoted – consultations at a single time, in a single place, that are widely promoted so that anyone can access them, particularly if it is after hours, for instance – and something that anyone who has an interest can come to so they feel there is no-one who can possibly be a gatekeeper or a guardian of opinions. Those sorts of consultations, rather than picking people always to say, 'What do you think? Can you speak for this community?' Just something that is open like that and facilitated by bodies like the ethnic council, Shepparton district. They are a perfect example. They can host those things, they can publicise them.

Farah FAROUQUE: They do a great job.

James HOUGHTON: Yes. And then a consulting body, a government department, a statutory authority or whoever can just be there at the place in time to hear the voices of everyone that has an interest.

Farah FAROUQUE: That is right. And also travelling outside the CBD – obviously, again, there is a constraint there, but I think that that presence in community is a signal of inclusion. And also obviously, we have a vast network of parliamentary offices and representatives, and they are very well connected to their communities, so that is another possible pathway, and it is used to share information about consultations.

Wendy LOVELL: Also we talk about culturally safe consultation, and one of the problems that we have come up against in the past has been that – and at the moment every state member is a female – we used to have a female federal member, a female mayor, and virtually everyone in an elected position in Shepparton was female, and we had some males who would say, 'We won't meet with you because you're female.' How do we overcome those sort of cultural barriers to consultation?

Farah FAROUQUE: That is a complex matter, but at the same time that is gender discrimination. There are certain universal principles also that you have to hold to bear. I acknowledge your point, but it is a complex matter. We live in a non-discriminatory society. There are means to engage a male community leader to join you or such, but I would not just pander. When it comes to discrimination, I would not be overly pandering to that.

Wendy LOVELL: I think that is how we overcame it.

Hayat DOUGHAN: It depends also on the type of consultation.

Farah FAROUQUE: That is right.

Hayat DOUGHAN: You need to be aware of the cultural background of people you are consulting with, and the religious background. Sometimes there are restrictions. As I said, we treat people with respect. We need to respect their cultural background, make them feel safe. If it is not based on gender inequality, someone might say, like for us Muslim women, they prefer to have women only if they need to discuss health issues or some relationship issues. Multicultural people, they have similarities in the way they think. I see it out of respect. You need to respond to their needs as to what they prefer if you can do it.

Farah FAROUQUE: That is right, but we need to uphold universal principles of equality. That is very important.

Wendy LOVELL: And that is what we said to them: 'In this country, you know, men and women are equal, and if you want to meet with a state member, you're going to have to meet with us as females, because we are not going to change our gender.'

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell, did you want to take that launching pad?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Well, Ms Lovell actually asked my question. I was going to ask about favouritism and how you address it, but I think we have just covered that. Previously in a roundtable discussion we have had one of the witnesses stated that the type of language used by consultants throws off a lot of people; it intimidates them. Do you find that that happens a lot? Like the language that is being used is far too formal, the words are too big. They are making it intimidating for those that they are trying to consult with.

Farah FAROUQUE: I do not want to say that that it is universal, again, but I think there is a sort of a consultant speak. In any communication with the public, or in fact with each other, I would hope that plain English communication is the preferred mode of speech. I think that point has merit – we will put it that way – because there is always a power differential, isn't there, between someone who is an 'expert consultant' and a member of the public who might have language barriers or other matters? And if they are they doing, obviously, a paid engagement and then this person is just a community member, there is a power differential as well. The best consultants can overcome that, but again, the best consultants are community organisations. That is what we should be looking at when engaging more with communities – engaging those community organisations that have the knowledge and experience, the connections and long-held trust relationships, which is sort of circular to the point I made initially.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. When I first walked in – apologies for being late – I think you were discussing that there was no follow-up. Like, in your consultation you found that there was a lack of follow-up processes. How would you like to see those delivered in the future if we were to improve?

Hayat DOUGHAN: Just one minor correction – not in our consultations, in general. I was giving an example of a negative experience – I was asked – so this was no follow-up. For us, what we do after the consultation is done is we show appreciation. We say thank you to people; we send an email. I make sure when we have the report or the findings I share with them the link or I share the information about the consultation outcome. This is, I think, best practice. It shows that really you have been heard and we are following up. We are saying thank you, not just by word but by action.

Farah FAROUQUE: Being heard does not mean that everything you say is adopted either.

Hayat DOUGHAN: No, no. It does not.

Farah FAROUQUE: There is a difference, isn't there? Yes. But I think that issue of being heard is really important to build trust. Isn't it the case? That is our experience.

James HOUGHTON: Absolutely, yes. I mean part of being clear about the purpose of consultations is that everybody who participates understands that everything they say cannot be adopted. But I think it is very important that at the end of a consultation process some next steps are clearly communicated. You say to everyone who participated that as a result of your participation in this inquiry or consultation process, we thank you very much for what you did, the next steps are going to be A, B and C, and this is what has come out of it, so people really do feel that they have been valued and they have been heard.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Wonderful. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That brings us to the end of today. Our next steps are going to be to provide you with a copy of today's transcript so that you can review it and check it for any inaccuracies. Then we will be providing a report to the Parliament, and the government will have six months to respond, just to give you a sense of how our processes work. Thank you so much, Hayat, Farah and James for coming in today. With that, we will take a short break and reset for the next witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.