

# **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**

Lauren Frost, Advocacy Manager, Policy and Communications, and

Pra Ashok Raj Kumar, Young Peer Facilitator, Youth Affairs Council Victoria; and

Meena Singh, Acting Principal Commissioner and Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People,

Julia, Member, Commission Youth Council, and

Allegra, Member, Commission Youth Council, Commission for Children and Young People.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices in Victoria. I welcome members from the Youth Affairs Council Victoria and from the Commission for Children and Young People.

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

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

Welcome, everybody. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask members of the committee to introduce themselves. I might start at the end of the table.

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

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

**Gaelle BROAD:** Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, and I am also a Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Sheena WATT:** Hi, I am Sheena Watt. I am a Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

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

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

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

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. The way we will do this is I will shortly ask you to have an opening statement and then we will get into questions. But before we do, for Hansard I just need each of you to state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of. We might go from that end of the table down there.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** My name is Prathiksha, but you can call me Pra. I am from YACVic. I am a Young Peer Facilitator.

**Lauren FROST:** My name is Lauren Frost. I am the Advocacy Manager at the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, or YACVic.

**Meena SINGH:** I am Meena Singh, I am the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, and I am also currently acting as the Principal Commissioner for the Commission for Children and Young People.

**ALLEGRA:** I am Allegra. I am speaking on behalf of the Commission for Children and Young People's Youth Council.

**JULIA:** I am Julia, and I am also speaking on behalf of the Commission for Children and Young People's Youth Council.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Welcome. I will hand over to you. I do not know if you flipped a coin as to who is going to start, but you can choose.

**Lauren FROST:** Great. I will kick us off for today. I would like to begin by thanking the committee for inviting us to speak at this hearing today. As the peak body for young people and the youth sector in Victoria, a key part of YACVic's work is elevating the voices of young people to government and ensuring our advice is based on meaningful youth participation. So we are really pleased that the Victorian government is holding this Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices into what changes can be made to make a system and design a system that values and encourages the participation of all Victorians, including young people.

Young people have a right to participate in decision-making that affects them, and our vision is to ensure that young people are respected and that they are active, visible and valued in their communities. Young people are experts of their own lives. They have the contemporary real-world knowledge and experience of issues and opportunities impacting them and their communities. However, all too often young people's voices are largely underrepresented in community consultation, often tokenised or rarely included in government decision-making, and too often young people are left out of the conversation. They are given limited meaningful opportunities to contribute, or discussions are held too late and as a bit of a tick-box exercise. This can have real and lasting impacts both on our society as a whole and on young people who have negative impacts or negative experiences of community consultation when it is not done well.

Excluding young people from community responses can also lead to feelings of disconnection, alienation and disengagement from both the community and the democratic process. Involving young people in community consultation is about understanding their unique perspectives and experiences and making sure that more underrepresented voices are heard so that government can make informed policy decisions and strengthen community trust, connection and transparency. Further, young people have unique and valuable perspectives, which are sometimes missed by adults but which their peers may relate to and respond to. Young people are often creative and innovative, forward thinking and bringing a lens of intergenerational equity to policy solutions. Meaningful youth consultation requires giving young people a seat at the table, involving them from the start and creating safe environments for them to grow and contribute meaningfully. Young people are leaders in their own right and giving them a seat at the table builds their capacity and skills to engage with policy development and community leadership.

Our submission as part of this inquiry makes 11 recommendations about how we can improve community consultation processes to be in line with best practice for youth participation. In this opening statement I just want to particularly highlight our first three recommendations. Recommendation 1 is that the Victorian government should strengthen youth consultation practices in line with best practice for meaningful youth participation, as outlined in the youth engagement resource platform, or YERP, which has been developed by YACVic. For those who might not be familiar with YERP, it is an online toolkit and home for all things youth participation. It was first created in 2013 as a dedicated information hub for young Victorians and the Victorian youth sector, and in 2022 YACVic received funding from the Victorian government's Office for Youth to update the site to ensure its ongoing relevance and value. Part of this upgrading process involved consultation with over 200 younger and older people across Victoria, with a focus on youth participation, engagement and empowerment. This included a steering committee of both young people and youth sector representatives who guided this project, but also a group of 10 young co-designers who helped to create the scope, the look, feel and content of the site. I am really thrilled to have Pra with us today, who was one of those young co-designers, to speak to her firsthand experience of youth participation and community consultation with young people, including what it looks like to do that well and the impacts when it is done not so well.

As I mentioned, our first recommendation is that Victoria's community consultation practices should be strengthened to reflect that best practice for meaningful youth participation, as outlined in that YERP resource. Briefly, this includes things like engaging young people at the beginning of the consultation processes, including the consultation design; ensuring that consultations are accessible and inclusive; providing skilled and youth-led facilitation; remunerating young people for their time and expertise; and building in transparency and closing the feedback loop.

Our second recommendation is that the Victorian government should strengthen consultation practices with First Nations young people in line with the values, knowledge and actions set out in Wayipunga, which is a really incredible resource that was created by the team at the Koorie Youth Council as a youth participation resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. The Wayipunga framework gives workers, organisations and government strategies to support First Nations young people's participation in the decision-making processes.

The third recommendation is that the Victorian government should strengthen consultation processes and practices with multicultural young people in line with the *Not Just 'Ticking a Box'* resource created by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network and the *Inclusive Organisations* good practice guide created by the Centre for Multicultural Youth for engaging and supporting youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

You can read all 11 of our recommendations in our full submission., but I just wanted to highlight these three to start in particular because they represent the importance of recognising and creating safety for young people to be able to bring their full selves to community consultations in ways that are authentic and safe and best practice. As I mentioned, you can read all of our recommendations in our full submission on the YACVic website, including being able to download the submission as an accessible Word document for screen readers and reading the submission on our webpage, which features something called 'tooltips', which is where words and phrases that might be new for people are explained in easy English. These are all really important things that we do to make sure that our content is accessible, which is now standard across YACVic's work. And importantly, these are things that we do because they came out of meaningful and genuine consultation and were co-designed with young people. For me, they are a really great example of the positive impact of consultation practices that are inclusive, accessible and engaging for young people.

I will finish up our opening statement there. I once again thank the committee for inviting us to speak at this hearing today, and we look forward to answering any questions you have about best-practice, youth-focused community consultation.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thanks, Lauren. Meena, I will hand over to you

**Meena SINGH:** Thank you so much. Before I start, I will take a moment to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands that we are gathered on today, the Bunurong and the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders past and present, and I do so as a Yorta Yorta person on my mother's side and an Indian person on my father's side.

Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to be able to speak today alongside our colleagues from YACVic. You have our submission. I want to give as much time as possible today to Julia and Allegra from our youth council, but I just wanted to just say a few things before I hand over to them.

One of the reasons I wanted to be a commissioner for children and young people was to work directly with our youth council and see how they work. They have elevated the way that we work at the commission and the way that they have demonstrated to so many other people that have seen their work how to engage appropriately and meaningfully with children and young people.

Even though I am coming into the role as a children's advocate, as someone who is passionate about lifting voices of people made vulnerable, people made marginalised, I have been personally and professionally challenged by our youth council and the way that their ideas cut through all the faff of us who have often been entrenched in the systems that can get in the way of thinking really clearly about what it is that children and young people need. They have assisted us at the Commission to move from determining what issues we think we should be speaking to children and young people about what issues they want to, to what matters most to them.

Our youth council is obviously one way of engaging with children and young people. But I just want to say that children and young people are inherently deserving of being involved in the decisions that shape their lives. At the commission we see too much, particularly in the spaces of child protection and youth justice when decisions are made about children and not with children, of the negative impacts and outcomes that come from that. When you listen to Julia and Allegra, you will hear a chasm that exists between their experiences and many of us in this room, including those of you in the seats that you are sitting in. We see disproportionately negative

outcomes for children and young people, particularly those who have been made marginalised, have been made vulnerable, when policies and laws are made without them in mind and by those people who do not understand their experiences inherently. Consultation, truly engaging with children and young people, is a way to bridge that chasm. I will hand first to Julia.

**JULIA:** Thanks, Meena. Hi, my name is Julia, and my pronouns are she/her. I officially joined the youth council at the end of 2022, but I have been involved in different ways in the commission's work since 2019, including sharing my experiences of care for various inquiries and having input into strategic planning and direction of the commission.

As our submission states, good consultations create a safe and welcoming space where young people feel comfortable expressing themselves without the fear of being ignored or judged. To me, that means recognising the different intersecting identities children and young people bring. We are not all the same, but sometimes adults forget that; we are treated like a single group instead of being recognised for our diverse backgrounds, experiences and needs. I grew up in public housing, and that experience still carries stigma. I remember worrying about sharing something as simple as my address. Being in care added another layer, and I carried the feeling that no-one would understand. But those worries should not be ours to carry; they should not stop us from having opportunities to share our expertise and lived experience. At the commission, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to consultation. We engage with young people in different ways, through surveys, phone calls, group consultations and one-on-one conversations, depending on what is safe and accessible for them.

In 2022 I helped lead a consultation as part of the Let Us Learn inquiry. It was held at the youth group where I was a youth leader and in the public housing community where I grew up. That consultation was meaningful because it happened in a space where young people felt safe and many of us had shared experiences. Consultations like this are rare, but they should not be. When you meet young people where they are and give them some choice and control, it makes a real difference in how open and honest they can be. Since my involvement with the commission I have been able to realise the importance of hearing the voices of children and young people who we do not get to hear from – young people who are not expected to be seen in spaces like this. It is everyone's responsibility to challenge the broader community to include the voices of children and young people who have experienced disadvantage and, as our youth engagement framework highlights, to partner with children and young people where possible.

**ALLEGRA:** Hi. My name is Allegra. I use she/her pronouns, I am 17 years old and I am a part of the Commission Youth Council. Today I am obviously presenting alongside Meena and Julia on behalf of a much larger group. I initially joined the youth council because of my own experience in the Family Court system and growing up as a mixed Tamil girl. I wanted to see change in the Family Court system and make a difference to the racism that mixed race and diverse children experience daily in Victoria. Before I begin, I would like a show of hands: who in this room has ever been sick enough to lose their voice? Yes. Great. Well, do you remember the panicked feeling that set in when you realised that you were voiceless for the day? That sticky feeling in your chest when you realised that communicating and getting your ideas across was about to become infinitely harder? That is the feeling young people across Victoria wake up with every day – that they will not be able to have a say and decisions will be made for them without any form of consultation.

As members of Parliament you are voted in by adults to make decisions that impact everybody in the state, including children and young people, and every day you go to work to shape a future that we as young people must live in but currently get no say in. We are here today to tell you it is not that hard to give us a say. By directly consulting with children and young people on decisions, our voices are brought into the conversation. I have been fortunate enough to work together with the commission and have had direct input into many different projects. One of these was making submissions to make a change within the Family Court, and I also had a *Youth Voices* article about my experience published. This experience was incredible and empowering for me; however, not all children and young people across the state are able to have their voices amplified in that way. Examples like this can and should be implemented across all areas of government decision-making. It is not that complicated; it enriches our society, ensures systems and services fulfil their full potential and deepens our understanding of what future generations care about. Just because we cannot vote now or yet does not mean that we should not be able to have a say in the decisions that are impacting us. Thank you for having me.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all and you two in particular. The way this works is we will take it in turns asking questions. It is pretty straightforward. Just be as open and articulate as you have been so far and have a great

experience. Allegra, one of the phrases you used really struck me – that not all children can have their voices amplified. Obviously you have had a great experience with the commission in terms of providing you with support and probably some tools to be the sort of person who can come to us and give us that. What are those tools? What is the type of support that you have been given that has put you in a position where you can come before us today and be so confident and articulate?

**ALLEGRA:** I think, if anything, it is just that people have had conversations with me like I am their equal within the commission and within the broader community with school and stuff. Obviously treating young people as though they are a colleague, instead of someone below you or just someone who is dragged out to speak at an event, makes a big difference in how confident people can be and is quite empowering for the children involved.

**The CHAIR:** Julia, do you have any reflections on that?

**JULIA:** I think I would echo what Allegra has said there. I think also treating young people like they are colleagues is so important, because often we are left out of that. We are the future, after all, us young people, so really listening to what we have to say is so important.

**The CHAIR:** Do you mind describing for me a little bit how that might work on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis so we can get some sort of practical examples of what it looks like to treat someone like a colleague rather than, you know, as someone who gets trotted out.

**ALLEGRA:** I mean, genuinely just having conversations with them the way you would with a colleague is a massive step, instead of treating it tokenistically, like making sure that they are included in things. I have been lucky enough to speak in the commission's staff forums and stuff as a member of the commission, not as just a young person that has been brought in. So I think obviously just integrating them into the work is so crucial, instead of being like, 'These are external people that we sometimes bring in, like little consultants.' That is how I would describe it.

**Meena SINGH:** I might add, just from a commissioner perspective, we have learned so much in terms of the way we shift our engagement. If I could give any one piece of advice for engagement, it is to suspend your own reality and to think about how this is not about you as the individual or what your needs are, it is about how you are wanting to engage – the why – that is really important. For us, little things like making sure we have our meetings with the youth council after hours, outside of school and business hours, that is so practical. We have our youth council meetings on a Sunday when we get together. So being prepared to be flexible and meet people where they are at in their lives is crucial to engagement. I think it has also been, for us, really top down. Our senior youth engagement officer Jason has brought so much and supported so much the individual relationships that are in our youth council. It is important to understand that what we are experiencing in our lives could be completely different and will be completely different to what young people are experiencing in theirs. Particularly for us at the commission, we have members of our youth council who have care experience, who have experience of youth justice systems, who have experienced family violence, homelessness, a whole range of things, so we recognise that those things are not necessarily stopping just because we are engaging. So really practical things that we set out also in our child and youth engagement framework, which set out not only the principles but also the ways of really engaging as well, are really key.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I might hand over to Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Excellent, thank you. Lauren, earlier you mentioned closing the feedback loop. How would you like to see that delivered to make sure that it is closed properly?

**Lauren FROST:** That is such a great question and such an important reflection that so many young people have fed back to us. We consulted with a range of young people when we were putting together our submission, and that was one of the most common things we heard. I will maybe hand over to Pra afterwards for some practical experiences of that.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** In terms of closing the feedback loop, I think it definitely involves not just having a single consultation with the young people and then going off and implementing it. I think it also involves staying in contact. I know when I was working on YERP I was receiving – I had been on the project for two years and we finished it a year ago, but I have still been receiving opportunities to come and speak at

events where they launched the actual website, to come and talk about how maybe we can design the flyers for distributing this out to the public, things like that. We also had a couple of meetings where we just talked about what came out of the whole consultation that we had.

**Lauren FROST:** Yes, absolutely. And I think being up-front with young people – transparency – is a big part of our submission as well, so being up-front from the beginning about what the process will look like, including what closing the feedback loop will look like, so when we will report back to you about the decisions made, how we will report back to you about the decisions made. It is so crucial, because if young people – anyone really – are participating in consultation and they give their personal experiences, their expertise, their thoughts, but then they do not hear back about how that was taken on board or what happened as a result of that, it massively reduces their likelihood to participate in consultation again. So it is a really core part of that. And Pra gave some really great examples about what that can look like, to stay in touch, not just about the decision that was made, but about the implementation of that and chances for review, too.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. That was the only question I had, really. Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Ms Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you very much. It is great to have young people in here engaged in the process. I cannot speak on behalf of every member of Parliament, but I really do encourage people to get in contact with your local members of Parliament. I have been pushing for lowering the P-plate age in Victoria; I had an email just yesterday from a 17-year-old student, so it is not someone who is old enough to vote. I think hearing those stories is really important. I remember receiving a letter from some students in grade five and six that were wanting some changes, and I advocated for them. About a year later I actually met their mum, who was the mayor, and I thought, 'Isn't that interesting that she's engaged,' but she was just thanking me for taking up their cause. I think it is really important to say, 'Please do get in touch.' I am interested: the submission from the Youth Affairs Council talked about the Youth Participation Practice Network and having 700 people involved in that. In that communication and engagement, how do you engage with such a large number of members, and is there anything that you do that could help us as we look to make recommendations from this inquiry to improve that community engagement? What have you learned from your own experience?

**Lauren FROST:** Yes, absolutely. The YPPN, which is the network you are talking about, is a really incredible network that is coordinated by our participation and development team. It really focuses on bringing together that expertise within that youth sector. It is workers all throughout the youth sector, but also workers who might not consider themselves youth workers or part of the youth sector. They might have a broader kind of remit of their work but working with young people as part of it. I think there are a whole range of lessons that they have learned from doing that work. It continues today, and more and more organisations and practitioners are joining all the time. I think it is making that space really engaging, making it really practical and relevant to the issues that workers and young people are facing. Actually that feedback loop is a big part of it. I know that they do a lot of two-way communication. It is often members of that YPPN who are coming to the convenors to say, 'Here are some things we're hearing from young people on the ground,' or 'Here are some things we're experiencing firsthand in our day-to-day work. We would love to have a dedicated space to talk about this.' I think there are a whole range of things that the network does. Maybe something I could do is to get our participation and development team to send through some more information about what works as some supplementary evidence today, because I know they have got some really great learnings from what that looks like, really making sure it is a mix of hearing from young people and from workers themselves.

**Gaelle BROAD:** While you are on things that you might send in after – I am not sure; it may have been a link, but it does not seem to come through when I look at the submission – *'A Seat at the table': Young People and Disaster Recovery* is a fact sheet on engaging, including and consulting with young people, *A Guide to meaningful Youth Engagement, Participation, and Inclusion*. Is that a document that you could share?

**Lauren FROST:** Absolutely. Yes. We have got a fantastic team who have been working really hard on that resource. Part of the work that has come out of that is into the Centre of Excellence – Young People and Disasters, and they have been doing some really fantastic work in that area too. I can get them to send some of that stuff through, for sure.

**Gaelle BROAD:** That would be great. As well, there is the *Child and Youth Engagement Framework* – I think that is something that you have. When I looked at it, it is like 60 pages long. In the communication that government puts out – one of the submissions received was talking about how we need less marketing brochures and more factual letters that are succinct – is there anything in that communication that you see coming out that perhaps could make things more accessible?

**Meena SINGH:** Yes, absolutely. I might hand up some copies. I do not have enough for everyone, but we have just printed out the principles from the framework. There is no one set way to engage, and I think that is really important. Just as people can get in touch with their local MPs and engage in that way, there are so many people who are not able to, because they are dealing with some really current, impactful issues in their lives that prevent that. Often it is their stories that you really need to be getting to. I think it is the act of reaching out and working with those people who are working with the people you want to talk to, so people who are working with children and young people. For us, when we are doing systemic inquiries, one example is that we will contact different organisations that are working with children and young people and engage in that way. It is really important to make sure that the engagement is two ways: people reaching into you, but also reaching out. I will just hand up these copies – apologies, I do not have one for everyone.

Just to go through some of the principles that are in there: things like ‘We leave our ego at the door,’ so we are really openly engaging; ‘We ensure informed consent and confidentiality,’ and I know consent and confidentiality for children and young people can be used as a bit of a barrier – we posit children and young people as experts in their lives and able to tell us about the experiences that they are having, so their voice in telling us that is essential – and ‘We do no harm.’ The youth council informed these principles. All of our ongoing work is informing our principles, and the framework is a live document, but these are applicable to so many other groups of people that you are wanting to engage with. ‘Culture is key’ – not only in terms of an individual person’s identity and culture but also the culture that you are presenting to the engagement space. We know that children and young people will say it is really tokenistic. Do you want to jump in?

**ALLEGRA:** Yes, I would like to jump in with this: I think it is good that we have the principles laid out for you, but at the end of the day going into situations with basic respect – not assuming you know everything about someone’s experience – is I believe how you should go into a conversation with anyone, regardless of their age. I think it is very easy for us as young people to be caught up in ‘Oh, you need to do it via this framework,’ but in reality it should just be being compassionate the way that you would be with any other person. Again, jumping in on engagement with MPs, it is quite difficult from a young person’s point of view to engage. A lot of the time engagement opportunities are only given to students who are on their school’s representative council or, you know, are school captains, and it can be quite difficult for students who are, I do not know, maybe the captain of the rugby team or an art student to be given those opportunities. Again, another example: I have been trying to get in contact with my local district’s youth council, but the only meeting times I have been given for the head of their youth council are during school hours. So there are a lot of roadblocks that need to be worked through, I think.

**The CHAIR:** I might go to Ms Watt.

**Sheena WATT:** We have mixed up the order from last time. I was not expecting that. Thank you so much. Thank you all for coming to join me today. I must confess I did a lot of advocacy as a young person, particularly through what is now the Koorie Youth Council but before was VIYAC, which was very much attached to the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria. What I heard so much all those years ago – yes, many years ago, but now I still hear it – was about consultation fatigue, that sometimes it is just too much, and we are asked too much for our opinions on all the things. You feel like the weight of having to know and have an opinion on just about everything. Could you talk to me a little bit about how we might refine our work with young people so that their time is felt like it is better valued and that their contributions are really meaningful? Because it can be a lot. Is there anyone that has any views on that? And I particularly perhaps could start with the Youth Affairs Council if that is all right – Pra.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** I would just like to speak to that, because I have been in a recent consultation where the government did reach out to a private organisation to conduct a consultation with young people that have been in a carer role to try and engage more migrant workers to work in the childcare department. The way they reached out for that consultation there was not any clear idea about who exactly was funding the consultation or why exactly it was happening, and then halfway through the consultation we realised that our



only input was meant for marketing in regard to getting more people to work in child care – migrant workers to work in child care – and not really anything else. I feel like we were pretty unprepared and not really given time to prepare for it. I think it is laying out clear expectations – who is funding the consultation and what it is going for exactly – so that way when we do show up to the consultation we are ready to go with what we have and we are not kind of scrambling through trying to figure out what our best examples are, what our best advice is.

**Sheena WATT:** Yes, that is helpful. Any views from anyone else?

**Lauren FROST:** Maybe I will just add for you and pass on. I would absolutely echo everything that Pra just said, especially about the consultation fatigue thing that you are talking about. I think a big part of that is that the way that we do a lot of community consultations right now means that we are consulting the same young people again and again and again.

**Sheena WATT:** That is kind of what I was getting at.

**Lauren FROST:** Yes. So a big thing that I think would help with that consultation fatigue is actually being able to broaden out the range of, in this case, young people who are getting the opportunity to have a say or who are being consulted. Part of that is about: how do we meet young people where they are? How do we get the information out to young people that these opportunities are there so that we are bringing a broader range? A big part of that, actually, is all of the amazing co-design work that Pra does – actually having young people involved from the very beginning, even in the design of the advertising to recruit for the consultation. So how can you go to where young people are, speak in ways that will resonate with them and have a broader group recruited?

**ALLEGRA:** I agree with Lauren, in that having a diverse range of young people also helps with that. You might have young people who are more interested in the social media side of things and how they can promote the consultation, and then there might be some who are more interested in actually sitting down and discussing it. I know I have been a part of a few other consultations with other groups like VicSRC, and for me and a few friends there, being there to be productive instead of being there to say that there are young people there or going through a million different intros for a million local politicians that people sort of do not care too much about at this point, going and actually doing something instead of going through the speeches, is, I think, the best way to get rid of that fatigue – just get to the point.

**Sheena WATT:** Allegra, that is awesome. Thank you.

**Meena SINGH:** I was just going to say, in regard to consultation fatigue, it is really important that the people doing the consulting and seeking out the views do the hard work first and recognise what work is out there already and what knowledge is already out there, because you might have the same people being engaged on things. They could be the very people challenging you and saying, ‘Hang on, I talked about this two years ago. What has happened with it?’ So you really need to do the hard work in terms of that side of things. That is why the feedback loop that Lauren spoke about, which we also incorporate, is so important, because people need to see where their voices go and what happens to them. If they just go into a vacuum, that is nothing.

And something that we get a blockage about that contributes to that consultation fatigue is when adults say, ‘Oh, well, I don’t want to consult directly with children and young people, because I don’t want to retraumatise them. I don’t want to have them relive their experiences.’ We see that used as a blocker, which really is about often the adult’s own discomfort with hearing a story that is of hardship, of pain. You can engage in trauma-informed ways that do not retraumatise a child or a young person or anyone, and you can also engage in ways that put their voice first. Equally, what is just as traumatising is a lack of response – sharing your story, sharing what has happened to you, and not seeing a response happen to it. That also contributes to consultation fatigue. Consultation fatigue puts the fatigue on the people being consulted, but really the work that needs to be done is by us in doing the consulting – that is the where the heavy lifting has to happen.

**Sheena WATT:** Lovely, thank you.

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

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you so much for all of what you have presented today and in your submissions. A few things you have mentioned have been around how there is that real risk of almost token,

tick-a-box consultation that happens late in the piece rather than that early integration of the perspectives of young people. Are there things that could change almost from a system point of view that would ensure that those views are considered in that way by government? I do not know, but for example, are there changes to laws that we need to consider? When we are implementing new laws, we have to consider the impacts on future generations. I am just wondering if you have thought about ways we could integrate it so it becomes part of business as usual.

**ALLEGRA:** I think, for sure, having youth councils within organisations is a really good step. I know that there is Youth Parliament – I do not know if you guys work directly with them a lot – but having groups like that involved in the organisation and central to the organisation's doing is a really good way to start. Then you can look at branching out to other children and young people. For instance, starting something within the youth council, getting their opinions and then spreading the word and advertising so that more children and young people across the state can weigh in.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** I would also like to add that reaching out to organisations like YACVic – we do a lot of work with consultations, and they helped me, as a young person, train up so that I can run these consultations myself with the help of other youth workers. So that way, when young people are there, they get to see a familiar face. You do not have to worry about training up an adult to focus on being comfortable in that youth environment. Secondly, we have already done a lot of that work in terms of standardising that practice in terms of consultations and making sure that they are engaging enough for young people that they do not feel left out.

**Lauren FROST:** Yes, I absolutely echo all of that. One of the things that I think we highlight in our submission is that there are really fantastic resources out there about how we can do it better, and, yes, all of the things that Pra has mentioned today. I think actually the role at YACVic of young peer facilitators like Pra is so crucial in making sure that those consultations are designed in a way that is engaging and accessible and relevant for young people, and that can make the experience far more meaningful.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. One of you made the observation that we are voted in by adults to make decisions on behalf of all of us. Obviously going to vote is the ultimate consultation in some ways in our democracy. What are your views on potentially allowing even optional voting for people under 18 as a form of engagement?

**ALLEGRA:** Yes, I fully think that it is a great idea. I know that the UK is working on implementing it, and I think that a lot of young people my age and in school actually do care about politics, whether it is on a local level or a federal level. I know the boys in the locker hallway often talk about the potholes when they are learning to drive. The potholes are a big thing where I live, but even that is something that they would love to be able to have a say in and a lot of young people would be. Having it optional, I think, takes a lot of pressure off of, 'Oh, we have to teach the young people everything now when they are 14.' Whereas having optional voting up to 18 I think sounds like a good plan.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** Also, I would like to add a lot of people say that young people are the leaders of the future, but we are also leaders that exist now. We do a lot of advocacy work. We are more than involved, and I think leveraging that through either community consultations or just by having optional voting would be incredibly impactful.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks so much. I might go to Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks very much, and congratulations to the four of you – and you, Meena, you are not that old – for being actively involved, because – although, Allegra, you just said that young people are interested in things like potholes and stuff like that – it is generally not something that young people are engaged in – politics. I know even my own boys who are very politically aware – sorry, I have four nephews, I call them my boys – say, 'Political parties don't talk to us.' So we are not communicating with young people enough. People are disconnecting from both state and federal politics. I think there is still a level of interest in federal more than state, but people are disconnecting. What worries me about when people disconnect is that things will be done to you by governments, rather than for you. How is it that we can better connect with young people so that they do realise that politics does affect their daily life and that things like potholes are about

politics. How can we better talk to people of your age group to engage them in political debate and in being part of the conversation so that they do have a voice?

**ALLEGRA:** I think for me it begins with school and education. We learn how to do maths, we learn how to write a sentence, but I have schoolmates who do not understand the difference between how taxes work between states or what affects what between state, federal and local politics. I think implementing things within schools – programs where students can learn about exactly what happens with your vote, who you are voting for in which election and what that impacts in your area – is really crucial to getting the younger generations able to be politically literate and to consult with their local, state and federal politicians. And then obviously having lots of engagement – things that are not just a photo opportunity where the MP goes to a school and reads a book to the children, but having them actually come in and sit in a classroom for a day with students that are not just the local school leaders but students from all different backgrounds within the school who might not otherwise be given the opportunity to engage.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** I might also add on to that. Currently you guys are running the Pick My Park initiative, which I know some of you have been championing in your electorates, but a lot of people that I have personally spoken to, even my current Monash youth committee, do not know about the initiative itself. You have to go to a specific government website, you have to log on to the Engage Vic website, scroll, find where to do the survey and click on it, and if you are trying to find more information, there is a 70-page document to go through. I think making that more accessible for young people could be going to schools directly and running that survey in person, rather than just having it online. Young people might not all have access to phones or the internet all the time. Publicising it more, whether it be through social media and all of those things, and understanding that catering it to a meeting where young people are at will make sure that we can actually engage them properly, rather than just having an online survey.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Can I ask a favour of YACVic then: that you actually advocate to the schools to invite us in to do that? Because we cannot just walk into the schools and do those sorts of things, and often schools are reluctant to have politicians coming in. If you could actually advocate to the schools to invite their local politicians along and genuinely engage, it would be great. Thank you.

**Lauren FROST:** Yes, I love that as an idea. I think the conversations we are having today have such flow-on effects in terms of the engagement of young people in politics. I often think that voting is not the start and end of participation in the democratic process. All of the things we are talking about today are ways that people from the entire breadth of society can be involved in the democratic process. For young people who may not have the right to vote yet, having a good experience early on with community consultation will actually embolden them to say, 'Okay, yes, this is something where my voice matters.' So when they do get to the age of being able to vote, they already have confidence that the system is one where their opinions matter and where their voice is heard. I think it is all tied up, and I think it is a great suggestion.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I might go to Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Hi. Thanks for the work that both your organisations do. I was just interested in that genuineness of engagement or listening. In a YACVic submission you talk about extending consultation timelines to a minimum of 10 weeks, and then further down you talk about planning consultations thoroughly with and for young people. It just makes me think of how sometimes adults get into this whole technical expert kind of thing. They start working on something, they get very engineering and might go beyond their brief in designing something and then at the last minute ask young people what they think. Whether that is public open space design or whether that is social planning, it is all technical expertise. I think what you are saying is to involve you early, ask you what you want to prioritise and bring you along on the journey. Is that the messaging that you are giving? I am interested to hear from anybody who wants to comment on that.

**Lauren FROST:** Absolutely. That is the message we are giving: involve us early, right from the beginning – and, like I was saying before, not just in the consultation process itself but in the design of the consultation process, including the advertising process for recruiting participants to be involved in it. Part of the reason that we advocate for that longer lead-in time is so that we have time to engage young people from the very beginning. So, yes, absolutely, what you were saying is something we would endorse.

**Meena SINGH:** I think also what is really critical is building the relationship before the need arises. That is absolutely important so that you have got genuine engagement. You are not just going and consulting and taking and not providing back, you are seeing an inherent value in what children and young people have to say, and your relationship reflects that as well.

**ALLEGRA:** I agree with what everyone is saying about how processes should be involved from the start with children and young people, but I also think that there are some situations where you do not necessarily need a 10-week process, and consultation does not have to look like a sit-down thing. Take, for instance – and this is a very random example – Triple J's Hottest 100. Everyone was able to vote in that, which is, again, a form of consultation, and everyone knew that their vote would eventually be tallied up. So it does not necessarily have to be 10 weeks, but having a way that is accessible for people to be involved gives them a sense of ease in the process, and obviously people are then emailed later on to say, 'Hey, this is the date that the results come out.' So that is, I think –

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** There are probably 10 weeks of advertising in the lead-up. Again, that is another technical space, isn't it? Yes. Thanks. That is great.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Ettershank.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Thank you, Chair. It is always problematic at the end of the queue – so many questions you want to ask have already been asked. Can I first of all compliment the young people here on the quality of their presentations and their submissions. I think those submissions have also pointed us to a number of resource materials, like the framework on engagement, that give us some very good guidelines to work with. I guess I would really just like to hear, while we have got some youth voices here with us – can you share with the committee an example of a really good consultation you have had? And what made it have that cut-through or that special, positive impact for you?

**JULIA:** I think I touched on this in my opening statement. This was in 2022, when I went back to where I grew up and I spoke to the youth group where I was a youth leader about their experiences in education. I think what really stood out was that we were all coming from shared experience, but it was a place they were comfortable in. They would go there every week, and when you are at your most comfortable, you can feel able to share everything that comes to mind. So I think that is probably, yes – feeling most comfortable and just being able to be yourself in that.

**ALLEGRA:** I know, for me, my local school area, which encompasses Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula, had a day where they invited students from all the schools to meet the state, federal and local politicians and have open roundtable discussions with them about a range of different issues that we were all concerned about. I think having everyone in the room, aside from Zoe McKenzie – she did not decide to grace us with her presence – genuinely engaging with us and then later talking with us about 'Oh, I heard that you were interested in the state of the local public transport. We have this later event coming up for that. Would you like to be a part of it?' was really good to hear. We were also able to ask them questions throughout the day and had a dedicated time to ask them questions, which I thought was really good.

**Pra Ashok Raj KUMAR:** I also just might add, with the youth engagement resource platform that YACVic has developed, it was very integral to have young people build it. One thing that made me feel very included was how much they were willing to be accommodating and accessible, making sure people from different states could travel in and making sure that we had an elevator whenever we needed to. I think that the fact that I was already familiar with this organisation – they have newsletters; they reach out to young people constantly – and that they were running something like this made me more comfortable to be able to go and share my opinions. Even though we found that we were creating a resource for both young people and youth workers, having young people at the helm did not disenfranchise the adults that would be using the resources. I have spoken to many adults and they said that they loved it, even though young people were essentially the ones that created it, and I think it is a wonderful way to also ensure that you are futureproofing it, right. With that, it gave us so much more confidence to be involved, to know that they were doing this for us and making us the experts, essentially.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Thank you. That is fantastic. I am happy to finish there. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Ettershank. That brings us to the conclusion of today's session. Thank you so much, all of you, for coming and giving us your perspective. We have really appreciated it. From here, we will send you a copy of the transcript of today's hearings for you to review and just make sure we have got all the names and everything you have referred to correct before we publish that on our website. That will all help us prepare our report, which will be tabled in the Parliament, and then the government will have six months to respond. So that is the process for us from here today. Thank you. We really appreciate it. With that, we will take a short break.

**Witnesses withdrew.**