

# **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**

Dr Katherine Keirs, Coordinator, Policy, Advocacy and Communications (*via videoconference*), and

Annika Stewart, Health Promotion Officer, Community Engagement (*via videoconference*), Women's Health Goulburn North East; and

Melissa Edwards, Climbing Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. We are joined in the final session of today by representatives from Women's Health Goulburn North East, who are joining us online, and Climbing Victoria in the room.

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 witnesses provide 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.

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

Welcome. 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 to introduce themselves.

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

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

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

**David ETTERS HANK:** I am David Ettershank, representing Western Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** Before we get started, I might ask everyone to state their full name and the organisation they are appearing on behalf of for Hansard. We will start with you, Melissa.

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Melissa Edwards for Climbing Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** And online we have Katherine –

**Katherine KEIRS:** Yes, Katherine Keirs for Women's Health Goulburn North East.

**Annika STEWART:** And Annika Stewart from Women's Health Goulburn North East.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. I will invite each of you to make a short opening statement, and then we will get into questions. Melissa, I might start with you.

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Thank you for the opportunity to address this inquiry. My name is Melissa Edwards, and I have travelled 4 hours today to represent a regional Victorian community that has experienced firsthand the devastating consequences of inadequate government consultation practices. I am here today in the midst of a very difficult time in my life but with the determination, strength and resilience of my father, the man who made me who I am today and the man who empowers me to fight for justice. I bring professional experience in community engagement, having worked in diversity and inclusion, as a coordinator in higher education, as a producer and facilitator at a global leadership consultancy and currently as a board member of Climbing Victoria. However, I speak to you today as a resident of Natimuk, a town of 500 people in western Victoria, where since 2019 we have experienced cascading failures of engagement by Parks Victoria to follow established consultation best practices. This is not merely an administrative matter, it is a fundamental question of government responsibility to its citizens. When consultation processes fail as catastrophically as they have in our case, the accountability rests squarely on this government and its agencies.

To give you some background, the region is home to roughly 150 climbers and many locals connected to Mount Arapiles, traditionally known as Dyurrite. It is an international climbing destination, and in 2018 an independent economic assessment reported over \$12 million of direct and indirect revenue from rock climbing to the region. Dyurrite is woven into the local economy, social fabric and sense of identity. The cafe, the arts organisation, studio, gallery, outdoor shop, climbing school, museum, fringe and film festival, the yoga and fitness studio – they are all integrally linked to rock climbers. Some have lived here for over 40 years, and others are third-generation climbers. Critically, it is the only large natural area providing recreational space in a sea of agricultural land, and as we all know, being able to access nature is fundamental to our health and wellbeing.

Now, the current situation in a nutshell: in November 2024, so last year, Parks Victoria released a draft plan amendment to close over 60 per cent of climbing routes and 90 per cent of bushwalking at Mount Arapiles to protect both Aboriginal cultural heritage and environmental values. The plan arrived without any prior consultation, and Climbing Victoria was blindsided, being notified just a few days before its release at 5 pm on the day before a public holiday. The community was presented with an inform-only approach after its release, rather than being engaged in the process from the onset. The original 1991 plan has never been reviewed, and while the obligation to do so only arose in 2018, the substantial changes should have triggered a full review as opposed to the piecemeal amendments. Parks Victoria has avoided consultation by framing major changes as minor. Members of the existing advisory group established over 30 years ago – and those members still live in the town today – were disenfranchised by Parks Victoria, and all voices were ignored despite the statement of obligations.

Personally, I have found it incredibly challenging to sit with the tensions manifested by this government. Prioritising Indigenous knowledge and decision-making is necessary and just, yet people like me understandably feel alienated and frustrated when decisions that affect our lives are made without us. And absolutely the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage is necessary, but what I am criticising here is the process, because even if the decisions are predetermined, consultation and genuinely listening to the community allow for better change management, support and opportunities to bring people along for the journey. This government should have anticipated that proposing to close over 60 per cent of climbing access to a park beloved by hundreds and thousands of people all over the world would be highly controversial.

Now I will share some of the devastating consequences that I have experienced myself, that I have witnessed, or that have been reported to me: friendships destroyed; neighbours no longer speaking; residents who have sold homes and left town; documented cases of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and relationship breakdowns; reports of physical assaults, death threats, anonymous threatening letters and vandalism; animal carcasses left on doorsteps and blood splattered on walls of buildings; and local business closures. Nine tertiary campuses have cancelled their programs, and outdoor ed trips have been cancelled, impacting over 3500 school-aged students. There has been a complete breakdown of trust between community and government agencies and decreased support for Indigenous rights and for outcomes related to treaty processes in Victoria. One climber's family reported to me that the situation was the tip of the iceberg that contributed to a suicide earlier this year.

I have personally called for government-funded mental health support to address this trauma, and yet none has been provided. We have met with the minister on two occasions to raise our concerns, and no actions have followed. These impacts were entirely foreseeable and preventable. The government's failure to implement basic change management principles has torn apart a small, rural town that should have been engaged as partners. What should have been a powerful step forward towards reconciliation, trust and shared care for country has resulted in a complete loss of confidence in a process that could contribute to building a future together.

I will now outline some of the consultation failures. Through freedom-of-information requests we discovered that Parks Victoria deliberately misled the public by using a native fern 'to take the heat off cultural heritage'. To date, Parks Victoria have not been held accountable. During supposed working group meetings, which I attended with the interim CEO earlier this year, Parks Victoria staff insisted on Chatham House rules and operated with no terms of reference and no minutes. We later discovered that our comments were being shared with other stakeholders without our knowledge or consent. While Parks Victoria has since boasted of five of these meetings in their recently published engagement summary, these were meaningless in terms of community engagement. When Parks Victoria opened a public consultation through the Engage Vic portal,

they explicitly stated that they would not impact access decisions, only signage, maps and the like. This narrow scope renders the consultation meaningless. It fails to meet any recognised standard of genuine public engagement, and it represents consultation theatre rather than authentic community involvement. To date, this scope has not changed. The decision-making framework, also revealed through FOI, targets only rock climbers, and yet these documents guided the entire process without community awareness or input. For example, it describes rock climbing as a continuing act of colonisation of the landscape. Such inflammatory language within government documentation raises serious questions about procedural fairness and whether any other recreational group or user has been subjected to this sort of discriminatory characterisation in official government processes.

Lastly, despite community requests, an economic impact assessment was only commissioned by DEECA in December 2024, after the plan's release. The assessment was only made available six months later, coinciding with another FOI deadline. Proper consultation requires that impact assessments inform the consultation process, not follow it.

In response to these failures, another Natimuk local, Dr Jess Hopf, and I launched Shared Not Shut, a grassroots campaign promoting public access to nature through community cohesion and reconciliation-led conversations. In April we organised a peaceful gathering at Mount Arapiles that attracted over 300 people in the pouring rain, demonstrating their community support for inclusive and equitable access. In August 2024 we facilitated community conversation with 70 residents – for a town of 500 that is quite a lot – in attendance to deepen our understanding of the community's relationship with reconciliation and treaty. These community initiatives achieved more meaningful engagement than the government's entire consultation process.

So to prevent further consultation disasters, I have six recommendations for this government: conduct a public inquiry into the laws, policies and processes and decision-making that affect public access to nature in Victoria; engage change management experts in regions where significant and potentially controversial change is expected, such as the transfer of state lands to joint or full management by Aboriginal land councils – this is necessary to support reconciliation; mandate independent representation to participate in or observe significant consultation processes; establish permanent advisory committees for state and national parks, comprising of traditional owners, recreational user groups, conservation experts and community representatives, to provide a structured oversight over access decisions; mandate economic, social and mental health impact assessments before any decisions restricting public access to nature where results can inform the consultation process; and finally, improve minimum standards for government consultation that include early engagement, procedural transparency, independent oversight and meaningful scope for the community to input.

The Mount Arapiles consultation process is a textbook example of how not to engage communities in government decision-making and change management, and what should have been a collaborative process respecting both Indigenous heritage and culture and community connection to place is now a divisive ordeal, causing lasting trauma to our region. Regional Victorians deserve consultation to build trust, respect, community knowledge and work towards solutions that serve all Victorians. This inquiry has an opportunity to ensure that no other community endures what ours has experienced, and I urge you to recommend systemic reforms that will restore faith in government consultation and prevent future disasters. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Katherine, Annika, I am not sure who wishes to make an opening statement, but I will leave it in your hands.

**Katherine KEIRS:** Sure. Thank you very much. Women's Health Goulburn North East is a non-profit health promotion organisation funded by the Victorian state government, one of 12, to support women's good health and wellbeing. We approach our work with communities across our region through a gendered lens and to address the many social determinants of health to people in our regional and rural context. Our expertise is in women's economic empowerment, gender and health equity, climate justice and the prevention of gender-based violence, all areas in which lived experience and community perspectives are crucial in gaining a nuanced, place-based understanding of a given issue in order to effect change. We conduct community consultations to inform our policy and advocacy work, identify pressing needs within our communities and build a regional evidence base of lived experience and gender-disaggregated data to guide our suite of health promotion and primary prevention activities. Equally, we are informed by information obtained from state and local governments through inquiries, consultations and other engagements that are able to access a much larger section of the population and are also frequent contributors to inquiries and consultations.

Through the Victorian government's consultation practices we would love to see community consultation practices, including the routine collection of gender-disaggregated data, strengthened to inform population health initiatives. For us, considering how factors like gender, rurality, digital literacy and accessibility of communications will influence the ability of community members to participate in consultations is incredibly important, because central to community consultation is people and their lived experience. With this comes the responsibility to engage with care, recognising the inherent values and expertise of individuals and groups, whether it be through face-to-face or online consultation. Through our community engagement we have found that obtaining diverse perspectives from the community, and especially underserved cohorts, is dependent on fostering processes and environments where everyone feels safe and valued. It is crucial that practitioners undertaking consultations from the planning stages to implementation have been provided the tools to build their capacity to apply principles of care, intersectionality and accessibility to consulting equitably with community members.

Women in our region and around the state are often keen to share their experiences and perspectives, ideally to contribute to solutions but also to know that they have been heard in a society that does not always value or seek out women's voices, especially on issues that are highly gendered. The overwhelming response to the Victorian government's call for submissions to the women's pain inquiry last year is evidence of the generosity shown by women in contributing their voices and experience to the evidence base. When women are provided opportunities to tell their stories safely and in a way that articulates effectively why the information is needed and how it might be used, the community benefits.

Of course it is integral to consider community consultation practices through a socio-economic lens as well as a gender lens. When consulting communities we must consider everything from how time-poor single parents are enabled to contribute to which approaches might be least burdensome for them to do so. Our approach to community engagement is built on the perspective that the process is as important as the outcome. We are pleased to have been invited here today to offer our perspective on community consultation practices and we thank you very much for the opportunity to talk to our submission.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. We will now go to questions. Each of the members of the committee will get a block of time, and we will just take it from there. Melissa, I might start with you. Thanks for coming so far to participate in today's proceedings. You obviously feel very strongly and very passionately about the issue. If a different process had reached the same outcome, would you have the same view or would you be more accepting of decisions to close the routes and the climbing?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Absolutely this is about the process. It is a process that is ongoing, so it is hard to really share what I would think about the outcome that is going to come, but it is about bringing people along for the journey and the change management. More importantly, if there is no consultation and voices are not heard, then we are failing to meet the principles of co-design for inclusive decision-making in regard to disability and inclusion. If there are only two voices at the table, then we are not able to see the value that the community provides. I think whilst decisions may be predetermined in that we have to absolutely protect cultural heritage, there are ways that we can protect cultural heritage. That can be a discussion, and we can do that at a table where the traditional owner voices are centred and the conversation is weighted. But if we just exclude that conversation altogether, then there is no opportunity to even consider the different approaches to protection.

**The CHAIR:** Since the draft plan was released in November, what has been the engagement with Climbing Victoria about the issue?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** It is complicated, but in a nutshell I would say – as we know, Parks Victoria have gone through a massive structural change and they have a new CEO. We have engaged in two working group meetings since then. I have yet to see any commitment or change in the scope. There are big questions around decision-makers and whether or not consultation will be genuine, and by that I mean whether or not it is going to be tokenistic. There is a huge difference between what is being said on the Engage Vic portal and what is actually happening on the ground. What I said about those five working group meetings earlier this year – there were no minutes and no terms of reference, and everything that was being told was shared outside the room. The Engage Vic portal is saying that a consultation process is happening, and that is really not true. There is nothing else we can do except –

**The CHAIR:** But there have been meetings; there have been working groups.

**Melissa EDWARDS:** We do not have a terms of reference yet. There have been two working group meetings so far. I am hesitant to go into the process too specifically because I want to talk more broadly about the consultation process as a whole. This one is kind of ongoing and a changing beast, I suppose, so it may evolve over the next week or two. There have been meetings but no commitment, so we might as well be talking to a brick wall at this point if there is no commitment to change.

**The CHAIR:** Do you think the process is only valid if you get a different outcome?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** No, if there was a different decision-making framework. The decision-making framework that guides this process is still being used, and that is the flawed decision-making framework. We have written a response to that which I can share with you. It is incredibly biased and discriminatory.

**The CHAIR:** Right.

**Melissa EDWARDS:** We have asked for that decision-making framework to be rescinded, and we have heard no response to that. That is the decision-making framework that has guided the process so far. That is what I see as the major flaw, so if that decision-making framework is still being used and there has not been any commitment to change regarding the consultation process, then it is hard to imagine a different outcome. But like I said, I understand that government has obligations in terms of protecting cultural heritage, but the government also has social and moral obligations to bring the community along.

**The CHAIR:** By ‘decision-making framework’, do you mean the factors that need to be taken into account in making the decision or who makes the decision?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Who makes the decision and how the decision –

**The CHAIR:** Who should make the decision?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Well, Parks Victoria should be making the decisions, but that does not seem to be what is happening right now.

**The CHAIR:** Who do you think is making the decisions?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Traditional owners are making decisions. The land council is making decisions.

**The CHAIR:** My time is about to run out, so I might go to Women’s Health Goulburn. You talked about the women’s pain inquiry as an example of broadscale engagement that has led to policy change. Do you mind expanding a little bit on what happened through that process, what has come about as a result and whether or not you think that was an effective use of engagement to affect policy change?

**Katherine KEIRS:** Sure, yes. As far as I am aware, we are still waiting for the final report, the conclusion of the women’s pain inquiry. From what I understand, it is because of the overwhelming volume of submissions. I guess the example was to highlight that it was pretty clear that this issue was something that women wanted to have their voices heard on. This collective experience of feeling unheard, having your pain minimised and having all of these kinds of experiences in the healthcare system obviously spurred women to contribute. I suppose that does bring me to the point that I think it is really important to be very clear how the information is going to be used to affect change. We do not want to ask people to contribute to an inquiry and have them expect that it is going to lead to some kind of revolutionary change in the healthcare system. In terms of the delays in finding out what the results of the women’s pain inquiry are, I think it is important to have transparency about how that is going to help find solutions to the problems that women have articulated.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. I might go to one of our online members. Dr Mansfield, are you there?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes, I am. Thank you so much for appearing today. A common theme we have heard all day is the importance of people being able to see how their feedback was considered. It might be that their feedback did not lead to the outcome that was requested, but people want that level of transparency and honesty and an explanation for why a different decision was made. Can you explain why that is important in the areas that you are working in – and maybe start with women’s health?

**Katherine KEIRS:** Yes, sure. From an ethical perspective – we could start there – when people are giving their time and often, for example, in the women’s pain inquiry, giving and sharing stories that are emotional for them or that might have some kind of impact on them, I think it is really important to set expectations realistically. Especially if someone has had trauma and they are sharing a story, we do not want them to think that it is going to fix everything straightaway. So I think, yes, from an ethical and trauma-informed perspective, that is why it is most important. I also just think people are going to be more likely to contribute to community consultations if they have an awareness of what is going on and have all the information.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** And potentially, I would imagine, contribute to future consultations if they feel that it has been listened to –

**Katherine KEIRS:** Absolutely.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** whether the answer is the one they want or –

**Katherine KEIRS:** Yes, and if there is a feedback loop there where, as you said, even if it is not the answer they want, they are keeping informed.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. Mel, do you have any reflections on that?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** I think that, like I said, the process is the thing that I am focusing on, because regardless of what the outcome is, if we can bring people along for the journey then we can avoid disasters like we are experiencing in Nativuk. The way that the plan was released with no consultation but more importantly no communication or warning or any sort of preparedness for the community to understand and support has meant that we have just been thrown into these two massive divisive camps – you are either a coloniser and a racist for even questioning something that you do not understand or you are supportive of Aboriginal self-determination and land rights. We know there are a lot of people that sit in the middle there and sometimes it is just about having conversations and helping people understand what is going on, and I am fully aware that people do not want to talk about this because they are too afraid of being called racist, like I have been as well. So I think that it is important and it is a huge element, even if the outcomes are predetermined, to let people know what is happening and how it is happening.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. In terms of women’s health I know that, especially in a lot of the work that happens across the different women’s health networks, there is a focus on co-design and incorporating lived experience from the very outset of concept planning for different programs. What benefits have you seen from that?

**Katherine KEIRS:** I think demographic data can tell us a lot, but it really needs to be contextualised with lived experience. You can find a statistic and you can say, ‘Okay, this many people have accessed this health service,’ but it does not tell you what their experience was, whether it actually benefited them or whether it helped them with what they needed, so you do not know then whether you need to improve that service or change it in some way. Again, from a human rights perspective, participation in decision-making that affects a community is really important. I think engaging with the political system and with civic society strengthens social cohesion and it makes services more fit for purpose for communities.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Great. Do you have any examples you can provide of consultation that either you have undertaken or you have observed where it has been done really well?

**Katherine KEIRS:** I can answer this on a really localised basis if that is okay. Often when we do community consultations we find that we just get a lot more engagement when we do it in the settings that women feel comfortable in and maybe sometimes even keep it a little bit more casual. We did a housing consultation, and we approached libraries across our region. We just set up a conversation space in each of the libraries and different sessions and invited people to come and share their views around housing. It just gave us some really rich, valuable information that I do not think we would have got through a survey alone.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** That has been a common theme as well today. I think that undertaking consultations in places where people feel safe and comfortable is really important. Earlier you mentioned, I think, a really important issue around socio-economic differences for people and how that impacts on people’s ability to engage, particularly with a lot of the standard approaches to community consultation. Do you have any

suggestions for people who perhaps are, say, a single parent on low income and really time poor? How can we more effectively engage with parts of the community who perhaps are systematically kind of excluded from a lot of consultation?

**Katherine KEIRS:** I think that is a really tricky one. I think in the planning stages of consultations we have to put that sort of lens over how we are going to design and carry out the consultation. For example, if it is something that requires online or in-person appearances, thinking about school time, school pickup times and work times, and perhaps for focus groups and things like that providing childcare – those kinds of measures can be effective. Sometimes with having things purely online, people with lower educational attainment or people who do not have reliable access to the internet – so this affects rural people as well – can impact people's ability to participate. Again, local settings like public libraries, places that are easy to get to, community and neighbourhood houses are also good settings that are inviting and sort of easier for people to get to, and you can help build that relationship as well. Even if the survey is online, you can have people supporting people to participate on computers at the library, for example.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. Mrs Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you all for your contribution. I do want to say, Melissa, thank you because you have travelled a long way to be here. I do not know how old you are, but I know you are younger than me. Earlier we heard about the importance of young people engaging in the process, and you have certainly done that today with an extensive submission. I guess it outlines many of the challenges about community consultation when it does not work and the impact on a community. You talked about consultation theatre; you have talked about the damage to regional communities when they get engagement wrong. Can you talk about that? What is the impact on the local community when they do not feel respected in the process about issues that are happening in their own backyard?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Other than the impacts I have outlined, it is a huge loss of trust in local government and just government in general – and in people that are making decisions, including parks managers and the land councils as well. It is unfortunate that this has created this manifested and divisive, ongoing issue that could have led towards a reconciliation journey but has instead done quite the opposite. That trust is really hard to build back, and I suppose that is why I am so sceptical about the current process – until I see things in writing and I see a commitment. Like I said, we met with the minister twice and we have not heard any responses or seen any follow-up actions. We are yet to see any terms of references or any change in terms of the scope or the decision-making frameworks. It has been almost a year that we have been advocating for this as volunteers, and this is not our day job at all. Whilst it is great that there have been some small positive wins along the journey, and I am optimistic about what may come, it is hard to tell. But what has unfolded so far should not have unfolded in the first place.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I guess you are certainly not alone in this. I think many of us would have received – I know I personally received hundreds of letters from people that were very concerned about the decisions made, and one really stood out to me. I remember it was a business that was just saying they were completely blindsided by this and the impact it would have on them, and that they were going to have to close. Do you think it is possible to rebuild trust with the current government? What steps need to be undertaken now? I guess it is difficult to sort of backtrack, but what would you like to see happen?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** I think we would need a commitment from the minister in writing and an acknowledgement of the failures, which we have yet to see. We have received an apology from Parks Victoria in the minutes that from the previous meeting that we had, but something from the government that is acknowledging the failures and then committing to change and withdrawing a decision-making framework that is still flawed and guiding the current process. As far as we know, the minister is still perpetuating the same flawed process that has brought us here in the first place.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Can you just talk about Engage Victoria? Because that is a platform you said had a very narrow scope. What was your experience of that?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** Tokenistic and still so. There was a lot of misinformation on the website which we had to provide specific feedback to. That has since changed. But there was, for example, a claim that rock climbers had been consulted or the rock-climbing community had been consulted – there were false claims



about that. That has all since been removed and amended and the words have been altered. There were also, like I said, claims that the closures were to protect environmental values. That is also incorrect, which we discovered through FOI, and that has not quite been amended publicly yet. But we know now that all the closures are to protect cultural heritage. The submission process itself, because of the narrow scope where people were only able to provide feedback on signage, for example, or how they would receive communication, renders the consultation process meaningless, because what is the point in providing consultation or feedback when at this point all you are doing is expressing your dismay and disappointment. So in that sense I would say that the feedback that was provided by people was not constructive and not productive because it was not contributing. That plus the five meetings that we sat in in person that had no minutes, no terms of reference, where we were lied to – I was lied to directly to my face multiple times by Parks staff – were totally meaningless. Yet the recent report that has been published claims consultation has happened and all of that has been taken credit for.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Your experience has been shared by others. I think of the closure of the timber industry. That came I think nearly seven years earlier than what was originally said and caught communities completely off guard. We had the Malmsbury prison, which closed and the local people working there did not have any idea. So, yes, we have seen this happening before. Anyway, I do not have any further questions but I do really appreciate your insights, because it has been an appalling process.

**Melissa EDWARDS:** I will just add as well: it has been pitched as a conflicting of rights or a competition of rights, whereas it could be an integration of values and knowledge. It could be an integration of values and expertise from traditional owners, land managers, user groups. It can be a shared journey. It has been pushed on us as if we need to fight.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you.

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

**David ETTERS HANK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you for attending today. Melissa, first of all, I think it is really regrettable that this is being increasingly seen through a racist sort of lens. Certainly I have had a number of climbers in my region that have been very forthright in putting forward their concerns. Given that we are where we are, can I ask, perhaps following on a little bit from Ms Broad's questions: what does it look like to try and put the pieces back together in the town and with the local communities?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** I would hope that we will soon have a terms of reference for the new working group meetings that we are a part of. At this point we are so traumatised and we have lost so much trust in the process that I just need something in writing, to be quite frank, and I need a commitment and, like I said, an acknowledgement of the failures and then a commitment that we can have a voice. Like I said before, it is not that we need to be the decision-makers or we want to be central to the decision-making process; we would like a seat at the table, but we would like to be a part of the process that is going to decide how restrictions and how access decisions are made. At this point we do not have any commitment that is going to take place. When it comes –

**David ETTERS HANK:** You are still doing working group meetings as I understand it. What are they doing, those working groups?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** There will be a public statement released, I believe, next week. At the moment there has been a commitment to pausing the writing of the plan, and we have been discussing maximising the economic benefit of the mount. But restrictions or discussions around access restrictions are not on the table, which is confusing for Climbing Victoria. That is the thing that we are interested in.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Sure. Okay. Thank you. Katherine and Annika, could I just ask: given the challenges you face, both geographically and in terms of diversity and such like, if you had an opportunity to just produce a wish list of how you would like to be consulted in the future – and I understand that will obviously depend on what you are being consulted about – what are the really high priorities in terms of trying to get a better consultative process?

**Katherine KEIRS:** Oh, sorry. Was that for me?

**David ETTERS HANK:** For Katherine for Women's Health and for Annika, please.

**Katherine KEIRS:** I can start. Maybe Annika can add something. That is a really great question. I think as I mentioned before, getting gender disaggregated data embedded in the planning stage of consultations is really important, and not just gender disaggregated but other factors that can really influence health outcomes. I think being a rural organisation as well, often rural communities are underconsidered and so embedding that kind of lens into consultation practices would be really great, which would also involve strengthening a focus on getting consultations out there and maybe partnering with organisations like ours that are place-based and have those relationships to really help strengthen participation and enable participation in rural areas.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Annika, have you got thoughts on this question as well?

**Annika STEWART:** No, I think Katherine covered it. Thank you.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Okay. Thank you. That is fine. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Ettershank. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks. Melissa, thanks for coming. As everyone has said, you have travelled a long way and you are very passionate about this. I can understand your passion. I know the Natimuk community because it used to be part of my electorate, and it changed with some boundary changes. I know that it is a very passionate and very dedicated little community there in Natimuk. You talk about Shared Not Shut. We also have proposals from the government around the Wombat–Lerderderg and the Mount Buangor regional parks to turn them into national parks. It has been a different process to yours, but there is still a lot of distrust by the communities that whilst the government are saying that they will allow certain activities like dog walking or seasonal hunting to continue there, there is a distrust in the community that that is what they will say now and then it will be death by a thousand cuts to just shut things down. How can we come to a point in regional communities where we feel there is genuine consultation and genuine commitment from government that these things will be honoured? I have been a member of Parliament for a long time, and I have seen so many of these. When the Barmah forest was closed, they were promised that it would be replaced with tourism. That has not happened. I just wondered from a community point of view what you think should be changed and how we can do it better.

**Melissa EDWARDS:** I am entirely speaking as a member of community. Although I am volunteer for Climbing Victoria, I am not a professional consultant, but I would say that at your fingertips you have a lot of volunteer resources, and you have a lot of people that are passionate about the local area that they live in. For example, in Natimuk we have hundreds of people that moved to that place and live there purely because they love this piece of rock so much. They are willing to donate hundreds and thousands of hours and genuinely commit their resources and time and energy to help support sustainable, respectful access to public lands. And so I would say harnessing the resources that you have, rather than feeling like you have to pay someone else to do it or feeling like you do not have the resources – it is all there. The community members are there; we are just not being listened to and not being heard. So harnessing the resources that you have at Climbing Victoria and other peak bodies and user groups, how can they help with sending the right message along so that we can respectfully access public land? Then hopefully there would not be a need to shut public land if we can navigate them in a sustainable way.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. Thank you. Women's Health Victoria – hi, Katherine. Your area covers a very large area – most of the eastern side of the electorate of three of us. You have got some diverse communities amongst that. You have got what are very white Anglo-Saxon type communities, and then you have the City of Greater Shepparton and Mitchell shire, which are very multicultural, and of course the City of Greater Shepparton with the big Indigenous population as well. There would be some of that in the Moira shire as well. I am just wondering how, when you do consultation, you manage to do consultation for what are vastly different communities and how you adapt in those areas.

**Katherine KEIRS:** Thank you. That is a really great question. I think that is something that we are still working on. We call our region 'Goulburn North East'. It is also often known as Hume. But, yes, there is a lot of variance in the different LGAs with lots of different factors. We have a multilingual health educator on our staff, and she has some amazing relationships with I think the Filipino community and the Bhutanese and Nepalese communities, so we do have that sort of liaison, if you will. I think it is just that relationship building

and building trust. You cannot just go into a community and say, 'Hey, we're going to consult you and help you,' and expect that they are going to just trust you. So, yes, I think in terms of the multicultural community, having our multilingual health educator on staff has been really beneficial to us. I think it has to be reciprocal too, is the other thing. You cannot just go in and say, 'We're taking what we want and then we're leaving.' You have to ensure that you are putting in measures to make the consultation worthwhile, and sometimes that involves remuneration really. If you are consulting underserved communities and it is face to face or online or in person, yes, we offer remuneration. So that is part of our process.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Hello. Lucky last, and nobody has managed to read my mind for once. Melissa, if you could turn back the clock to right from where it all started, how would you like to have seen this all play out in the community consultation process so that it would be perfect for your community?

**Melissa EDWARDS:** That would go back to many, many years ago with Gariwerd as well. It would predate this current plan, because a lot of the damage that we are seeing started many, many years ago. One of my recommendations was mandating independent representation, because a lot of I guess the deception, misleading, lies and inconsistencies – I would imagine if we had a third-party independent body as part of the consultation process, perhaps that would not have happened and there would be someone else to facilitate some of those consultation processes. But most importantly, I would say, establishing permanent advisory committees and making sure that we have representation from community, from user groups and from traditional owners, people that really love and value the place, and making sure that that is permanent. That also saves time. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. We do not have to bring them together last minute. These plans need to be amended and reviewed every 15 or so years. So we can have those groups and committees ready to sort of provide advice. Again, we are harnessing volunteer resources that are readily available. That group does exist and was established but, unfortunately, was disenfranchised. That is just on Parks Victoria at this point.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you. That is all I have.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Unless anyone has got any final questions, I might conclude today's hearings there. Thank you all. I keep looking at the screen there, but the camera is over there. I am looking at you, those of you on screen.

Thank you so much for coming today. We really appreciate the evidence you have given us. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript for review before its publication. With that we will bring today's hearings to a close.

**Committee adjourned.**