

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices

Melbourne – Monday 15 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 (*via videoconference*)

Philippa Nihill, Director, Digital Platform and Products, and

Laurel Chidgey, Executive Director, Transformation, Department of Government Services.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices. We are joined today online by representatives from the Department of Government Services. The Environment and Planning Committee is an all-party committee of the Legislative Council looking into the community consultation practices that are taken by governments here in the state of Victoria, and we will be providing a report and recommendations to the Legislative Council and to the government. We do ask everyone, those who are on mic, to put their mobile phones on silent and try and minimise any background noise.

I will begin today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are all meeting on today. I join you from the lands of the Wurundjeri people and pay my respects to elders past and present and also to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians who are participating in today's proceedings. Welcome to any members of the public who may be joining us, watching the live broadcast online.

For our witnesses, all the evidence that we take today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders, so any information you provide during the hearing today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during these hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those 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 Parliament.

As you can see, all evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review following the hearing today. 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 Environment and Planning Committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. We have got a range of other committee members joining us, and I will just cycle through so they can introduce themselves. We can use that as a sneaky double-check to make sure that everyone's audio is working.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

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

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

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

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

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Basically, the format of today is we will hand over to the representatives from the Department of Government Services shortly for an introduction. They can make an opening statement, and the committee will ask questions. If anyone has got any questions or issues during the course of the proceedings today, you can put your hand up or send some messages in the chat. Hopefully the technology will be kind to us and it will get through without a hitch.

With that, Laurel and Philippa, for the Hansard record, if each of you could just state your name, your position and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, and then we will get into the proceedings. Laurel.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Laurel Chidgey, Executive Director of Transformation, Department of Government Services.

Philippa NIHILL: Hi. Philippa Nihill, Director of Platform and Products at the Department of Government Services.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I might hand over to you guys to open up. I do not know how you are going to handle it, but I am in your hands.

Laurel CHIDGEY: I will go first. Nice to meet the committee. I will just make a few opening remarks and provide a bit of background information around Engage Victoria. Engage Victoria is the Victorian government's online engagement platform. The platform really provides a range of tools to enable the community to participate in the development of government policies and programs and share their ideas and thoughts on a range of issues and topics that are relevant to Victorians. The platform itself is managed by the Department of Government Services. All contents, consultation processes, collection and analysis of data is the responsibility of whoever is the relevant department that actually leads that consultation, so the Department of Government Services provides the technology to support that.

Every Victorian has the opportunity to share ideas and provide feedback on the proposals or consultations that are hosted on the platform. Over 130,000 submissions were received through the Engage Victoria platform in the last calendar year of 2024, and from a technology perspective, we also gather community satisfaction and feedback and that also informs the improvements of the platform, with over 75 per cent of public visitors finding that platform helpful.

Engage Victoria was established in 2016 and literally developed to provide a unified consultation platform. Post the initial developments, this was further informed by the 2017 VAGO report, which was on public participation in government decision-making, and that concluded that the quality and extent of public participation to inform decision-making varied across the public sector. That was very much taken on board in the creation of the technology, and it also formed a key action of the *Information Technology Strategy* of the Victorian government between 2016 and 2020, which was around developing a unified consultation and collaboration platform. I will end my opening remarks there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Philippa, do you have anything else to add, or are you just going to go with that?

Philippa NIHILL: Nothing more to add.

The CHAIR: All good. We will essentially now break into segments and people will be able to ask questions. Laurel, I might start. I want to go back and get the committee to understand a little bit further about where Engage Victoria came from. Why do we have a platform that DGS runs that departments use? Do all departments have to use the platform? What are the benefits that it is trying to create by having a platform? And how did that arise out of what the Auditor-General said back in 2017, I think you said?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I might just touch on a couple of things and then maybe hand to Philippa as well. All the departments actually use Engage Victoria. Whilst it is not specifically mandated, all the departments actually use it – I would say all the departments plus Victoria Police. We also have nine agencies that use it, and those nine agencies are the Environment Protection Authority, Parks Victoria, Homes Victoria, the Victorian Planning Authority, WorkSafe, VIDA, Development Victoria, the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission and VicGrid. It is used quite extensively across those. In terms of the benefits, it is really very much about the platform being easy for the public to use and for departments and agencies to use and really provides that consistent look and feel for those Victorian government consultations that are run through the platform. I think a really key benefit of the platform is Victorians can actually subscribe to specific topics and automatically receive email alerts when new consultations are published. That allows them to continuously provide feedback on those specific consultations.

The CHAIR: So there is a system that if someone has registered, for want of a better term, or has participated in a prior consultation platform, they have the option of being made aware of the next thing on a topic that they might be interested in. Is that a fair –

Laurel CHIDGEY: There is a subscription ability, so there is the ability to subscribe to specific topics. Philippa, I might hand to you for any specificity around how that works on the platform itself.

Philippa NIHILL: Sure. Yes, there is definitely the option to subscribe to a range of categories that we have established, whether subject matter categories or region categories. So I can subscribe to be notified about anything that is tagged by consultation owners – for instance, there is Gippsland – and I could be notified whenever the next consultation that is similarly tagged would be run. In addition, consultation owners – so the departments and agencies – run their own subscription offers or mailing list requests et cetera that might be aligned to a particular program like the Big Build or something like that.

The CHAIR: You mentioned there were 130,000 submissions made to Engage Victoria consultations in the 2024 year. How many consultations were run in that year, and what have been the numbers over the last – I do not know if you have got them back to 2016, when you set it up, but at least over the last five years or so. How many consultations are run through the platform each year?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I have got that data in front of me. We ran 197 in 2024, 234 in 2023 and 109 in 2022. Probably – I would say fairly consistently over the last four or five years – it has hovered between about 170 and just over 200. Originally, when the platform started off, it was around 80 consultations. So we have seen the use of the platform, both in the number of consultations run on the platform and also the number of submissions, really trend positively over the time since 2016.

The CHAIR: Do you have – maybe you can provide it to the committee on notice – what the largest five, say, consultation topics in 2024 were and how many submissions each of them received, and the top five or top 10? If there are about 200 consultations taking place and about 130,000 submitters, are some of them very large and then it tails off? I am interested in what the top 10 or maybe even what an average and what a median would be for the number of submissions that are received so the committee can get a sense of: are there a limited number of things that are really impactful and really popular, or is it across the board? And particularly any insights you have got about the types or categories of consultation activities that, in your analysis, seem to be generating the most.

Laurel CHIDGEY: We might take that as a question on notice, if that is okay with the committee.

The CHAIR: That is fine.

Laurel CHIDGEY: We just do not have that –

The CHAIR: No, that is okay. The other thing I was interested in, and I do not know if again you might want to take it on notice – in reading the public service's *Public Engagement Framework*, which was released about four or five years ago, it had in it an evaluation framework that looked at two domains, one of which looked at how the public was being informed and the second was looking at how the public sector itself was changing the way it behaves. If there was any sort of reporting or any analysis of the extent to which the outcomes that were sought through that framework, the *Public Engagement Framework 2021–2025*, were being measured, that would be useful for the committee to receive. I am not sure if that is something that you have, but maybe you could take on notice for us looking for whether there has been any measurement of the effectiveness of the engagement framework that the government set out in the last five years.

The other thing we are also interested in – and again, I do not know whether you have got this; my time is about to run out, so I am just going to stop here – is if there is any information about how government agencies have changed how they do their business as a result of the platform. Again, I do not know if you have got any feedback on that you can provide to the committee.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Yes, I might, just on the *Public Engagement Framework*. The Department of Government Services just administers the technology and the supporting channels of Engage Vic, so we will try and take on notice the question on effectiveness of the evaluation framework but note that the DGS does not administer that framework.

The CHAIR: Who does, do you know?

Laurel CHIDGEY: We will have to take that on notice and confirm.

The CHAIR: Thanks. All right. I might hand over to the Deputy Chair Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERSCHANK: Thank you, Chair. Firstly can I say: I love Engage Victoria. It is a great site for finding information and stuff like that. A couple of questions: we have had a lot of feedback with regard to surveys and in particular things like closed options that do not actually provide people a fix, and linked to that obviously is the absence of just other spaces, which I know are a pain in arse when it comes to coding. Is there a policy about how these sorts of surveys should be prepared, and is there a style guide or whatever for questionnaires?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I might hand that one to Philippa, in terms of what guidance we provide around that and also how the Engage Victoria platform supports the different ways of seeking information.

Philippa NIHILL: Hi. I think I would say that we do not particularly have an explicit style guide for the use of survey questions beyond how to set them up. We do provide advice within the context of setting up your space on Engage Victoria as to how to put your survey together, but that is always done in response to the survey questions that the department is coming to us with. So that is a short answer. If you would like, we can dive into that a bit more.

David ETTERSCHANK: Do you actually – if, let us say, the Department of Health came up with something and they said, ‘We want a survey on X,’ they would send you the questions and then you would actually do the formatting and coding and stuff like that. Is that how it works?

Philippa NIHILL: No. I mean, one of the great things about Engage Victoria is that it is easy to use, and it is intentionally built so that we leave the publishing and the control of the publishing and the content with those people who are the business owners of the questions themselves. So when somebody comes to us and says, ‘We’re going to do a consultation,’ they will send us – and you can see the template that is online. They will complete the template to say, ‘This is our plan; this is what we want to do,’ and then our assistance to them at that point really is about making that happen within the platform’s constraints. So we will talk them through what their aims are and then look at how that can be applied to the survey question types that Engage Victoria has. But in the first instance we will have pointed them to all of that information as well, so they will have seen the full range of questions that are available to them and they will know what kinds of responses that they can get. Our advice to them is really more about enabling their desires or their intentions through the technical capabilities that the platform offers.

Laurel CHIDGEY: So just to summarise that one, we basically give them the technology, and they can create the surveys et cetera through the survey content and how they want to structure that through the platform itself.

David ETTERSCHANK: Right. Okay. Thank you for that. Given the level of frustration I think we are all picking up – and I think everyone wants to know that there is a good and consistent way of consulting with people. Clearly, when people have a really negative experience, and I think the one that has been repeated is where you get like four options and none of them are what you want and there is no other. The other one relating to others is it might be 50 characters or 80 characters, and certainly some of these people would probably want to produce a book. If this was a concern, to actually have a better structured and more inclusive approach to survey design, how might that be standardised or applied? Have you got any thoughts on that?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I might jump in with that one. I think we will watch with interest the findings from this inquiry and how we can support it. At the moment because we just provide the technology platform, I would say it would probably link into the public engagement framework and what might be any recommendations that need to be built into that if there is any specificity around survey design. I do not know, Philippa, if you have got anything additional to add.

Philippa NIHILL: Well, I think I would just add that in the example that you just cited, it is about the business owner’s knowledge of the subject matter, because I think at the Engage Victoria program level, we would not have an understanding exactly of how a citizen might take those four options. We are unlikely to know whether or not something is appropriate or a broad enough selection for different choices. It is not so much about what the technology lets you do – the technology can always be built to let you do most things – but it is about the design of those questions. So I would say it is more in the realms of the public engagement framework and the advice and support that is given to that.

David ETTERS HANK: Can I just ask one more question, and that strikes to the decision around how many languages surveys or engagements are providing. There does not seem to be a consistency, from my experience, in the extent or number of languages. Is there a policy or a process on that? Or again, is that purely up to departments?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Yes, I might just jump in there. Engage Victoria does support translated text across multiple languages, and that does include right to left. It is about 200 languages; however, it is down to the departments and agencies to ensure the accuracy of content and what language translations they actually use. Philippa, that is correct, isn't it?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes, that is right. I mean, I understand that they generally will prioritise the predominant languages in the community that they are consulting to.

David ETTERS HANK: In western metro and Werribee, I have got 123 ethnic groups with more than 20 people in the suburbs. So if it is just the top 10, it tends to narrow it, I think. Am I out of time, Chair?

The CHAIR: You are out of time.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you very much. I appreciate your feedback.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell, you are on screen. I might go to you.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Thanks for the presentation, ladies, and the explanations. I was just wondering about the ability for the public to view any information that has come in, so they can see perhaps a summary of what people have answered to your 'tick the box' – you know, whether people have ticked A, B, C, or D – and also whether there is any ability for them to view any additional commentary that is put into text box fields when you are doing the consultation, because in the interest of transparency, people should be able to know what others have answered. In this inquiry, for instance, when we have public hearings, people can come in and sit in the gallery and hear the evidence that is given by anybody who wants to give evidence to the inquiry and they can read all our submissions. So I am just wondering whether Engage Victoria has transparency over the information that is provided to them.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Can I just clarify that is about other individuals' answers to a specific consultation?

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, de-identified of course. But like 'X number of people answered A to this question, X number of percentage B to this question', whatever.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Philippa, are you able to answer that, noting whether it is as the consultation progresses or once a consultation has closed and any information?

Philippa NIHILL: I can say that the platform itself does not have a feature that lets us at the flick of a switch turn on submission content for display, so that functionality is not available within the platform. But I do know that individual consultations can choose to make that information available. They would generally, for all manner of concerns around privacy et cetera, wait until the end of the consultation. It is not common, but they are able to share a document that contains all of the submission data if they choose to. I think the most common practice is that consultation owners generally provide a high level report on it, and that is probably what you are talking about, Wendy. You do not often see the actual detail in amongst those reports.

Wendy LOVELL: But don't you feel that – well, the feedback that I get from the community is that they do not have a high level of confidence in those high-level reports. They come out after the consultation, and they feel that it is being selective in how it is reported. Whereas when we open an inquiry for the Parliament the submissions are all published, so people can see those while we are still engaged in the inquiry, and they can also view people giving evidence in person to a public inquiry, yours is all done basically in secret; nobody else knows what anybody else is submitting, nobody else ever gets to really assess whether that final report is genuine or not.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Just on that one, I would say that we provide that technology platform with the ability for results and information to be published. It is the departments that own those consultations and that make any decisions around what gets published on that. We really just provide the platform.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. Sorry, Laurel, are you saying that there is an ability on your platform to publish information as it is submitted?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Not sure about as it is submitted, but definitely at the end. Philippa, can you comment on the ability?

Wendy LOVELL: After it is closed?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Yes. Philippa, can you comment on the ability as to whether it could be published as it is submitted?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes. There are a range of tools that do provide this. If I go into a map and place a pin, there is often a scenario where I can then leave a comment and that is visible. So the consultation owners can choose which tools they want to use best to get the desired outcomes of any particular consultation. So there are tools available that do let us see what comments are being left in situ at the time. But yes, there are definitely a range of things – for instance, the surveys – that are not currently set up so that you can see the real-time submission of those and content of those real-time submissions.

Wendy LOVELL: Would it be possible to set it up to do that?

Laurel CHIDGEY: We would have to take that as a question on notice in terms of the possibility.

Wendy LOVELL: If you could come back to us with the answer to that, that would be great. Thank you. How am I going for time, Ryan?

The CHAIR: You have got about 30 seconds.

Wendy LOVELL: Then move to the next one.

The CHAIR: Okay, thanks. I might go to Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you, Chair. I wanted to ask about your integration across other consultation mechanisms that might be out there, but before that, thank you for your presentation and for being here today. I live in a local government area that often has coinciding consultation on state government projects. I am just interested to understand: does Engage Victoria integrate with consultation systems used by local governments or indeed any other states? Is there a mechanism in which you work together on that? I can come up with some sorts of examples of that duplication in consultation that happens at both a local government level, but also state, if that would help. But I am sure you are getting it.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Look, whilst we do not integrate as such with other jurisdictions and internationally, we definitely look at what various jurisdictions are doing – for example, New South Wales's 'Have your say', Queensland's 'Get involved' and the ACT's 'YourSay'. I might hand to Philippa to talk to any kind of integration with local government or not.

Sheena WATT: Thank you.

Philippa NIHILL: Sheena, we do not currently have a formal avenue for integration with local governments, but as is always the case, we would be open to having a look at such things. Sharing of data in this day and age is not such a scary thing.

Sheena WATT: Yes, I certainly appreciate that. In one of our recent consultations we heard a lot about fatigue and consultation fatigue and that communities often are wanting to minimise duplication or really tackle consultation fatigue. Can you talk to me about what efforts you make to overcome consultation fatigue, particularly as we know that some communities are often asked many, many times for their views on things?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Philippa, did you have any thoughts around the different consultations that occur across communities et cetera?

Philippa NIHILL: I think only to say that the idea of consultation fatigue is something, again, that for us as managers of the technology is not so much a thing that we would use technology in this instance to manage.

But it is sitting with the consultation owners to be mindful enough of what is going on in their communities and to understand that there may be other consultations underway. But it is not something that reaches us in the management of the platform. I guess the team that are looking and helping onboard people into Engage Victoria are seeing all of the consultations come through, so they would certainly be keeping an eye on whether or not there is duplication, but also there is a structure in place. I guess it is a process that we have in place whereby we have an engagement manager sitting within each department, and it is those people as well, or that role, keeping an eye on what is going on from a consultation point of view across the department. We also make sure that we get those people together so that they can talk to each other about what they are doing across departments. But I think you are talking very much about local government, different jurisdictional consultations. The Engage Victoria work that we do I think manages duplication fairly well – I hope, fingers crossed – across Victorian government. I am not sure if that helps with what you are talking about.

Sheena WATT: Similarly, we heard that the engagement process might happen and then some short time later another department will ask a very similar question in another engagement process and peak bodies or representative bodies are asked again to put together a piece of work or participate in engagement mechanisms as set out by departments. So I am going to that point about the big load that sits on our peak bodies and our representative bodies to feed back on various consultations that are happening out there. But I wanted to then perhaps, if that is all right and there are no comments on that one, go to the future of engagement in Victoria, because I am keen to understand what is in the works in terms of improvements to the site. Are there any innovations that you are exploring not only from what is best practice here but some of those relationships that Laurel mentioned around interstate bodies? Was it ‘your say’ or something that they have got elsewhere? I am keen to understand if there is any innovation or things that we should be looking forward to on Engage Victoria.

Laurel CHIDGEY: I might just provide a few remarks and then hand to Philippa. We are very much committed to continuously improving Engage Vic and very much about supporting that meaningful public engagement. I would note that we have improved it continuously since 2016 – the way that translated languages appear, improving language around error messages, looking at various features and looking at how we further explore security, usability and accessibility. I cannot specifically speak to any innovations that we have got planned, but we very much look forward to the outcomes from the inquiry and what we could do to support some of those outcomes – but that would be very much within the constraints of our funding mechanisms et cetera. Philippa, do you want to comment on any specific improvements or innovations that we have got in the works at the moment?

Philippa NIHILL: No, I do not think I would add anything other than, from the list that you have just outlined, to note that a lot of those are ongoing and to say that within a year we have processes by which we connect back into our own community of practitioners. We will use those connections to really help drive the innovations that are most required or most needed at any point, within the constraints within which we operate overall. I guess I am taking a lot of time to say: no, I do not have anything extra to add.

Sheena WATT: Lovely. I appreciate that. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might go Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. I do not have too many questions. I guess a lot of us might be interested in specific consultations and how they are developed, but as you said, that is left to the departments. I guess I would be interested in understanding just one more thing around accessibility of the platform: how you support people with disabilities or different access requirements. What sort of functionality is there on the platform to do that?

Laurel CHIDGEY: The platform has been quite extensively accessibility and usability tested in line with AA accessibility standards to make sure a broad range of Victorians can use the platform. As we launch new features, those are also accessibility and usability tested before they are launched. In terms of those with limited digital literacy, our whole-of-Victorian-government centre can support those users in actually using that platform.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. And when you make those sort of changes, how do you communicate that to different departments so that they are aware that those options are available?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Philippa, do you want to jump in on that one?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes, sure. We have a release process. We use our both our communities and we also have what we call a technical working group. That is a membership made of engaged senior engagement practitioners who are specifically involved in the prioritisation and the design of the development changes that we make. So we inform both the technical working group – they are an inherent part of the process of any development, so they are across it – and then we also engage with the broader engagement community, so anybody who uses Engage Victoria within Victorian government. We have regular meetings with them, and we do demos and also provide written information about what the new functionality is and how it might be used.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you have any sense of what the uptake is like in different engagements of those different tools? Is it something that then is routinely adopted, from what you are aware of?

Laurel CHIDGEY: In terms of the use of the different features that are available?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Laurel CHIDGEY: I think we would have to take that as a question on notice.

Sarah MANSFIELD: That is okay.

Philippa NIHILL: We are always looking at how the tools are being used, and it is continually changing. But yes, we will take on notice any further detail that you need.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And do you ever have instances where some of what I guess you would call the engagement community or those different officers across departments come to you seeking changes to Engage Victoria based on the experiences that they are having?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Yes. I think as Philippa spoke about, we have a community of practice and those technical working groups. What we do is we look at the different needs across the departments, and obviously we are looking at where there is similarity and consistency across the requests for new features to make sure that it is something that is going to be used across the broader departments and agencies. So that input and that feedback, from departments, agencies and across the community as well, get put into the mix for prioritisation.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sure. I understand that there is often a bit of a process and you need to go through that prioritisation, but I can imagine there might be instances where there is a particular consultation that might have some bespoke requirements a department might like to try that may not necessarily be something that ends up being used widely across the organisation. How much capacity is there to tailor what Engage Victoria offers to a specific consultation that is being undertaken?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I might hand to Philippa on this, but obviously any tailoring considerations – as we said, we work within the funding constraints and what is available to us from a capacity perspective as to what is doable, looking across our backlog of work. Philippa, do you want to comment on any specific bespoke tailoring and how much that actually comes about – whether there is much request for bespoke?

Philippa NIHILL: There have been along the way I think a few requests for bespoke work. We have made, for instance, a custom map for a particular consultation that was more involved than the functionality that was available on the website. As Laurel said, particularly managing a whole-of-government platform, you try to make sure that any changes that you make are going to benefit everybody and the entire program, the entire platform, rather than building into specific individual customisations which require ongoing maintenance. So we try to do that, but where somebody comes to us with a specific request for something technical that we are able to action for them, if we needed to, we would seek some additional funding support from them to make it happen. So yes, it is possible, and it has been done, certainly in terms, for instance, of maps.

Sarah MANSFIELD: One last question just on your role: if departments need advice on how to undertake a consultation or the best tools to use, do you provide advice to them regarding that, or is that dealt with in other ways?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Philippa, do you want to provide some insight into that?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes, sure. I think going back to this idea that we have got – the structure that we have set up in the community around Engage Victoria is that there is what we call an engagement manager in every department, and it is really that role that would be the one providing the specific advice about the set-up of their engagement more broadly. When they come to us, it is about: how do I make that so within the technical platform? So it is true that we will provide advice, but it will be more a technical thing. It will be more about: ‘That tool won’t give you what you need.’ Yes, our questions and our advice are much more about how to make your page work so that the person can actually submit a response.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Great. Thank you very much.

Philippa NIHILL: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath, do you have some questions?

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for your time today. Could you talk a little bit more about your funding? I am seeking to understand; you are funded from the larger department, the DGS department, and then you are provided funding for Engage Victoria. Can you talk about how that is allocated, and by that I mean you have an array of departments or government stakeholders that you provide this platform for. They ask you to go out and consult the community. Is it divided into X many consultations per department, or how do you carve up your resources to provide this platform and engage with Victorians?

Laurel CHIDGEY: This platform is not centrally funded, so to speak. It is funded by departments and agencies that use that platform, and the funding model that we use is a mix of some base funding that goes across, which is based on a broad allocation, and then also usage as well. Philippa, correct me if I am wrong there.

Philippa NIHILL: You are right. So yes, there is a usage tier that notes that some departments do a lot of consultation and others do less. The flat fee is one for all departments, and then those who use it more will pay a bit more in support of it. That is how the program is funded.

Melina BATH: Thank you. And say – and I am just picking one that I am familiar with – Parks Victoria is a department that uses Engage Victoria regularly. Can the quantum of money provided by your stakeholder, by Parks Victoria, dictate the quality of the outcome of information that is received via a particular survey?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I think, as we said before, we provide the technology and the tools. In terms of how Parks Victoria use that to get the consultation outcomes that they want, that is really down to them. Apologies if I have misunderstood the question.

Melina BATH: No, no. We are clearly here because we want to see the best platforms available for Victorians to provide full and frank information on issues. I know VAGO had some recommendations previously about Engage Victoria being tokenistic – I am solidifying some of their comments – and I am therefore trying to find out if a department could in effect provide limited funding so that the response to Engage Victoria is also limited in its nature and therefore not as expansive as it could be in terms of either the duration of the engagement or the types of questions and the format that is delivered to the public?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I will take that one first and then maybe get you to add, Philippa. The funding model is agreed generally at the start of the year, which is based on a number of different things that run into that funding model. We have not seen that departments are trying to use that funding model to constrain the way they engage. Philippa, did you want to comment on that at all?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes. I think I would agree with what you just said. I think that when we are talking about Engage Victoria, we are talking about a technical platform, and within that the technical platform that you have with Engage Victoria is on a par with most of its competitors outside of government. I am talking about the technical platform itself. So you may have a social pinpoint or a whole range of other technical programs that we could use instead of Engage Victoria, but the capabilities there are on a par, so I do not think that you are looking at money constraining the functionality that is available to you in terms of being able to run a consultation.

If we look at what you have just asked about, things like the timing that a consultation is used for, that is nothing to do with Engage Victoria. If you come to Engage Victoria, you can have a consultation up very quickly. So it is really about the department itself or that consultation group within the department, because that is where those practitioners are – they are within the agencies and the departments – and it is about how they are able to best organise their time and their consultation requirements. So those sorts of things also are not really constrained by money, unless of course then you come back to the big picture of the staffing and resourcing of those particular areas within those departments. But that is separate to Engage Victoria. Engage Victoria is just the technology platform and the support that it puts in place to ensure that that platform itself can be used – from a technical point of view, though. So we are not involved in the design and implementation of the broader consultation process, if you will.

Melina BATH: Sure. So when VAGO came and said that – and I think we have also heard through the engagement institute, which had another name, but I will use ‘engagement institute’. They provided feedback to VAGO and VAGO has provided some recommendations. When they provide recommendations to Engage Victoria, is VAGO really then just saying, I’m going to use the meat in the sandwich, you are the deliverer, but is it actually the department that these recommendations should be addressed to, and then which department? How do you fit into responding to recommendations from VAGO on improvement when in effect you are saying that you are the platform? You are the receiver and deliverer of information. So how do we know that the VAGO recommendations are going to be accepted, or do you see that? Is that something that you can comment on? Are they being improved?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I think where those recommendations are directed to us we very much consider those and look to see if there are improvements that we need to make in our platform or not. I cannot specifically speak to the broader consultations. When was the last VAGO recommendation we had, Philippa? Can you remember?

Philippa NIHILL: I thought the last one was part of that report that we have quoted, in 2017, but I could be missing something.

The CHAIR: I might hand over to Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. I am going to start at the bottom of my question list, just in case I have been too animated in putting my questions down and somebody has already asked them. What are the most common negative feedback issues you hear from users of Engage Victoria?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I have not got that data in front of me. Philippa, have you got that, or will we need to take it as a question on notice?

Philippa NIHILL: We might have to take that on notice, again noting that we do not analyse the submissions themselves, but we can report back to you on what our ‘Was this page helpful’ data says.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. It would just be nice to hear the feedback from your users.

Philippa NIHILL: Yes, sure.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: And now, talking about feedback, we have had a lot of comments from witnesses stating that there is not enough feedback. It is not thorough enough. How can Engage Victoria improve on delivering that?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Philippa, do you want to speak to what mechanism Engage Victoria uses to gather customer satisfaction as well as gather feedback?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes, sure. So the Engage Victoria platform has the capability at the bottom of every page for you to say whether the page was helpful, yes or no. And you are able to provide a comment, particularly if it is no, to say why it was not helpful to you. As well, I believe – actually, I might just confirm this before I say it, so I might pass across to you, Laurel. But definitely we have those processes in place so that we can review the satisfaction data with pages and the feedback from particular pages. We also have a relationship –

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I am asking about the feedback to the users, so the feedback that you are providing. So people that are receiving consultation, a lot of them are saying ‘We’re not receiving feedback on the process that we’ve just gone through.’ So that is what I am trying to ask.

Laurel CHIDGEY: Okay, yes. As I said before, we provide the platform. The response back to individuals who participate in consultation – it is down to departments and agencies as to how they provide that information back. I understand, and Philippa, Engage Victoria has the ability to provide that, but again it is down to departments and agencies as to how they leverage that.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. So how often do you provide it? Is it 100 per cent of the time, or 50?

Philippa NIHILL: If we are talking about the reporting back within a consultation – so you are talking about, ‘I’ve done a consultation on my local pathways,’ or whatever.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes.

Philippa NIHILL: From the Engage Victoria point of view, we make a point of working with the departments to ensure that they have got something like – not something like, a lot like – a timeline, and you will see those timelines on the consultation pages on Engage Victoria, and they will talk about a reporting back timeframe and usually talk about when you should reasonably expect to see something reported back. We work with them to make sure that they have got that within their plans. But as to the content of the report back – and the report back is usually published in the pages of the projects on Engage Victoria – whilst we as the managers of the platform do not police that, I think we would report that in the majority it is done. We are not the ones doing it, but I think I can safely report that in the majority the departments and agencies are reporting back. Now, as to whether or not they are reporting back in a way that will satisfy the constituents who have submitted, that is a whole other question that I cannot answer.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Tyrrell. Mrs Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much, Laurel and Philippa. I really appreciate your insights. You mentioned a client satisfaction survey or something similar that you have done recently. Are you able to share that with the committee?

Laurel CHIDGEY: The client satisfaction is – there is a kind of ‘yes/no’ at the bottom of the page – ‘Was this page helpful?’ and we gather that feedback. As I mentioned before, 75 per cent of people find the pages helpful.

Gaelle BROAD: And was there any more detail in that, like a summary document, that you could share with us?

Laurel CHIDGEY: We could see if we could extract the feedback that has been provided and provide that through to the committee.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. And I am just interested too – you talked earlier about the tier of funding. How much does it cost a department to actually run a consultation through Engage Victoria? What is the lowest rate and what is the highest rate?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I have not got that data in front of me right now, so we would have to take that on notice.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. If you could share that, that would be great. You mentioned briefly security as well. How can people feel assured – or not – that their data is secure when they put it in? What mechanisms have you got to ensure that?

Laurel CHIDGEY: The data is stored on a secure platform in Australia which has regular data and privacy reviews, so it is very much that we are very focused on the privacy of the platform; the data is considered in that regard. Philippa, did you want to add anything extra on security and privacy of data?

Philippa NIHILL: Yes, just to say we make sure that the platform is run through regular testing. The most recent tests – penetration tests et cetera – were conducted at the end of 2024, and there is another round planned for this year.

Gaelle BROAD: So you have not had any hacks or data leaks as far as you are aware?

Laurel CHIDGEY: It is a very dangerous statement to make. As far as we are aware, I would say.

Philippa NIHILL: But we do everything that we can to ensure that we are managing things well enough so that we are preventative but also that our monitoring and our ability to know what is happening on the platform is also fairly up to date, so, yes, we feel like we are in a good position.

Laurel CHIDGEY: And probably just to add to that, we very much leverage our cybersecurity team, which is in the department, to ensure that as well.

Gaelle BROAD: Wendy mentioned earlier about submissions. From what I have seen, it looked like earlier, a few years ago, a lot of consultations did include and publish submissions with different perspectives. Now that seems to be not so much published. Is that right? Has there been a shift to sort of not publish material online?

Laurel CHIDGEY: I do not know whether we could comment on that. As Philippa said, part of the process we provide is the ability for departments to provide that information back to the communities that participated. If the departments and agencies have not done that, then we have not picked that up and we have not picked that trend up at this point in time.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. I am just interested in the working from home consultation that is open at the moment. It opened on 12 August, and then businesses had a chance to register their interest for online forums, but it was on 31 August that it closed, which was 2½ weeks or so. Is that too short a timeframe? What are your thoughts?

Laurel CHIDGEY: We cannot comment on that. As Philippa said, we provide the platform. The consultations are very much driven by the departments and agencies that facilitate that and manage that.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. So in your discussions with the working groups do you give any guidance on best practice? I think Ryan sort of alluded to that earlier as far as best practice, but is there advice given in that regard?

Laurel CHIDGEY: Philippa, did you want to comment on that?

Philippa NIHILL: I think with things like notice, the best practice and the advice that is generally understood within the community is that as much as you can give is fabulous. But no, we do not specifically say, 'There is a timeframe that you should allow.' Given that it is digital, given that we can stand things up so quickly and given the speed of communications in this day and age, there does not seem to be a need for a smaller amount of time to be stipulated.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. And there is the capacity for each website to have the total number of submissions received publicly shared on the website page?

Laurel CHIDGEY: In terms of the total number of submissions that have been submitted?

Gaelle BROAD: For that individual consultation, yes.

Laurel CHIDGEY: As in shared out to the community? We might have to take that one on notice in terms of the ability of the platform to do that if it does not do it already.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. Because we have had questions raised – by I think the Riddells Creek community, for example. They found a big difference with what the government first advised as far as submissions received. When they raised concerns – because they knew that they had put in a lot more than that – there were over a thousand extra that were found, so they asked for an independent review. They just sort of undertook an internal review and said it was working as it should, but clearly there was a big difference there.

Laurel CHIDGEY: We will have to take that one on notice.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Laurel and Philippa, thanks so much for taking the time to participate in the hearing today. Shortly you will be provided with the draft proof of the transcript of today's hearing for your review before we publish it.

That brings today's hearing to a close.

Committee adjourned.