

Andrew Dyer
AEIC - Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner
Community Engagement Review Taskforce

(By email: cereview@dcceew.gov.au)

2 October 2023

Dear Commissioner Dyer,

Re :

I am writing on behalf of [REDACTED] to formally submit our insights and recommendations for the comprehensive review of community engagement practices necessary for the effective development of renewable energy projects.

[REDACTED] is an experienced Australian wind farm developer committed to advancing renewable energy initiatives across the country. Since our inception in 2004, we have established a proven record of developing successful renewable energy projects. Across each project and throughout our development process, we are committed to developing longstanding, positive relationships in the communities where our projects are based.

As an industry, it is of paramount importance that proponents demonstrate robust community engagement practice, supported by a timely and efficient planning process, to facilitate the transition to renewable energy. This submission covers three key areas relating to community engagement practices and considerations for the review conducted by the AEIC's Community Engagement Taskforce.

Successful Examples of Community Engagement

Constructive community engagement practices in renewable energy projects have, in many cases, yielded positive outcomes. A noteworthy example is evident in the development of the [REDACTED]. This specific project and its community engagement process has been referenced as a case study in the CEC 'Guide to Benefit Sharing Options for Renewable Energy Projects' as an exemplar of successful community engagement.

[REDACTED] worked closely over many years with the local [REDACTED] community to understand and address concerns and provide opportunities for local involvement through the establishment of a Community Reference Group (CRG). The results of many hours of grass roots community engagement led to programs identified, and subsequently developed, multiple benefit programs which include;

- A 'Community Grants Program' that provides financial sponsorship support for a range of community-based initiatives, projects and events with multiple grant rounds available annually that will increase up to \$215,000 once the project is operational. The grants applications are reviewed by the CRG to assess suitability against specific eligibility criteria to ensure alignment with community needs both short and long-term.
- A 'Financial Incentive Program for Neighbours' which provides an annual payment for existing neighbouring dwellings that are located outside the [REDACTED] township zone. Neighbours that are located within 2km of a

constructed wind turbine generator are eligible to opt into this program with the payments based on the dwelling proximity in relation to the turbine towers.

- The 'Off-Sight Landscaping Program' enables residents at dwellings with a view to wind turbines, within 5 kilometres of a wind turbine to participate in a landscaping program. This will provide for landscaping to reduce the visual impact of the turbines with a visual assessment to be undertaken at each property.
- The 'Community Investment Program' which has been offered to the community to share the financial benefits with the community through enabling them to invest financially in the project.
- Facilitation and sponsorship of free community events for Easter and Christmas.
- Finally, A 'Community Energy Program' that enables neighbors to off-set electricity costs while also reducing the local communities carbon footprint. The scheme will offset the electricity costs of all non-host, habitable and registered dwellings within 3km of a constructed turbine to an amount equal to the average Victorian home, regardless of usage. This specific program demonstrates the opportunity for developers to deliver innovative and leading programs through a commitment to genuine community led engagement practices.

Overall community involvement and contribution, not just to the benefit programs but the project more broadly, has seen the community rally behind the project through its legal challenges. The cumulative effect of authentic, grass roots community involvement, spanning benefit programs and wider project support, is emblematic of the outcomes that can be achieved when an engagement process listens and responds to the community.

Lessons Learnt from Successful Engagements

██████████ had challenges with the community during the development of the ██████████ which led to significant changes to development practices across our business. Engagement must be prioritised from the top down with training for all community facing team members on the importance of listening and engaging respectfully with community members. While engagement with each community needs to be appropriately considered and understood based on the individual needs of the specific community, a successful engagement process offers critical lessons for the industry to consider, specifically:

- a) Appropriately Timed and Ongoing Engagement:** All communities are different, and a significant amount of time needs to be taken to understand the specific concerns and issues in the communities you are working with. Identification of appropriate stakeholders and subsequent engagement at the project's early inception is crucial. This should occur based on level of impact and face to face when appropriate. This should be completed only when land tenure is secured and when an indicative project design or layout is completed but importantly, prior to planning application. This allows a proponent to communicate a concept that is reasonably progressed with key constraints considered. It also allows time for the identification of community needs and concerns and ensures projects are designed from a more informed position based on greater surety of a project's key elements (design, specific location, boundaries, biodiversity etc) without causing undue concerns from parties that may not be impacted.
- b) Transparency and Information Sharing:** Developers should provide consistent, accessible, and accurate information to the community during this process. This includes details about project benefits, potential impacts, and the regulatory process. Regular updates and forums for discussion help build trust and can address misinformation around renewable projects.
- c) Local Involvement and Benefits Sharing:** The development and design of community benefits should be community led to ensure the needs of the specific local community are prioritised. These benefits can be financial, educational, or infrastructure-related, aligning the project's success with the community's wellbeing and the

process should involve genuine consultation with the community to build the formation of benefits schemes. With the ability to support both short- and longer-term legacy projects or larger scale investments.

- d) A collaborative consultation process with key stakeholders including host landholders, local government, local community groups, and local aboriginal parties that provides feedback to minimise impacts where appropriate. This ensures an appropriate design that enables the effective management of landowners ongoing farming operations and more broadly complements the regions environmental, cultural heritage and economic activities.
- e) Tailoring engagement to suit varying needs: Every community has specific and individualized needs and developers must ensure their engagement processes and subsequent benefits programs are tailored to identify and support these needs. This should extend to knowing how community members and broader stakeholders wish to be engaged with.
- f) Following through with your commitments to a community is key to building trusting relationships. This includes being clear with what cannot be changed, never over promising as developments change, and having a process embedded that ensures that when a commitment is made it is delivered.

Key Areas Requiring Improvement

While many renewable energy projects have achieved exemplary community engagement, there are instances where engagement has faltered. Common challenges include:

- a) The current 2-5 year planning process for a development can cause uncertainty with respect to infrastructure locations, specifications, timelines and other details. Subsequently, this presents challenges in maintaining consistency in messaging and the ability to provide accurate information for the community when planning requirements occur that and can lead to delays and negative community sentiment towards a project. In states such as Victoria, the number of objections and challenges that can be made make it hard for a community to move forward to acceptance and also means opponent often spend a great amount of time and resources fighting a development without success. This period can be the hardest time for communities as it creates great uncertainty, and there is little a proponent can do to minimise this. Therefore, it's vital that the planning process provides consistency and surety of an end to an approval process.
- b) There is a requirement to better define the expectations that government has of developers as to the conditions and expectations for delivery of community engagement. Importantly, to redefine the definition of the term 'social licence' to be based on the position of the majority of stakeholders, not each and every one. State and commonwealth govts have been elected on a strong renewable energy policy, thus have a mandate from the electorate to deliver renewables. It's unrealistic to expect 100% support for any major infrastructure development (currently this is what is believed to be is required for a 'social licence') from communities, so this needs to be balanced with education from the government on what 'social license' means in relation to the benefits that renewable energy provides the wider community. Defining the requirements also ensures that projects located near each other don't provide great variances in benefits provided which can also create disharmony and frustrations between developers and communities.
- c) Premature community engagement whereby developers initiate communication too early in a project's lifecycle (prior to project design completion). This leads to fear and uncertainty from a lack of understanding and limited information being available which should be avoided through timely and considered engagement. Community consultation through the draft design phase should be supported to ensure project design can respond to constraints identified by stakeholders and during the environmental assessment process.

In conclusion, Australia's transition to renewable energy represents a collective endeavour that must steadfastly prioritize the interests and concerns of our communities. By implementing rigorous community engagement practices, we can foster trust, promote sustainable development, and ensure that renewable energy projects contribute positively to the wellbeing of our nation.

Thank you for considering our submission. We look forward to contributing further to this important discussion and working collaboratively to shape the future of renewable energy in Australia.

Sincerely,

