



Mr Andrew Dyer
Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner
PO Box 2443
Melbourne VIC 3001

5 October 2023

Dear Mr Dyer,

**[Redacted] Submission to the Australian Energy Infrastructure Coordinator's
Review of Community Engagement Practices**

Australia's energy transition is not just about new technology; it's also about redrawing the map regarding the location of that energy. The closure of coal-fired power stations and the move to renewables has spotlighted many regional parts and communities, often unchanged over the past 100 years, now suddenly thrust into the energy narrative. The speed of that change, and the sense of it being cumulative and uncoordinated, can be overwhelming for community members where the rhythm of life has been consistent and harmonious for so long.

Community engagement is most effective when it is a collaborative dialogue with the local community rather than a one-sided conversation. Building relations with supporters and those opposed to our operations is the key to gaining invaluable insights and ensuring the successful delivery of energy projects.

AEIC Q1: What community engagement has worked well and, what can we learn from it?

The following criteria factors are crucial in developing successful community engagement programs.

Communication Channels:

- Undertake significant research to identify and understand the channels of communication utilised within the local community.



- Do not assume that all stakeholders access information similarly – i.e., regional areas may have strong mobile communication connectivity in towns, but outside connectivity may vary. While digital communications may be appropriate for some, analogue methods may also be required.
- Proactive outreach is essential at all stages of the engagement program. We cannot assume that all stakeholders are aware of our presence just because we have provided opportunities to engage with us. We must seek opportunities to reach those who may be impacted by our operations but have not taken up opportunities we have provided to engage with us.
- Engagement specialists should occupy a middle ground between the project team and the community, ensuring they can represent each side to the other with clarity and empathy. Ensure our team includes stakeholder engagement professionals who:
 - have respect for and connection with regional Australia, enabling them to engage sincerely.
 - can build rapport with stakeholders from varied backgrounds, including those who may oppose our project.
 - can engage individuals and local communities with empathy and respect.

Local Input:

Craft engagement programs based on local insights. These insights include understanding:

- Local communication channels, as above.
- Seasonal activities, including agricultural seasons or local events, might influence community awareness, cut through our messaging, and the appropriateness of our engagements.
- Concurrent regional activities that may shape community sentiment. In energy communities, activities include other local renewable energy projects, transmission infrastructure projects, etc.
- The potential or perceived impacts of multiple projects within a community. This understanding may include issues such as access to housing and healthcare, affecting local traffic and road conditions, etc.
- The traditions, history, and interdependencies of the community. We must develop an understanding of and respect for the community itself, not just concerning our project.

Stakeholder Diversity:

- Engaging with those critical to our operations is essential, offering them a voice in our engagement process. This approach can be challenging and requires patience and respect. However, ensuring we gain respect across the broader community is vital.
 - [REDACTED] engagement programs prioritise engaging with local activist groups as a critical early step in project engagement. For example, we have met with several community groups formed in response to renewable energy development across the New England Renewable Energy Zone as part of engagement on the EDF Renewables Australia Yarrowyck Wind Farm project.
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**Stakeholder control:**

- Allow stakeholders to influence elements of our program and, where possible, project development. Be transparent about which areas of the development can be influenced and which cannot – including clarifying why not.
- Ensure we engage with project managers and key decision-makers within our organisation to identify areas for stakeholder influence early in project development.

Engagement program focus:

- Share vital information transparently, including decisions that have been made and are pending and the points at which stakeholders can influence the project – concerning project development and the approvals process.
- Identifying, clarifying, and acknowledging stakeholders' concerns. Our engagement program should recognise the varied responses experienced by stakeholders to our program – i.e., from supportive to opposed, and confirm with our stakeholders that all reactions are valid.
- Provide opportunities for stakeholders to be directly involved with the project team, including consultants, to tackle areas of concern, co-design solutions, and avoid, mitigate, or resolve identified issues.
- Provide opportunities for stakeholders to engage directly with experts, including consultants undertaking work at various points during project development.

Balanced messages:

- While emphasising benefits appeals to many stakeholders, including decision-makers, local communities are often more concerned with potential or perceived issues. A program that focuses on amplifying benefit messaging and ignores the issues will not meet stakeholders' needs and may entrench local opposition.
- Further, we must not define the benefits or issues of our project but be guided by the community in developing our understanding of these areas. Arriving in a community with our position on benefits and issues fully formed can be seen as patronising and can contribute to poor engagement from the outset.

AEIC Q2: How can we improve engagement that has not worked well?

When an engagement has not worked well, negative feelings can exist between the project team and the community. Rebuilding relationships can take humility, patience, and acceptance that some stakeholders will oppose our project. We must accept this situation and be willing to engage with stakeholders respectfully and empathetically, regardless of their position.

The following actions, when employed alongside those outlined in Q1, can be beneficial in improving relationships when engagement has gone poorly.



Taking a clear view of our role in the engagement:

- It can be challenging to accept the role we have played in the process as individuals or as an organisation. However, we must listen carefully to the community and ensure that while we may disagree with their views, we respect their right to hold them.
- Acknowledging and apologising for our role is an essential step in rebuilding relationships. Clarifying what we think went wrong with our stakeholders and working together on a more appropriate approach indicates our willingness to accept our role in the situation and do better going forward.
- Maintaining an awareness of our ego throughout the engagement process is crucial to focusing on the main goal – i.e., successful project development.

Active listening:

- Communities often report a lack of consultation as a critical concern throughout project development. While we may feel we have consulted appropriately, we must acknowledge when the community does not embrace this sentiment. Seeing this consultation as an opportunity to engage and build a program that meets stakeholders' needs and builds trust and a sense of ownership is helpful.

AEIC Q3: What is needed to ensure best practice engagement in all future projects?

- Best practice engagement can mean different things to different audiences. This response embraces best practice engagement from the local stakeholders' perspective.
- We aim to build respectful relationships with stakeholders across the community when developing and implementing engagement programs. We recognise that not all stakeholders will support our project, and we must respect the right of stakeholders to hold opposing views. We can maintain positive, respectful relationships with a broad cohort of stakeholders by employing the methods outlined above.

Commissioner, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your review of community engagement practices. We would be happy to discuss our submission further if that would be beneficial.

Yours sincerely,


