

Australian Energy Regulator  
Submission to the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) on Guidelines Review for Community Engagement in Large-Scale Renewable Energy Projects

Dear Anthea Harris CEO

Murrindindi Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the review of guidelines for community engagement in the planning and implementation of large-scale renewable energy projects, particularly those involving significant infrastructure such as transmission lines and wind turbines.

### **Supporting Low Emissions and Renewable Energy**

Our council supports the transition to low emissions and renewable energy to ensure a sustainable future. However, we emphasize that this transition must be undertaken with proper consideration of environmental, ecological, and social impacts. We believe that robust community engagement is critical to achieving this balance and ensuring that projects are implemented in a manner that respects and benefits local communities.

### **Importance of Social Licence**

The AER's definition of social licence as "the level of acceptance of an organisation and its activities by a community" is a fair foundation. However, we believe acceptance should also encompass genuine support and empowerment, not merely community acknowledgment. Social licence must be integrated from the very beginning of the project, ensuring that the community is consulted not just to inform but to empower and actively shape the outcomes.

### **Proposal for Citizens Panels**

We strongly advocate for the inclusion of citizens panels as a mandatory element of the engagement process for all large-scale renewable energy projects that have visual, amenity, environmental, ecological, or social impacts. Citizens panels would consist of a representative cross-section of the local community, including residents, business owners, environmental groups, and other relevant stakeholders. These panels would:

1. facilitate thorough and inclusive community engagement, capturing a wide range of views, concerns, and aspirations.
2. through Regular meetings and open discussions, build trust and transparency between project proponents and the community.
3. Incorporate Local Knowledge and insights to enhance the understanding of potential impacts and the development of effective mitigation strategies.
4. Enhance Decision-Making by integrating community feedback into project planning and decision-making processes, ensuring that community concerns are addressed and that projects are more likely to gain social licence.

Feedback from our community highlights several key points:

- The need for minimum Standards and Comprehensive Processes. Engagement should be part of a broader, more comprehensive approval process, ensuring continuous feedback loops and genuine relationship-building.
- Proactive and Early Social Impact Assessment (SIA) to embed social licence into the project alongside technical assessments.
- Guidelines should be adaptable to different community needs while being specific enough to prevent mere box-ticking exercises by project proponents.
- There should be national benchmarks for compensations to ensure fairness and consistency across different projects and regions.

Murrindindi Shire Council believes that the inclusion of citizens panels in the engagement process for large-scale renewable energy projects is crucial for building social licence and ensuring that these projects are developed in a manner that is respectful of and beneficial to local communities. We urge the AER to embed more effective, genuine, and deep community engagement in all significant projects that have an impact on the landscape and amenity not only in our shire, but across the country.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Gallagher', written in a cursive style.

Mayor  
Cr Damien Gallagher  
Red Gate Ward