

**MINUTES
WESTERN RENEWABLES LINK COMMUNITY CONSULTATION GROUP –
MEETING #26 – 20 November 2024**

Meeting date: 20 November 2024
Meeting time: 5.30 pm, Oscar’s Hotel
Meeting called by: Catherine Botta

CCG Meeting Purpose: The CCG is a consultative forum and not a decision-making forum.

Attendees

Catherine Botta	Independent Chair
Archie Conroy	Community member – Ballan/CCG
Randall Cape	Community member – Moorabool/CCG East
Ian Terrill	Ballarat Group of Fire Brigades – Ballarat/CCG Central
Allan Harnwell	Community member – Melton/CCG East
Peter Dreimanis	Strategic Planning - City of Ballarat
Gerard Carew	General Manager, Major Projects – AusNet Services
Carlee Grant	Stakeholder Engagement Manager – AusNet Services
Megan Cusack	Communications, Stakeholder and Land Engagement – AusNet Services
Kelly Parkinson	Risk Communication Specialist, Strategic Engagement – AusNet Services
Katie Watt	Senior Principal Environmental Consultant – AusNet Services
William Gubbins	Land Transaction Manager - AusNet Services
Tania McIntyre	Secretariat – Premier Strategy

Apologies

Vicki Johnson	Community member – Ballarat/CCG Central (Chair, Moorabool Central Power Alliance)
Martin Webb	Community member – Moorabool/CCG East

Not attended

Jennifer Thomas	Northern Grampians Shire
Karl Sass	Melton City Council
Bronwyn Southee	Strategic Advisor – Hepburn Shire Council
Catherine McLay	Moorabool Shire Council

Agenda item 1	Apologies, minutes, and actions of the previous meeting
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- The Independent Chair opened the meeting, acknowledged Country, welcomed the attendees, presenter and secretariat, and mentioned the apologies.
- The Chair reiterated the group’s Terms of Reference, noting the purpose of the CCG is to enhance communications between the community and the technical team and to understand the community's concerns. It was highlighted that the group is not a decision-making body.

- The Chair discussed the minutes from the October meeting and acknowledged member comments, including some additional community insights provided by Archie Conroy that need to be included in the revised minutes.
- The Chair acknowledged member comments that there was insufficient time on the November meeting agenda for a reflections and closeout discussion. The Chair clarified that the objective of the November meeting is to explore unanswered questions and that a subsequent session would be scheduled to reflect and close out the CCG (in its current format).

Agenda item 2	Project Update and Engagement update
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- AusNet Services provided a Project Update noting:
 - All options for easement (OFE) have now been issued (with many signed and others in negotiation). AusNet is continuing to meet with landholders to progress OFE negotiations.
 - AusNet introduced Katie Watt, Senior Principal Environmental Consultant, noting that she would now lead the Planning and Approvals workstream. Reports and technical documentation are being finalised with the EES exhibition anticipated for mid-2025.
 - AusNet is working with two shortlisted construction contractors, with an 18-week process underway.
 - Benefit-sharing frameworks and initiatives are a focus for the team which is working to deliver ten social value projects (at varying stages of development).
- A CCG member queried how much money is being committed to the affected community along the alignment. AusNet explained that a range of programs are being developed that equate to a \$5m budget. AusNet committed to sharing information about these initiatives when available. CCG members expressed concerns that the communities along the alignment aren't receiving the direct benefits or taking precedence for benefit initiatives.
- CCG members asked for more details about the categories for compensation. AusNet confirmed that compensation is negotiated individually with landholders. VicGrid's significantly impact neighbour benefit program will provide payment to some neighbours, and a broader Community Benefit Fund is proposed. CCG members highlighted concerns regarding mental health issues in the community and requested that these be considered and incorporated into the approved list of funded initiatives.
- AusNet provided a summary of the recent Community Survey findings, as well as findings from recent face to face engagements

Face-to-face engagement undertaken during 2024 included eight sessions along the alignment. The Elmore Field Day reflected a high volume of robust conversations (which have been reflected within the survey).

Survey findings:

- 103 participants completed the survey.
 - 58% of respondents said they knew a lot about the project, and 5% did not know a lot about the project.
 - 32% of respondents were landholders or neighbouring landholders.
 - 18% live and work in the area.
 - 24% live in the area and;
 - 11% indicated they travel through the area.
- CCG members questioned why the AusNet team attended Elmore Field Days, as it's 140km from the project. AusNet responded by explaining that the Elmore Field Day is well attended by the agricultural and farming community, with many attendees travelling from within the project area to the event.
- The survey findings indicated that community concerns have remained consistent, with 61% of respondents highlighting project development and route selection as a key issue, followed by 44% attributed to landscape and visual amenity.

Agenda item 3	Update and Discussion on the "Unanswered Questions"
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□ Kelly Parkinson, Risk Communication Specialist, Strategic Engagement at AusNet Services, facilitated the discussion with members on Unanswered Questions. The following questions were explored and discussed with the group.

□ **Compensation**

- Taxation implications and issues for host landholders:
 - AusNet explained that all OFEs are now with landholders. There has been some initial traction, with several landholders signing OFEs to date. Conversations about tax implications have occurred with some landholders and will continue into the future. AusNet acknowledged that some landholders have expressed that they aren't being adequately incentivised because the compensation for easement attracts a Capital Gains Tax. AusNet has raised this issue with the State government. AusNet is currently in discussions with AEMO and VicGrid regarding possible mitigations to this issue, including seeking an exemption from Capital Gains Tax for compensation payments.
 - CCG members expressed frustration that they had not received this information earlier as they have received questions from their respective communities that they have been unable to answer. AusNet noted that they aim to provide landholders with updated information on this issue in early 2025.
- Neighbour compensation issues:
 - AusNet noted that the opportunity for payments to WRL neighbours is progressing and that it will align with the initiatives being developed by VicGrid. VicGrid aims to deliver a range of direct benefits to communities hosting new transmission and renewable energy infrastructure as it is developed across the state.
 - AusNet shared that VicGrid's final Significantly Impacted Neighbour benefits program is yet to be finalised and released publicly. AusNet does not have the details of the proposed final program to share with CCG members. This program is anticipated to be

shared publicly by VicGrid by Q1/Q2 2025 (details will be shared with the WRL subscriber eUpdates).

- Consider a model like wind farm development:
 - AusNet explained that it has been investigating various neighbouring payment models, similar to the models adopted for wind farms and how they could potentially be applied to transmission. AusNet noted that further investigations would be undertaken and align with VicGrid's scheme.
 - AusNet highlighted that in the OFE compensation offering, reimbursement of independent professional advice fees are available for landholders to discuss their options, including financial implications of the compensation offer. They also noted that easement agreements do not prohibit stakeholders from lodging objections in submissions to the EES; there is a clause that explicitly states that by signing an OFE, a landholder is not prevented from participating in the EES process. AusNet urged CCG members and landholders to open a dialogue with them to ensure they receive the best possible outcomes if the project is approved.
 - AusNet clarified that the EES will not indicate how many landholders have agreed to the compensation agreements.
- **Insurance**
 - Impact on insurance costs and insurance coverage:
 - CCG members highlighted concerns about possible inflated insurance premiums due to increased risk on their properties due to the project infrastructure. Members provided an example, noting that fire service levies would increase. AusNet explained that various levels of indemnity will be provided to landholders in the first instance to mitigate this risk.
 - CCG members highlighted concerns with liability regarding potential issues such as fires or property damage. AusNet noted that liability is addressed, and that loss and damage is also considered. Indemnity clauses would also be posed to landholders for issues that may be outside of AusNet's control.
 - CCG members raised the Black Friday fires as a case study for a lack of TNSP insurance.
 - AusNet highlighted that they are working with AEMO and VicGrid to achieve an industry-wide approach to resolving issues related to insurance costs and coverage that are not unique to the WRL project.
- **Land devaluation**
 - Bank property valuations and property titles:
 - Members confirmed that a key issue landholders and neighbours face is the reported devaluation of land due to the project. AusNet explained that OFE deeds have been provided to all private landholders based on an independent valuation as part of an OFE proposal from AusNet. AusNet explained that they encouraged all landholders to seek professional advice to assist them in considering this documentation and highlighted that they provide a \$10,000 payment to enable landholders to access professional advice.
 - CCG members noted significant discrepancies from their independent assessments (i.e. up to \$1M). CCG members also highlighted that the banks had prohibited landholders from borrowing money to expand businesses due to the devaluation of their properties. AusNet noted that the OFE offer can be provided to banks to provide them comfort that any apparent devaluation is offset by the compensation offer available to a landholder.
 - AusNet urged members and landholders to share this information with them so that they can develop equitable compensation models. Landholders may not have permitted

AusNet's appointed independent valuer access to inspect their property, and therefore compensation offers are only able to be based on a desktop assessment. AusNet outlined that Landholders are encouraged to enable access to ensure that the valuer is able to provide the most accurate assessment to inform the OFE compensation offer as possible.

- AusNet outlined that it is engaging with landholders and encouraging landholders to test a compensation valuation assessment.
- **Community safety including**
 - Bushfire and fire safety: Fighting fire around transmission
 - Members explained that they had received feedback from local fire departments stating that they would not cross under transmission lines during a bushfire as the smoke inhibits visibility, reducing safety. CCG members went on to discuss the 25-metre exclusion zone for fighting fires, expressing their concerns. CCG members stated that communities are pushing for a review of these procedures.
 - AusNet noted that CFA's standard operating procedures include processes for safely working around high-voltage transmission lines in bushfires. AusNet also noted that they are looking to work with leaders in the community and CFA to engage more meaningfully in how to fight fires in and around transmission lines.
 - CCG members acknowledged that there is no definitive solution to this problem within this forum. AusNet encouraged CCG members/volunteer fire brigades to make submissions to the EES.
- **Relationship breakdowns**
 - Community divide:
 - CCG members discussed the community divide resulting from the project, noting that it is more prevalent in rural areas rather than peri-urban areas.
- **Dwelling setbacks and proximity of infrastructure to houses**
 - AusNet acknowledged that the distances between dwellings and the proposed transmission lines have been a key concern for landholders and communities. AusNet has committed to work to maximise the distance between the transmission line and existing houses.
- **Farming around infrastructure**
 - The Chair noted that this discussion was covered by an expert presentation earlier in 2024.
 - CCG shared concerns that you can't farm with the towers and lines on land:
 - CCG members highlighted the inability to undertake certain farming practices under transmission lines, stating that hosting towers restrict the use of their land.
 - A member asked whether a covenant could affect land use. AusNet explained that there will be terms and conditions agreed by the easement terms. CCG members raised concerns about grazing livestock below transmission lines and that there were insufficient studies on transmission effects on livestock.
 - CCG members highlighted that local concerns were not adequately reflected within the Agricultural Report presented by the technical specialist in an earlier session. AusNet clarified that a loss of livestock production during the construction phase is included within the compensation framework. Each individual OFE offer includes heads of compensation that attribute an offer to these compensation categories.

- AusNet encouraged landholders to discuss these concerns with them and highlighted that any conversations had with AusNet would not indicate support for the project or preclude stakeholders from lodging objections or submissions to the EES. AusNet committed to communicating this message to the community and landholders in small groups over the next few months.
- **Undergrounding**
 - Underground construction impacts:
 - AusNet explained that they were not ready to present to the CCG on the topic of undergrounding as yet and suggested that they focus on this topic at an additional session in early 2025. AusNet shared that VicGrid has clarified that underground is not a preferred/ viable option for Victorian transmission projects, i.e. Gippsland.

Agenda item 4	Reflections on the CCG
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- The Chair requested that the group take time to reflect on their time on the CCG and to return for an additional meeting in 2025 to provide their insights.
- Members agreed to return in early 2025 (February or March) for up to two additional meetings – one on undergrounding and one on providing reflections.

Agenda item 5	Community perception/questions/emerging issues and Meeting Close
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- A CCG member requested that more detail be provided to the group regarding the EES process (including indicative dates) and the project's construction phase.
- AusNet acknowledged the CCG member's time and thanked them for their involvement.
- Meeting closed at 8.30 pm.

Actions	Who
Existing Actions	
Questions around underground construction impacts to be sent to secretariat before a future session, so presenter can respond accordingly.	To remain open , an opportunity to discuss questions on undergrounding in the November CCG meeting, when undergrounding is the key topic.
Further questions regarding the CSR and/or CBF to be sent to secretariat before a future session, so presenter can respond accordingly.	To remain open , an opportunity to discuss final questions will be provided once the EES is exhibited.
Discussion whether the WRL project would be covered under the VicGrid CBF framework.	AusNet clarified by email to members by AST. CLOSED

Actions	Who
AusNet committed to providing the CCG with a summary of how feedback from members on the technical presentations has been considered.	AusNet
AusNet will investigate the options for an updated aerial map be included on the webmap.	AusNet actioned in November with updated imagery on project website. CLOSED
AusNet requested that CCG members provide information on land agent interactions and staff involvement so they could investigate	CCG Members
CCG members raised serious concerns regarding the perceived illegal access to properties and requested that AusNet provide an overview of the S93 process.	AusNet
Economic Impact Assessment: Members requested to be provided with the number of impacted businesses considered within the assessment.	Closed - 39,969 businesses within the study area (i.e. the 5 LGAs), of which 225 (0.6%) are within 2km of the proposed route.
Transport Impact Assessment: Members asked if the majority of construction components would be transported in the evening and how unavailable information is factored into assessments (i.e. data that reflects rural roads rather than freeways/ larger road networks). AusNet committed to returning to the group with more information on how this data is captured.	AusNet
Transport Impact Assessment: Members asked for more information regarding contractor's proposed transport routes.	AusNet
AusNet to meet with CCG members to better understand the information needs of the broader community.	Closed
New Action	
AusNet to share full details of the initiatives being developed under the CBF with members when available.	AusNet