

Meeting Minutes

Meeting:	Minutes of the 7th Community Reference Group Meeting
Date:	20 August 2026
Venue:	Sanctuary Inn on Westernport 126 Marine Parade Hastings, VIC 3915
Present:	Project team: David Christodoulou (Design & Construction Manager) Joanna De Lotto (Deputy Director Strategic Communications) Liam Morkham (Senior Engagement Lead) Mitchell Wynd (Communications Officer) Natasha Reifschneider (Environment Director) Rebecca Boreham (Environment & Planning Project Coordinator) Department of Transport & Planning: Daniel Heley Offshore Wind Energy Victoria: Sarah Hogan CRG Members: Aled Roberts (Somerville Business Group) David Wright (Wellbeing & Health Organisation) Ian Coffey (Mornington Peninsula Labor Environment Action Network) Ian Hales (Community – non-affiliated) Ian Stevenson (Western Port Seagrass Partnership) Jane Carnegie (Save Westernport) Jeff Weir (Dolphin Research Institute) Julia Stockigt (Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council) Mel Barker (UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation) Richard Cox (Rotary Club of Somerville Tyabb) Rod Kerley (Community – non-affiliated) Shannon Hurley (Victorian National Parks Association) Online attendees: Greg Johnson (Phillip Island Conservation Society)

Delivered by

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	Joshua Sinclair (Committee for Frankston and Mornington Peninsula)
Absent:	Axel Leonhardt (Community – non-affiliated) Kim Storey (Destination Phillip Island Regional Tourism) Nicky Pitkanen (French Island Community Association) Terry Nott (Preserve Western Port Action Group)
Chair:	Louisa McPhee
Commenced:	1:00PM

1. Chair welcome and introductions

- 1.1 The Chair provided an Acknowledgement of Country.
- 1.2 The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting.
- 1.3 The Chair ran through the agenda for the meeting.

2. Confirmation of minutes and action items

- 2.1 The Chair confirmed that previous meeting minutes had been circulated along with the outstanding action register with officer responses in advance of the meeting.
3. The Chair noted that representatives from the Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) and Offshore Wind Energy Victoria (OWEV) were present in response to previous CRG requests.
- 3.1 The Chair addressed key points that were raised to PoHC by specific members before the meeting, which included:
 - 3.1.1 Biodiversity Net Gain – discussion regarding requirements for project to have a biodiversity net gain outcome.
 - 3.1.2 Western Port Strategic Framework – confirmed PoHC's role as project proponent and that responsibility for decision-making on this matter sits with Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.
 - 3.1.3 Community Benefit Fund – discussion about timing of Community Benefit Fund and community consultation to help inform the fund.
 - 3.1.4 EES Public Exhibition – confirmed that exhibition timeframes are set by Planning Panels Victoria.
 - 3.1.5 Public Release of Port Options Assessment (Jacobs Report) – discussion about public version of document available on PoHC website. DTP confirmed the full document cannot be released as it is cabinet-in-confidence.

4. Reintroduction of membership

- 4.1 As requested by members at the previous meeting, members of the CRG reintroduced themselves and their represented organisations or areas of interest.

5. Project update

- 5.1 PoHC introduced OWEV who provided an update on the Victorian offshore wind auction process, highlighting confirmation from newly appointed Energy Minister Jaclyn Symes that the offshore wind auction will proceed in August 2026 as scheduled.

- 5.2 **Question:** Save Westernport asked if the auction will still commence in August 2026, noting that only seven business days remained in the month.

Response: OWEV responded that the commitment is still to meet this date, noting the change of Minister.

- 5.3 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked if the offshore wind auction documents would be made publicly available.

Response: Information about the offshore wind auction is available via [OWEV's website](#). Detailed auction documents are not publicly available. The auction is a competitive procurement process open only to Gippsland offshore wind feasibility licence holders that have satisfied the State's participation and probity requirements. This is to protect commercial confidentiality and maintain a fair and competitive bidding market.

- 5.4 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked how many tenderers are expected to participate in the auction.

Response: There are nine feasibility licences available in Victoria - within those nine, proponents will submit their proposals for the first 2GW.

- 5.5 **Question:** Save Westernport asked if there was a backup plan in place should the offshore wind auction not proceed in August 2026.

Response: Auction process commenced on 26 August 2026.

- 5.6 **Question:** Westernport Peninsula Protection Council (WPPC) asked how long the auction process itself would take – days, weeks, etc.

Response: The auction timeline includes a 12-month RFP phase from August 2026 to August 2027. After auction close, an extensive evaluation of these bids will occur to select successful projects, with contracts for the first 2 GW expected to be awarded in 2028.

- 5.7 **Question:** Ian (Community non-affiliated) asked what will happen to offshore wind areas that have been abandoned by their proponents.

Response: DTP responded that the auction is for the first 2GW across nine feasibility licences, not necessarily for the specific areas. Withdrawn proponents have forfeited their licences to bid. There is a long-term plan for 9GW across the entire Gippsland offshore wind zone, with more than 9GW worth of licences available. There will be further clarity once the auction begins.

- 5.8 PoHC outlined the project's current focus areas including finalising the EES reports and chapters, preparing a dedicated EES website, preparing supporting communications materials ahead of exhibition and ongoing stakeholder engagement.
- 5.9 Following member interest about benefits of the VRET project to the local community, PoHC provided an overview of the Local Jobs First framework that the project must adhere to, including minimum local content requirements across pre-construction and construction phases.
- 5.10 **Question:** Somerville Business Group asked if local suppliers will be prioritised.
- Response:** The project and future contractors will need to comply with the requirements outlined under the Local Jobs First Framework, including for apprenticeships, cadetships and local jobs.
- 5.11 **Question:** Somerville Business Group requested a definition of what is considered 'local' in the context of the framework.
- Response:** Australia and New Zealand are defined as local under the framework, however PoHC understands the desire for local suppliers to the Hastings area to participate in the project.
- 5.12 **Question:** WPPC requested clarification that the state government requirement for local jobs actually refers to Australia and New Zealand rather than hyperlocal jobs.
- Response:** PoHC confirmed that interstate or NZ labour would satisfy the state government requirement for local jobs, noting that sufficient labour is available in Melbourne/Victoria for the project. Therefore, sourcing labour from interstate or NZ would be considered unnecessary. This ties into PoHC's strong focus on utilising hyperlocal suppliers and workers wherever possible.
- 5.13 **Question:** Somerville Business Group asked if workforce accommodation would be required.
- Response:** PoHC noted that dedicated accommodation would not be required, as the project is within Greater Melbourne and unlike a regional project, workers can travel to and from site for the day.
- 5.14 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked how many companies and consultants involved in the pre-construction phase are based in Australia to meet the 97% minimum local content.
- Response:** Taken on notice.
- 5.15 **Question:** Somerville Business Group asked if PoHC has had discussions with local schools and universities about apprenticeships?
- Response:** PoHC confirmed that it has started to engage with local secondary and tertiary education providers and noted there was a strong focus on education at the Gippsland New Energy Conference earlier in the week.

6. EES update & timeline

- 6.1 PoHC provided an update on the EES, noting that draft technical reports and chapters are being finalised and following IAU's adequacy and authorisation review, the exhibition is expected to take place in early 2027.

- 6.2 PoHC reiterated that the CRG cannot be provided with draft EES documents ahead of public exhibition because it has not yet completed the formal adequacy and authorisation process.

Action: PoHC provided table of contents to CRG of the EES in email 26 August 2026.

- 6.3 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked for an explanation on the governance and departments involved in the approvals process.

Response: PoHC detailed the IAU, TRG and IEG groups, who they are, their roles, and where they sit in the overall approvals process. PoHC has previously sent the list of agencies reviewing EES reports, and can send this list again if requested.

- 6.4 **Question:** WPPC questioned whether it was likely that the EES review would be completed by the end of 2026.

Response: PoHC advised that is on track to have all of the assessments completed by the end of 2026.

- 6.5 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked whether a change of government could impact the process or result in personnel changes in the IAU/TRG/IEG teams?

Response: PoHC stated that, to our knowledge, both the process and approval personnel would remain the same. Planning Panels Victoria will oversee the independent inquiry that review all the documentation.

- 6.6 **Question:** UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation asked how the EES timeline would interface with transmission line projects and other processes like the offshore wind auction. Noted that at the moment, all timelines are completely separate.

Response: PoHC noted that this request has been made previously and being discussed with OWEV and VicGrid.

Action: OWEV to consider providing a combined EES and whole of program timeline that displays interface with VicGrid transmission, VRET and the offshore wind auction.

- 6.7 **Question:** WPPC asked if separate EES processes for other offshore wind projects like Star of the South could be made available.

Response: PoHC stated that it is not privy to the EES processes of other organisations and members are welcome to contact them directly. Star of the South are currently in their panel hearing, which is [publicly available online here](#).

- 6.8 **Question:** Wellbeing & Health Organisation asked if there was a requirement for successful bidders to use the VRET facility, or if they could assemble elsewhere?

Response: PoHC confirmed that proponents are aware that VRET is the only assembly port, and that no alternative is in place. Other ports may be used by proponents for other purposes. No other Port in Australia is currently equipped to accommodate the requirements as an offshore wind assembly port.

- 6.9 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked if there were any minimum requirements or qualifications that bidders need to satisfy before being able to participate in the auction.

Response: Pre-qualification and feasibility will be assessed as part of the application.

Action: Taken on notice for OWEV to provide further detail.

6.10 **Question:** Western Port Seagrass Partnership asked when the dedicated EES website will be ready.

Response: PoHC stated it is preparing for the exhibition process and the EES website will be ready in time for exhibition. PoHC also noted that when submissions are made during exhibition, they are submitted to the independent planning panel – not PoHC directly, therefore responses will not come from PoHC.

6.11 **Question:** Save Westernport asked if hard copies of EES documents will be available at exhibition.

Response: PoHC explained that it will have a limited number of hard copies of the EES documents at public locations, such as libraries or Council offices, however it would not be printing copies on request. Copies of the full document will be made available on a dedicated EES website and on take-home USB sticks.

6.12 **Question:** Victorian National Parks Association asked if it was possible to submit a request for the exhibition period to last as long as possible, beyond the standard exhibition length.

Response: PoHC noted that requests for extension can be submitted to the IAU and Planning Panels Victoria.

6.13 **Question:** WPPC asked if the CRG can collectively make a submission to extend the exhibition period.

Response: PoHC clarified that the CRG cannot make a collective submission – CRG members can do so individually or on behalf of their respective organisations (if applicable), the CRG is comprised of stakeholders with a wide range of interests and views on the project and may not be unanimously aligned on matters as a collective.

7. Business and social impact assessments

7.1 PoHC provided an update on the Business Impact Assessment, which assessed potential impacts to business continuity, tourism and employment, as well as the Social Impact Assessment which considered how the project may affect the community.

7.2 PoHC noted that the project is expected to generate positive economic impacts, including increased demand for local suppliers, services and workforce expenditure

7.3 **Question:** WPPC wanted to seek clarification on how the additional truck movements identified for the project are considered an 'insignificant' impact.

Response: PoHC explained the Social Impact specialist referred to the Traffic Impact Assessment and that mitigations are suitable to manage impacts. 'Insignificant impact' in this context refers to tourism impacts. Tourism is not expected to be impacted solely based on the presence of towers on site. The same applies to the shipping channel, in that marine traffic can be increased without specifically impacting tourism.

7.4 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked where the extra trucks will come from/what routes they will take.

Response: It is expected they will primarily come from quarries in the Cardinia region (Pakenham). These trucks must follow the National Heavy Vehicle Network, with designated routes that must be followed.

- 7.5 **Question:** Committee for Frankston & Mornington Peninsula (CFMP) asked if PoHC is actively advocating for Graydens Rd to be upgraded.

Response: PoHC noted the Traffic Impact Assessment says that particular intersection can sustain the increase in traffic associated with the project, however there may be management measures put in place. PoHC is aware that Graydens Rd is a community issue, however it is beyond the scope of the project to upgrade the intersection.

- 7.6 **Question:** CFMP asked for a specific number of ongoing construction jobs at VRET.

Response: PoHC advised up to 300 jobs during construction, and up to 80 during operation.

- 7.7 **Question:** Somerville Business Group asked if there was a separate impact assessment for residential properties.

Response: PoHC advised that impacts to residents are covered in the Social Impact Assessment.

- 7.8 **Question:** Somerville Business Group asked if there would be other options for public transport, or changes to public transport offerings to bring workforce to and from the site.

Response: PoHC advised there are no planned changes to public transport or requirements for additional PT services.

Question: Somerville Business Group asked if Pearcedale has been included in traffic and business impact assessments.

Response: PoHC noted that the National Heavy Vehicle Network does not go through Pearcedale, and therefore is not considered in the impact assessments.

- 7.9 **Action:** PoHC to send the [National Heavy Vehicle Network route map](#) to the CRG members. Provided in email to CRG on 26 August 2026.

- 7.10 **Question:** Wellbeing & Health Organisation asked if public use of alternative routes (and associated traffic increases) have been factored into the Traffic Impact Assessment, and if there are any safeguards that can deal with road issues arising from this increased local traffic.

Response: This will occur as part of traffic monitoring. The Traffic Management Plan will identify any mitigations required.

- 7.11 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked if the port will have control on who the contractors and subcontractors will be.

Response: PoHC advised that there will be a robust tender process in place for prospective contractors and subcontractors.

- 7.12 **Question:** Wellbeing & Health Organisation asked if there will be any noise disruption at the Pelican Park foreshore area in Hastings.

Response: PoHC advised that the Noise Impact Assessment does not indicate that noise from the site will have significant impacts on that location.

7.13 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked if the VRET site is within the BlueScope Steel buffer zone.

Response: PoHC confirmed that it is within the Woodside Major Hazard Facility zone.

7.14 **Question:** Ian (Community non-affiliated) asked if any post-contact heritage has emerged in the Cemetery Estate/Old Tyabb area?

Response: This is detailed in the Historic Heritage Assessment – there is no evidence of historic values at the project site as it is reclaimed land. A sunken dredge from the 1970s was found in the seabed, PoHC have registered this with Heritage Victoria, despite the fact that the project does not impact on the wreck.

8. Update on Marine Ecology

- 8.1 PoHC provided an update on the Marine Ecology Impact Assessment, explaining that field assessments are now all complete, and the overall assessment is now with the TRG for second review.
- 8.2 PoHC noted that the assessment includes a number of Annexures, each of which contributes to existing conditions knowledge of Western Port.
- 8.3 PoHC flagged that the data gathered as part of the assessment will be made available in due course via state government databases including CoastKit and Victorian Biodiversity Atlas.

9. Engagement update

- 9.1 PoHC shared outcomes of recent public engagement activities including May/June community drop-in sessions, the French Island boat tour in May, and the cultural immersion day hosted by Bunurong Land Council.
- 9.2 PoHC also provided a summary of discussions from the Gippsland New Energy Conference 2026 in Traralgon on 18-19 August.
- 9.3 PoHC shared details about the upcoming Port Open Day event on Saturday 12 September, and invited CRG members to attend and share the event with their networks.
- 9.4 **Question:** Ian (Community non-affiliated) asked if the CRG would continue once project approvals are in place.

Response: PoHC indicated that it will review the composition and intent of the CRG ahead of construction commencing.

10. Final questions and feedback

10.1 The Chair noted that there were a number of questions from members which had been shared prior to the meeting. The Chair invited members to speak to their questions.

10.2 **Comment:** UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation wished to note that 30 business days of EES exhibition is an insufficient amount of time for a project of this size and given members have signed a confidentiality agreement, should be provided with materials ahead of exhibition.

Response: PoHC will not provide any reports before exhibition. The reports have not passed through the adequacy process – it would be inappropriate to provide information that can then be misconstrued or is in a draft or incomplete form prior to submission.

Comment: UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation contended that this reinforces the requirement for the State Government to extend the EES exhibition period.

Response: PoHC reiterated that it does not set the timeframe for exhibition. PoHC noted much of the information is already available in the EPBC submission, with Marine Ecology, Coastal Processes and Waterbirds information existing in the Preliminary Impact Assessments.

Comment: Dolphin Research Institute noted that 30 business days of exhibition is equivalent to six weeks, and that with today's tools such as AI, a high volume of EES content can now be reviewed more efficiently than before.

10.3 **Comment:** Save Westernport put forward that PoHC could put a recommendation forward to DTP on behalf of the CRG to ensure effective engagement and consultation.

10.4 **Response:** PoHC explained it has provided this feedback to the Impact Assessment Unit at DTP., but it cannot make any recommendations in this respect.

10.5 **Question:** Dolphin Research Institute asked if IEG comments and peer reviewer comments will be published.

Response: PoHC confirmed that all those reports will be published, however reiterated that it cannot provide reports ahead of exhibition.

10.6 **Action:** PoHC to provide table of contents of EES report.

10.7 **Question:** Wellbeing & Health Organisation asked if PoHC can reach out to the Minister for a meeting or to have them speak to the CRG.

Response: PoHC advised that individual organisations can make this request but not appropriate for PoHC to do so.

10.8 **Question:** UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation noted that the Jacobs site selection analysis was conducted before Minister Plibersek's decision to reject the first EPBC referral. Asked if the site selection changed after this time – focusing specifically on "How was Port of Hastings selected?" rather than "Why Port of Hastings?"

Response: DTP stated that PoHC remains the preferred site, and that the overall outcome has not changed.

Comment: UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation said the process that led to the selection of Port of Hastings should be included in the EES to demonstrate how MNES impacts were avoided.

Response: This is outside the scope of the EES, and a matter for DTP regarding consideration of further release of information about site selection.

10.9 **Question:** Multiple members asked about PoHC and the State Government's support for a Western Port Strategic Framework or Marine Spatial Plan.

Response: PoHC reiterated that the matter of a Strategic Framework or Marine Spatial Plan is not within the scope of the Port, or the EES. The matter falls under the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), and PoHC has previously passed on community feedback to DEECA.

10.10 **Question:** VNPA asked if there is potential for PoHC to be involved in a Western Port Bay fund.

Response: PoHC is looking into a Community Benefit Fund for the project however the mechanics and approvals of the Fund are yet to be determined as the project has not been approved.

10.11 **Question:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) asked if there is a business case available for the project.

Response: DTP confirmed there is a business case prepared for Treasury, reiterating that it is a Cabinet in Confidence document that cannot be shared with CRG members.

10.12 **Question:** WPPC asked if the 525,000m³ dredging figure includes the shipping channel relocation required for BlueScope jetty access.

Response: PoHC confirmed that the figure does include BlueScope dredging, noting that that specific dredging is slightly under 10,000m³ and is a small part of the overall dredging program. PoHC explained that it is being done to deepen the shipping channel slightly east, purely for VRET in front of the terminal to allow BlueScope vessels to pass.

10.13 **Comment:** Rod (Community non-affiliated) commented that the Nature-Based Solutions Workshop held in February raised some expectations among the CRG members, and the CRG should refocus on what the group's purpose is for.

Response: PoHC replied that the NBS workshop was an opportunity to capture ideas as to how the project can be a catalyst for nature-positive solutions. The ideas have been shared with organisations and departments. An offset strategy is required for this project, and the workshop played a key role in informing the development of that strategy.

10.14 **Comment:** Mornington Peninsula Labor Environment Action Network (MP LEAN) provided a statement recommending that biodiversity net gain outcomes must be delivered, should the project obtain the necessary approvals to proceed.

Response: PoHC noted that it has to prepare an offset strategy as a requirement of the EES. The EES requires an Offset Strategy to meet scoping requirements.

10.15 **Question:** WPPC asked if the project would commit to holding public ‘town-hall’ style information sessions rather than drop-in information sessions, to allow the community to hear questions and answers openly.

Response: PoHC explained that town-hall sessions do not provide the opportunity for all voices to be heard – only those who wish to speak up in front of a gathered audience. Public roundtable discussions to date have served as a very effective forum, as multiple conversations can be held simultaneously, and attendees can speak to specialists based on their particular areas of interest. Virtual sessions also feature a publicly accessible moderated Q&A, which are recorded and published on the project website.

10.16 **Question:** WPPC asked for details on ongoing Bunurong consultation.

Response: PoHC said they have regularly engaged with Bunurong, hosting them on site, attending cultural awareness training, developed a Cultural Values Report and engaged via the TRG and other forums.

10.17 **Question:** CFMP pre-submitted a question asking how the project can better communicate the general scope of the assembly terminal component to the wider public who may not be fully across the details.

Response: PoHC recommended that members encourage stakeholders to share the resources available on the project website, subscribe to the E-News updates and attend events such as the upcoming Port Open Day.

10.18 **Question:** UNESCO Western Port Biosphere Foundation asked if the CRG can be briefed on what PoHC considers the high-risk items within the EES.

10.19 **Action:** Taken on notice for consideration.

10.20 The Chair noted the next CRG meeting will tentatively take place on Thursday 19 November 2026 at the same venue and flagged a separate end-of-year “thank you” event with details to be confirmed.

10.21 The Chair noted tabled agenda items for future meetings.

FINISH

This meeting concluded at 3:51 PM