

# What next?

Community perspectives  
on the energy transition  
in the Latrobe Valley



# Acknowledgments

## ***Acknowledgement of Country***

We wish to acknowledge Traditional Owners of the land to which this report relates – the people of the Gunaikurnai Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, and offer our solidarity and support to First Nations groups across the country working towards economic sovereignty and justice.

## ***About The Next Economy***

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# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Understanding community perspectives – Project methodology	2
<b>Vision for a good energy transition</b>	<b>5</b>
“We know we are achieving a good energy transition when...”	5
<b>Themes</b>	
<b>1. Socio-economic disadvantage, equity issues and liveability</b>	<b>7</b>
Design for positive community outcomes	9
Integrate housing solutions	9
Improve energy access	10
<b>2. Community participation</b>	<b>11</b>
Expanding community capacity to participate	12
Improving community understanding of the energy transition	13
Diversity and inclusion in engagement activities	14
<b>3. Institutional capacity and good governance</b>	<b>16</b>
Governing for social and environmental outcomes	18
Invest in outcomes and provide funding certainty	19
Greater planning and accountability	20
<b>4. Environmental protection, remediation and rehabilitation</b>	<b>21</b>
Improving community engagement in environmental management	22
Improving coordination of the regulatory system	24

<b>5. First Nations leadership</b>	<b>26</b>
Improving organisational engagement practices and resourcing First Nations organisations adequately	28
Ensuring decision-making power for Traditional Owners	29
<b>6. New energy development</b>	<b>30</b>
Addressing existing cultural tensions surrounding the region’s changing identity	31
Addressing concerns around economic impact of the energy transition	33
<b>7. Regional economic development</b>	<b>34</b>
Additional support for locally-led initiatives	35
Targeted government investment for new industry development	36
<b>8. Workforce development</b>	<b>38</b>
Providing certainty surrounding future energy work	41
Improving training and apprenticeship opportunities	42
Creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce	44
<b>Good practice principles</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>47</b>

# Executive summary



The Latrobe Valley is undergoing a rapid economic transition as it grapples with the looming closure of the three remaining coal fired electricity plants and the acceleration of renewable energy developments across the Gippsland region.

In early 2023, a representative group of community leaders and residents from across the Latrobe Valley were invited to participate in the 'What next? Community leadership for a positive transition' project. The aim of this project was to explore the range of perspectives among community leaders with regards to the energy transition.

This report presents a summary of the perspectives shared during the project through a series of interviews and workshops. It makes visible the wealth of experience, insights and knowledge that exists in communities across the region and demonstrates how the local community can be a valuable partner in working towards good transition outcomes for the Latrobe Valley region.

The main project finding is that community members see a range of potential benefits from the energy transition, beyond job creation and Australia's national decarbonisation agenda. If managed well, the transition could provide opportunities to transform the systems that underpin society, the regional economy, and people's relationship with the local environment.



*View over Traralgon*



Specific opportunities participants identified included:

1. Addressing socio-economic disadvantage and issues related to equity and the liveability of the region.
2. Deepening community participation in local and regional development by making it easier for young people, First Nations people, multi-cultural and immigrant communities, and other groups to participate in decision-making processes.
3. Improving governance practices within the institutions involved in leading, coordinating and regulating the energy transition, especially transparency and accountability.
4. Expanding Traditional Owners leadership and power to influence decision-making regarding all aspects of the energy transition, and finding ways for institutions, industry and community groups to partner with them.
5. Improving efforts to protect and rehabilitate the environment and increasing opportunities for Traditional Owner management of natural resources.
6. Realising the full value of new energy developments by expanding community awareness, understanding and participation in planning, project development and decision-making processes.
7. Strengthening regional economic resilience through a stronger focus on locally-led and locally-owned economic development initiatives.
8. Increasing local employment and participation in new industries by providing information, training, and access to a range of current and future workforce opportunities.

Participants identified progress and challenges across all eight themes, as well as a diverse range of initiatives with the potential to generate more positive transition outcomes for the Latrobe Valley.

# Introduction



The Latrobe Valley is undergoing a rapid economic transition as it grapples with the looming closure of the remaining three coal fired electricity plants and the acceleration of renewable energy developments across the region. Substantial transition work and progress has already been achieved, but there is still much work to do to support workers, businesses and the community to manage change well.

In early 2023, The Next Economy worked with 31 community leaders and residents to explore their perspectives on the energy transition through the 'What next? Community leadership for a positive transition' project.

The idea for the project emerged after a range of community, government and industry representatives expressed concerns that community views remain largely under-represented in formal transition planning activities, despite the substantial planning efforts and investment in transition since the Hazelwood Power Station closure in 2017.

In response, The Next Economy, with funding from Environment Victoria, engaged with a diverse group of community leaders and local residents to understand their views regarding:

- What good energy transition processes and outcomes look like;
- Where progress has been achieved and energy transition challenges remain in the Latrobe Valley; and
- Initiatives and actions that could contribute to better transition process and outcomes.



*The 'What Next? A community perspective on positive energy transition in the Latrobe Valley' government and industry forum, Traralgon*



This report presents a summary of the perspectives shared throughout the project. It makes visible the wealth of experience, insights and knowledge that exists in communities across the region that could contribute more directly to good transition outcomes for the Latrobe Valley region.

## Understanding community perspectives – Project methodology

Understanding the range of community perspectives on what good transition processes and outcomes look like is fundamentally important in the development of regional transition plans and activities. Despite this, meaningful engagement with a diverse range of community representatives and residents has and continues to be a significant challenge for many government and industry bodies that are leading and facilitating transition planning activities.

Given this context, one of the key objectives of this project was to facilitate conversations with a group of leaders who represented a diverse range of residents from across the Latrobe Valley to understand the current barriers to participation and their views on the energy transition.

From January 2023 to May 2023, The Next Economy hosted a series of activities that engaged 31 community leaders and local residents including First Nations people and young people, people from the multicultural community, grassroots environment groups, small businesses and the social service sector (refer to Table 1 for list of groups).

Project activities included:

- Desktop review of over 28 regional plans and strategies related to economic development and the energy transition (January 2023).
- In-depth interviews with 11 community leaders to understand the range of perspectives on regional opportunities and challenges, as well as the barriers to participation (February / March 2023).
- Online workshop with 14 participants to report on the findings from the initial analysis, validate findings, gather additional insights, and design the next steps (March 2023).
- Full-day, in-person workshop with 23 community members to get a more detailed understanding of the transition opportunities and challenges and identify and prioritise potential interventions for consideration (May 2023).
- In-person forum to present the project findings to 35 industry and government representatives, including presentations by 6 community representatives on priority initiatives (June 2023).

The mix of project activities and iterative nature of the process facilitated rich and nuanced reflections from this group of community leaders who represent a diverse range of residents, many of whom are under-represented in formal planning activities. These findings have been





summarised into nine sections that form the structure of this report. The first section shares community perspectives on what constitutes good transition outcomes. The following eight sections address the major themes that emerged during the project:

1. Socio-economic disadvantage, equity and liveability issues
2. Community participation
3. Institutional capacity and good governance
4. Environmental protection and rehabilitation
5. First Nations leadership
6. New energy development
7. Regional economic development
8. Workforce development

The report concludes with some insights on community engagement practices generated through the process that could inform future projects.

**Table 1: Community Participant Affiliations**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Organisation/Group</b>
First Nations	Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners Gunaikurnai Land and Water Aboriginal Corporation
Environment	Environment Victoria Friends of Latrobe Water Friends of the Earth Gippsland Climate Change Network Latrobe Valley Sustainability Group
Local Business Community	Earthworker Cooperative Local business banking
Agriculture	Latrobe River Irrigators Local Farmers
Social Services	Latrobe Health Assembly
Multicultural Community	Migrant Community Representative
Workers	Gippsland Trades and Labour Council Recently Retired Power Station Worker
Young People	Latrobe Youth Space Inc
Local Media	Coal Face Podcast
Other Community Group	Great Latrobe Park Voices of the Valley
<b>Total:</b>	<b>31 individual people, including 5 First Nations people</b>

The Transition to date

# IMPORTANT MILESTONES

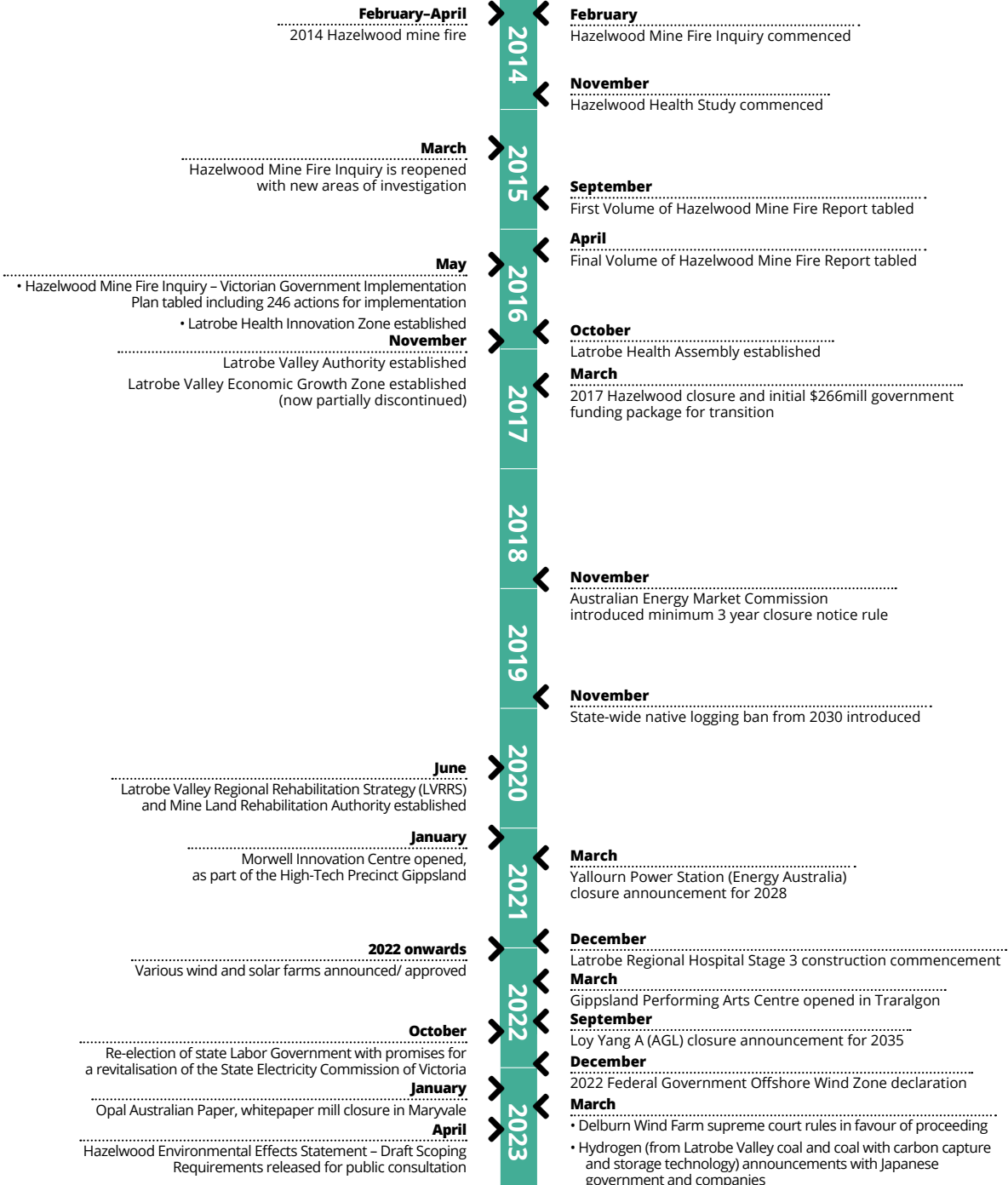
in the community journey

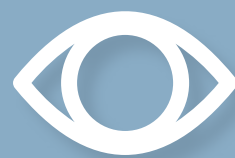
2014–2023 >

Project participants identified the following markers and milestones along the energy transition journey to date



Introduction





# Vision for a good energy transition

Community workshop participants shared their vision for the Latrobe Valley energy transition when asked to complete the statement: “We know we are achieving a good energy transition when...” The following is a selection of their responses.

## “We know we are achieving a good energy transition when...”

### ***The health and wellbeing of people and the planet are prioritised***

“Our solutions are focused on better outcomes for the environment and all people.”

“We follow a wellbeing economy.”

“Energy is produced in the interests of people and planet, not profit.”

“Communities and country reap the benefits from the change.”

### ***We have hope for the future of ‘The Valley’***

“There is a united voice, a sense of belonging and excitement for the future.”

“Kids don’t want to leave.”

“People start to talk about the future and not the past.”

“The new energy doesn’t just do less harm to people and planet, but lets them thrive.”

### ***Every person has the resources they need to be healthy and happy***

“Everything isn’t a struggle.”

“No one is left behind.”

“We don’t struggle to feed our families.”

### ***Everyone has equitable access to affordable energy***

“Affordable housing is energy efficient.”

“It is affordable to adapt to clean energy.”

“We can afford to heat our homes without fire.”

### ***Communities are engaged and understand the changes***

“Better informed community.”

“Most people want to know what’s happening.”

“People are engaged in new energy initiatives.”



Young participants in the community workshop, Josie Hess and Steph Sabrinskas.



### ***People can influence decisions that affect their future***

- “Our community has a voice and choice.”
- “Most people are included in the process.”
- “The transition is community driven and is a benefit to the community.”
- “The ‘unheard and hardly reached’ are part of the solution.”

### ***Traditional Owners are respected as custodians of the land***

- “More land has been remediated, cleaned up and given back to community and Traditional Owners.”
- “Free, prior and informed consent (is required) for renewable energy projects.”
- “We have a meaningful relationship with proponents, we are not stakeholders.”

### ***We work together openly, equally and collectively***

- “We can accept different views and collaborate.”
- “Small local community groups are seen as credible partners in the transition.”
- “There is clarity and transparency for planning.”
- “It is easy to have conversations about renewables/climate/ transition.”

### ***The economy offers local community stability***

- “We have diversified the Latrobe Valley economy.”
- “The region is participating in renewable energy”.
- “New traineeships and jobs have become available.”

### ***The environment is protected and nurtured***

- “We have more natural water in our river system.”
- “The Latrobe Valley Coal mines have been beautifully rehabilitated.”
- “Real penalties apply for environmental impact.”

### ***We’ve decarbonised everything***

- “New energy is mainstream for farmers, business, home owners.”
- “We have reliable energy supply from 100 per cent renewables.”
- “Energy comes from sources that enhance the environment rather than deplete it.”

### ***Our efforts to minimize climate change are working***

- “It is easy to have conversations about renewables/ climate/transition.”
- “We have solved the climate crisis.”
- “We are on track to meet our net zero targets.”



Morwell National Park.  
Image by Richie Southerton

## THEME 1:

# Socio-economic disadvantage, equity issues and liveability



The Latrobe Valley faces a range of socio-economic challenges. There is a high percentage of low-socio-economic households across the region particularly in relation to other surrounding local government areas in the Gippsland region.



View from Yallourn lookout, Haunted Hill

Participants agreed that they didn't want to see the energy transition exacerbate challenges already experienced by the region, particularly related to health, housing, food, education, access to services (accessible childcare, healthcare, public services and aged care) and employment disadvantages.

***People are dealing with housing, employment and food insecurity. They are in survival mode. We risk that transition will 'lose people off the edge'.***

COMMUNITY SUPPORT MANAGER





Participants expressed concern that the region is facing a housing shortage, with many community members dealing with housing access and affordability issues. Similarly, households are experiencing challenges regarding affordable energy. Some participants raised that these issues would be exacerbated in the context of future economic fluctuation and new industry development.

Participants emphasised in both interviews and workshops that they want see the current social challenges and disadvantages addressed and prioritised in all energy transition efforts. As one participant expressed, they wanted industry, governments and society to 'prioritise wellbeing over profits'. Participants also agreed that the benefits of the transition should be shared more equitably and in ways that would make a tangible difference to how the most disadvantaged groups in the Latrobe Valley region experience life.



***Latrobe Valley, especially Morwell and Moe, have been treated like second rate citizens. We need better public and accessible social infrastructure, we need better health, education, housing.***

GUNAİKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER

Despite the concerns raised, most of the workshop participants identified opportunities that might emerge through the energy transition that could start to address these socio-economic challenges and cost of living pressures more generally.

Participants were also able to provide examples of how the energy transition is already contributing to good social justice outcomes. These included the implementation of recommendations from the Hazelwood Mine Fire Enquiry and the Hazelwood Health Study, the implementation of the Latrobe Health Assembly, the appointment of the Health Advocate, publicly available homeowner energy efficiency assessment kits, union representation in closure negotiations, and increased advocacy from community groups.

Some participants attributed this progress to shifts in the way people were engaged in discussions and planning related to the energy transition. Some explained that planning activities had started to involve 'more local people on the ground' and the linkages across the community, local industry and government were being increasingly strengthened.

Participants identified three opportunities to take advantage of the energy transition to address socio-economic challenges in the Latrobe Valley:

1. Employ processes to design for positive community outcomes;
2. Develop integrated housing solutions; and
3. Ensure affordable energy access.



## Design for positive community outcomes

Participants discussed the potential for energy initiatives to invest in the wealth and prosperity of the broader community. Co-design processes could be used to integrate community wealth building strategies into the development of transition plans, policies, legislation and agreements, with the aim of significantly increasing the long-term economic benefits across the local community. A particular focus for many participants was ensuring that benefits are shared equitably, so that they also extend to the most vulnerable people.

Participants also expressed interest in developing a deeper understanding of different community benefit models, including how they can ensure investment in social services, health, education, housing supply, energy accessibility and efficiency across the region.

Specific initiative ideas include:

- Resource and support local communities to identify and prioritise the social outcomes they want to see across their community, so they are better prepared to inform transition planning activities and negotiate with industry.
- Legislate the requirement for industry to meet its 'social obligation' and 'community benefit commitments' with local communities.
- Offer community training on the types of benefits that could be generated through policy changes, community ownership and equity models, old and new energy projects, and ways to secure them.

## Integrate housing solutions

Participants would like to see the development of housing solutions integrated into efforts to manage the energy transition process. This could include the development of a housing strategy (informed with input from all key stakeholders) and the coordination of projects to address current and future housing shortages and quality issues. Addressing the housing needs of First Nations people and those experiencing disadvantage was identified as a key priority.

*Existing housing stock in the Valley is very poor, a hangover of past rapid growth. It needs a radical update.*

COMMUNITY LEADER





Specific initiative ideas identified by participants included:

- Develop a regional housing working group and a long-term housing strategy involving Latrobe City Council, social housing providers, First Nations housing organisations, community representatives, the building industry, planning departments, and other relevant stakeholders to plan and implement place-specific housing solutions.
- Expand the 'residential housing zone' to enable new housing development in the Latrobe Valley region.
- Increase First Nations housing supply and upgrade existing stock.

**Aboriginal housing has 10 year waiting list.  
People are couch surfing for years.**

GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER

**Overcrowding is not a choice. Provide affordable,  
actually subsidised housing. When people have the  
chance they will always try to live somewhere better.**

GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER

## Improve energy access

Participants identified the need to address energy poverty in the Latrobe Valley, particularly within public housing.

**We've powered the state of Victoria for over 100 hundred years,  
dealing with the impacts of mining and burning brown coal – people living  
here deserve access to cheap, clean renewable energy. This should be  
integral to Latrobe Valley's transition and decarbonisation journey.**

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Specific initiative ideas included:

- Programs to increase the energy efficiency of the public housing stock.
- Support the establishment of more energy hubs, community owned energy projects and community/ industry co-ownership business models.
- Support the growth of a localised 'home decarbonisation strategy' (for both new builds and retrofitting of existing homes) that includes the use of local products and services and employs local consultants, architects, builders and tradespeople. This would include support to train young people and other local workers.
- The Victorian Government, Latrobe City Council and local education providers providing targeted education and tools to assess energy use, implement efficiency strategies and help people with access to government initiatives to fund upgrades.
- Offer gas leak and energy assessment kits at local libraries.



## THEME 2:

# Community participation



A common thread throughout the participant feedback was that “the conversation has changed remarkably” in the Latrobe Valley. Many project participants articulated that they are now able to talk about transition, climate change and health problems in the Latrobe Valley more freely, especially compared with 5–10 years ago.

Today, participants feel that there is a general acceptance that change is required in the Latrobe Valley and renewable energy is “becoming palatable”, despite continued reluctance in some sections of the community to accept the energy transition.

*We're talking about transition all the time now.*

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE



During discussions, many participants acknowledged a range of efforts by community groups, unions, government agencies and companies to manage transition well and “to make positive changes” happen for the region. Some participants reflected that engagement activities regarding the energy transition had improved over time, given that there were more opportunities for increased collaboration and stronger connections between community members, community organisations, industry and government.



*Harlequin Goodes presenting at the 'What Next? A community perspective on positive energy transition in the Latrobe Valley' government and industry forum, Traralgon*



Participants noted an increase in the number of working groups and organisations that have been set up to support connection, sharing and collaboration around good energy transition activities in recent years. Examples included the Latrobe Valley Authority (the LVA), the various working groups the LVA facilitates, and The Health Assembly.

In addition, community leaders, community groups and unions have worked to develop stronger local networks, which have increased their access to “inside information”, local expertise, and current and historical knowledge. These activities have made the groups more effective and influential when asked to participate in committees, meetings and other community activities.

Despite the general consensus that the level of community engagement had improved in recent years, many of the project participants maintained that there is still room for improvement in three main areas:

1. Expanding community capacity to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes;
2. Improving community awareness and understanding of the energy transition; and
3. Expanding the level of diversity and inclusion in engagement activities.

## Expanding community capacity to participate

Participants agreed that when the opportunity for community to participate in decision-making processes is facilitated, community members are able to make a valuable contribution towards energy transition activities. However, many participants shared negative examples of when they felt that their participation had not been meaningful or impactful and that they had been engaged to ‘just tick a box’, leaving them less motivated to participate in other activities.



***When people go to consultation they find they are being told what has been decided, is going to happen.***

COMMUNITY MEMBER

Participants emphasised that more needed to be done to address the limits to both individual and community organisational capacity to participate when the opportunities emerge.

***People are too busy surviving to have time, energy, capacity, skills etc to participate. What is the point anyway if it doesn't make a difference.***

COMMUNITY MEMBER



One implication of this lack of capacity is that a small group of people are responsible for a significant proportion of the work.



***Lots of the same people doing the heavy lifting in the community.***

COMMUNITY LEADER



Workshop participants reflected on the socio-economic barriers to participating, such as lack of financial resources and time to participate, mobility issues and a sense of not feeling welcome.

At an organisational level, many community groups in the Latrobe Valley are facing ongoing challenges in maintaining and/or growing their membership bases. This has a direct impact on their capacity to participate in the events and activities that will shape how the energy transition plays out. Some participants noted the difficulty in maintaining volunteer energy and engagement in activities, especially when positive change can take so long, or when they have had poor community participation experiences in the past.

## Improving community understanding of the energy transition

Many participants identified that a key barrier to effective community participation is the broad lack of community awareness and understanding regarding what is happening in the local energy transition; the role that various agencies play in managing the transition; and the consequences of human impacts on natural systems and how this is connected to the need to transition.



***Transition is happening above the community.***

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Participants described this disconnect between transition planning efforts and the general lack of awareness across the community as fuel for fear, speculation and misinformation. Some expressed frustration and concern that there is not a 'trusted local source' to go to for information about the energy transition, and so many people rely on 'fake news' for information and evidence. A few community members shared that they worry about the potential political consequences of this lack of clear information, and the risk of extreme perspectives taking hold across the community.

***People are marginalised and easily manipulated.  
They are politically vulnerable to extremism.***



COMMUNITY SUPPORT MANAGER

Several participants posited that opportunities to participate in energy transition conversations has helped them to build their knowledge and experience.

Consequently, participants agreed that they wanted to see more constructive communication and facilitated public discussions about a variety of transition topics across the broader Latrobe Valley and Gippsland community. Suggested topics include – power station closure rationale, coal worker transition, transmission lines, mine remediation options, carbon capture and storage, and renewable energy generation and future jobs.



Specific initiatives to expand community awareness and understanding included:

- Work with youth and multicultural services, First Nations and other community organisations to identify and train more people in the community to talk publicly and constructively about the energy transition.
- Develop and implement a professional communication plan that seeks to educate the broader Latrobe Valley and Gippsland communities about the energy transition topics and address misinformation.
- Engage the broader community through a regular presence at community markets.
- Existing energy generators to explain their closures, management strategies and transition plans through mainstream media channels.
- Increase public understanding of the role and impact of the Latrobe Valley Authority.
- Share people's stories and experiences regarding the energy transition.

## Diversity and inclusion in engagement activities

Several participants noted that new community voices (such as environment groups) were increasingly being invited to participate in formal decision-making processes compared to ten years ago. However, many participants expressed concern regarding the lack of diversity in engagement activities on the energy transition, noting low (or no) participation from young people, First Nations people, "hard to reach" groups (socially and economically disadvantaged groups), multi-cultural and immigrant communities, and the general public.

***The unheard and hardly reached aren't part of the conversation.***

COMMUNITY SUPPORT MANAGER

***Many migrants don't feel they're a valued part of the community.  
They are not confident that they are seen to have a right to say  
what they think. They are not confident people will listen,  
and they believe they have no influence anyway.  
'Does it matter what we say?'  
Like it's not their place to say anything.***

MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATIVE

Participants acknowledged that not everyone wants to be involved in discussions about the energy transition. However, they feel more work could be done to overcome the barriers to participation so that a larger number of more diverse people are engaged in meaningful ways.



Identified barriers to participation included the inappropriate timing and location of workshops and meetings, the formats of consultation activities, the channels of communication, and the lack of safety in engagement spaces to enable diverse views to be heard and respected.

Suggestions to overcome these barriers included:

- Stronger efforts by government and industry to build ongoing, respectful and trusting relationships with different groups across the community by engaging with genuine openness and deep listening. This includes the acknowledgement of suggestions, space to ask questions and for two-way dialogue, the adoption of community ideas, and reporting back to the community on actions taken and recommendations that have made a difference.
- Building sufficient flexibility and resourcing into engagement activities to overcome practical barriers by providing payments for people's time, reimbursing costs associated with participation, going to where groups are, or providing access to transport.
- Using appropriate communication and advertising channels to target different groups for example:
  - Young People – engage via social media and posters in windows with clear, welcoming messaging designed by young people.
  - Multi-cultural Community – design clear messages in accessible language and distribute via social media networks and private messenger groups (through the appropriate local contacts).

## THEME 3:

# Institutional capacity and good governance



The capacity of institutions to manage and govern the energy transition in the Latrobe Valley presented as a cross-cutting theme in many discussions. Participants were positive about the ongoing developments and significant changes in key institutions and regional governance structures responsible for facilitating a good transition. It was felt that these changes have been noticed by the broader community as well.

*There are lots of good intentions and people doing amazing things.*

COMMUNITY LEADER

For many participants, the establishment of the LVA was a significant milestone in the region's transition journey. The LVA is considered to play a valuable facilitation role, with participants describing how it has brought people together and contributed to greater interagency integration and coordination. The LVA has also provided a greater sense of certainty across the community regarding the national position on decarbonisation. Participants value the conduit to government that the LVA provides and believe this, and other factors, were important during the Hazelwood Power Station closure.

*I don't know where we'd be without the LVA.*

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER

*The LVA is assisting us to get our act together.*

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Some participants also observed that the Latrobe City Council is beginning to acknowledge the economic changes facing the region related to the energy transition. Participants reflected that there were probably many drivers for this shift, with several suggesting that a sense of "not being left behind" other neighbouring councils may have been a significant motivator.



*Government and industry representatives attending the 'What Next? A community perspective on positive energy transition in the Latrobe Valley' government and industry forum, Traralgon*

Despite this, some participants believed that the Latrobe City Council may be missing out on opportunities that would benefit the community as a result of “hedging its bets” and struggling internally to manage divided opinion on how to navigate the energy transition. Many expressed concern that indecisiveness could mean that the region would miss out on new long-term opportunities, particularly in renewable energy and new manufacturing sectors.

***Latrobe City Council want their hand in any basket... makes it difficult to feel confident they will back positive transition activities.***

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Participants noted that improved philosophical alignment between the State and Federal Governments is providing clearer policy direction. This policy clarity provides certainty for action and transition activities across the region. For example, emissions reduction targets, renewable energy targets and offshore wind zone declarations are considered by many participants as signalling to the region (and Australia) that decarbonisation is the “direction we’re moving in”.

The State Labor Government’s commitments to revitalise the State Electricity Commission (SEC) and return state electricity governance to the public domain was viewed favourably by many participants. They also welcome the government’s intention for a “more hands-on approach” to energy transmission, generation and planning, and cite other examples such as VicGrid taking on more ownership of transmission in Gippsland as a positive step for the region.





Participants questioned the rationale behind setting commitments on climate and emissions at a state and federal level, whilst simultaneously supporting the extended lifespan of coal and gas. Participants described the new messaging around transition and energy development activities as being confusing, destabilising and lacking transparency. One participant provided the example of how the language of “repurposing the mines”, was now being used by industry and the State Government to reference the continuation of mines for carbon capture and storage for hydrogen production.

### ***Are we closing down the mines or not?***

COMMUNITY MEMBER

Participants called for the State and Federal governments to continue to apply a climate lens on all decisions that impacted Australia’s future and pursue solutions that will leave the world in a better place than it is now. Participants also identified the opportunity for state and federal governments to work on sending consistent messages relating to their positions on the future of fossil fuels for energy generation and the use of carbon capture and storage technology. They suggested that the rationale for any decisions and actions be communicated with local communities who are impacted directly, to help people better understand what is happening so they can engage in more constructive and informed conversations and debates.

Areas where participants identified further action could be taken included:

1. Governing for social and environmental outcomes;
2. Investing in outcomes and providing funding certainty; and
3. Greater planning coordination and accountability.

## **Governing for social and environmental outcomes**

Participants believe there is an opportunity for government agencies to work collaboratively with the local community, and to involve them in formulating policy, planning and frameworks that deliver meaningful social, economic and environmental outcomes.

***We’re looking for community wealth building and a wellbeing economy.***

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

As per the reflections shared in *Theme 1: Socio-economic disadvantage, equity and liveability challenges*, participants feel it is the government’s responsibility to establish systems and structures that ensure benefits from all industries flow through to the local communities, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people within each community.





Where there are systems and structures already in place, participants shared widely held concerns relating to their enforcement. The failure of industry to deliver on local procurement commitments were used as an example, with participants citing examples of companies that had made pledges during the planning approval process or tendering stages, but ultimately avoided their fulfillment.

***The companies bullshit their way out of it.***

UNION REPRESENTATIVE

As already described in earlier sections, participants identified the need to embed community-driven values and aspirations in all systems and structures to facilitate good energy transition and economic development outcomes in the Latrobe Valley. They also want to see improved government accountability and enforcement.

Community and not-for profit groups such as Gippsland Climate Change Network (leading multiple initiatives including the Gippsland New Energy Conference), Community Power Agency (facilitating renewable energy and community benefit conversations) and Friends of the Earth (leading a Latrobe Valley Jobs Expo) are seen by many to be making good headway towards ensuring benefits flow through to local communities, but many feel the gaps are too great without more government leadership, policy and support. They also believe the State Government seems to often respond to new issues in a “reactive” way, responding to and facilitating space for industry (fossil fuels and renewables) to drive the discussion and direction of development, not the community.

***Governments are too busy running after corporates.***

GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER

## Invest in outcomes and provide funding certainty

Another challenge in need of attention that participants identified was the short-term nature of funds and limited funding pools provided by government and other agencies. Many believed that the way funding programs operate undermines the effectiveness of existing institutions, good programs and initiatives.

The LVA, GLaWAC, Latrobe Valley Neighbourhood Houses, Latrobe Youth Space and the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council all were noted (among others) as facing funding challenges that impacted their ability to do good work. This can lead to organisations being “pitched against each other” to compete for limited funds, instead of being encouraged to collaborate, avoid duplication and share resources.

Some participants suggested that authorities like the LVA should constructively and proactively challenge the State Government on this issue and advocate for what community organisations need. Some reported that there is a general sense that ongoing funding uncertainty has made the



LVA “afraid to upset the Treasurer”. One participant described how this perception encouraged community criticism of the LVA, reducing its legitimacy with government and in turn undermining the LVA’s ability to deliver change for the community.



***Government agencies aren’t leading, some can’t – they struggle to be brave.***

COMMUNITY LEADER

Participants called for expanded and longer-term funding for energy transition related organisations, employment and training for marginalised groups, and social support programs. They argued that greater outcomes would be achieved if State and Federal Government ceased 12-month program funding models and committed to a minimum of three-year funding arrangements. Participants also wanted the SEC to be adequately funded to provide social benefits to their workers and the broader community.

## Greater planning and accountability

Participants spoke to the numerous reports and plans that have been developed in relation to different aspects of energy transition in Gippsland and the Latrobe Valley as evidence of the significant amount of resources and attention the transition had received to date. There is, however, concern that there are too many plans, that they are “too high level” (i.e. too broad, not tangible or practical) and lack clear allocation of responsibilities. Some participants regarded many of the plans as having been undertaken to serve political agendas and feel there is a lack of public follow-up regarding their progress and achievement of outcomes.

Examples of specific actions to address planning and accountability concerns included:

- Fund the establishment of an independent ‘Transition Progress Assessment Committee’ that publishes an annual report summarising how industry and government have progressed with their transition plans and commitments, describes key challenges and becomes a proactive way to increase visibility and accountability of transition actors.
- Develop a national body that coordinates wind industry development, specifically to oversee national planning, procurement processes, the growth of related manufacturing industries and subsidies.

## THEME 4:

# Environmental protection, remediation and rehabilitation



Participants agreed that the protection of the environment and remediation of mine sites is receiving more attention compared with the previous five to ten years. They also recognised an increase in the level of on-country management work being undertaken by Traditional Owners.

However, participants also expressed concern that important lessons have not been learnt around the long-term negative impacts that development activities and mine remediation has had on the land, biodiversity and waterways of the Latrobe Valley.

Participants highlighted a range of structural and practical challenges that continue to impact the effective remediation, rehabilitation and repurposing of mine sites and power stations. In particular, participants raised concerns regarding land, air and water contamination and made recurring references to the presence of heavy metals in the soil. Natural water cycles, local irrigation needs, and water access rights were also identified as important considerations needing attention.

*The reality is we're a sacrifice zone – the land, the air, the water, our health.*

COMMUNITY SUPPORT MANAGER



View over the town of Morwell towards the Hazelwood mine site. Image supplied by Friends of Latrobe Water.



Participants would like to see more equitable and values-driven approach to water management across the region and identified that a good first step towards proactively and constructively addressing contamination concerns would be for generators to acknowledge that there is contamination.

Some suggested prioritising water access and licenses to activities that are net positive contributors to the environment, and to embed other social and cultural outcomes within industry practice and government legislation.

***Water currently goes to industry as a permanent entitlement, in-perpetuity. They have more rights to the water than the river itself.***

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

The urgency of climate change was a concern shared by all participants, with many connecting the changing climate to problems with the systems and attitudes that underpin society. Some participants questioned the economic models they see perpetuating the environmental problems.

***The Government only values the environment for its economic value – will the mindset ever change?***

COMMUNITY LEADER

While nearly all participants expressed a sense of despair when describing the local environmental challenges, they used words like regeneration, repurposing, protecting, enhancing and healing to describe their hopes for the future of local land, waterways, air quality and biodiversity. Throughout the consultations, people expressed a desire for stronger environmental protections, sustainable and creative solutions to mine and site rehabilitation and repurposing, and greater support for self-determined Traditional Owner leadership.

Opportunities identified to improve environmental protection, remediation and rehabilitation activities can be categorised in two areas:

1. Support community engagement in environmental management; and
2. Improve coordination of the regulatory system.

## Improving community engagement in environmental management

Throughout the consultation, participants shared that they are keen to elevate and expand the conversation around mine remediation, rehabilitation and repurposing. They want to be actively involved in the decisions and actions that shape the future of the region's natural assets and would like to see the development of a shared vision of a regenerative future for the region's land, air and waterways.



*allourn Power Station and Latrobe River*

To date, participants felt that there has been limited space for broader community members to collaborate with each other and have an open and safe dialogue with relevant organisations and government bodies on regional remediation and rehabilitation activities.

Participants would like to see more opportunities for community-led problem solving for remediation and rehabilitation activities and would like all stakeholders to develop solutions with a long-term view. The positive role that Traditional Owners could play in improving the health of land and local water systems was repeatedly raised in this context.

It was also noted that there is a lot of misinformation circulating within the community regarding the environmental impacts of the mines and power stations, and the actions being taken to protect, remediate and rehabilitate the environment. Effective and diverse strategies for communicating with members of the community were identified as an ongoing need, and participants shared many ideas of what these strategies could look like.

Participants identified the following actions to encourage greater community engagement:

- Provide dedicated funding for community-led rehabilitation, revegetation and restoration initiatives and partnerships.



- Encourage the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority (MLRA) to reactivate engagement with the broader community. This would include support for the community to learn about the issues and considerations and the pros and cons of different options; participate in planning efforts; and create space for ideas and proposals to be tabled by different groups so they can be formally responded to.
- Provide additional funding and resources for self-determined leadership of Traditional Owners across all aspects of planning and management of environmental protection, and remediation and rehabilitation efforts.
- Facilitate greater opportunities for Traditional Owners to determine how they want to be involved in water management across the region.
- Activate and make visible research on the options for environmentally sustainable ash dam remediation and activate and elevate conversations (including the advantages and disadvantages of options) across the community and with government and other decision-making bodies.
- Work with the education and environment departments to integrate educational activities across the curriculum on water management, and visit relevant sites around the Latrobe Valley to conduct 'hands-on' learning.

## Improving coordination of the regulatory system

Participants agreed that the fragmented planning and environmental regulatory system that is currently in place has a negative impact on the overall capacity of industry, government and the community to achieve positive environmental outcomes. One of the challenges is that different components are overseen by different actors, including the Environmental Protection Agency, Earth Resources, State Government departments, Federal Government departments and Latrobe City Council.

In particular, community members reported that there is a lack of coordination and connected planning between stakeholders responsible for mine remediation, those involved with the development of new infrastructure projects in the region and government bodies. This is believed to have resulted in a significant lack of consideration for the interconnected nature of the local environment and minimal assessment of the cumulative environmental impacts that changes to industry has, and would have, across the region.

Participants suggested that government plans and policies have potentially contributed to the current scale and extent of the remediation challenges, and that the regulatory system is ill-equipped to manage the scale and pace of change.



***We have REZ zones which are just lines on a map.  
There needs to be coordination and planning.***

COMMUNITY LEADER



Some community representatives expressed disappointment at a perceived inadequacy of environmental legislation, legal requirements and ongoing enforcement in delivering good outcomes for the Latrobe Valley's natural assets and cited water management as an area in need of significantly higher levels of resourcing and attention from government and industry.

***The Morwell River is no better than a drain.***

GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER

***Current EPA guidelines state that new developments can pollute up to current background levels, which means they don't need to be better than the current polluters. So when will the air, land, water ever become clean?***

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Participants want to prevent past environmental mistakes from happening again through strengthening the systems and structures that are responsible and accountable for protecting the environment. They would also like to see stronger legislation for environmental protection and higher requirements for industry to operate and manage environmental protection measures in a way that reflects community and Traditional Owner values and expectations.

Examples of specific actions included:

- Allocate more funding for Parks Victoria to manage the Parks and Reserves as well as any legacy sites they may become responsible for.
- Legislate stronger environmental protections and requirements and expand the power of the Environment Protection Authority and other relevant agencies. This includes prioritising sustained, transparent and adequately resourced enforcement processes.
- Establish a regulatory policy through which the cumulative impacts of activity are considered, monitored and regulated.
- Expand efforts and programs focused on the creation of new jobs to include land care, management and restoration opportunities – for example rangers and Indigenous guides, wildlife rescue, vets, vegetation and wetland monitors, earthworks and stabilisation roles.

## THEME 5:

# First Nations leadership



The Traditional Owners who participated in this project<sup>1</sup> reflected that First Nations people were increasingly leading and engaging in the region's energy transition in recent years. Progress was attributed to strategic advocacy activities, cultural obligation, generations of fighting for justice and rights, experienced negotiation skills of First Nations people, and an evolving mainstream culture.

All participants noted that a greater number of Traditional Owners are working on and managing Country than there had been in the past. However, First Nations participants emphasised that involvement in land and water related conversations and management is often restricted to issues related to narrowly defined notions of cultural heritage. This limits the opportunity for embedding cultural values or Indigenous knowledge in transition planning and activities.

The application of Native Title Law and land access agreements also continues to limit opportunities for meaningful engagement, appropriate land management practices and benefit sharing from carbon trading and other activities. This is particularly challenging given that Native Title negotiations are still underway in some parts of the region.

Traditional Owner group representatives offered some examples where governments and companies have demonstrated an active and meaningful improvement in their approaches, including the efforts of the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority, Star of the South Wind developer and the regular meetings and direct political access GLaWAC receives via the Statewide Caring for Country Partnership Forum .

Both Traditional Owner and non-Indigenous participants agreed however that there is still a long way to go to appropriately engage and work with Traditional Owners and First Nations organisations to achieve a good transition. Traditional Owners felt that there is a "continued racism" in the Latrobe Valley and that they and their peers are often not treated with respect.

In addition, participants noted that the approaches to engagement that are often deployed by government and industry are not culturally appropriate forums to facilitate meaningful participation. This lack of cultural competency and systemic racism limits cross-cultural relationships forming and restricts the capacity of Traditional Owners to contribute important views and influence decision-making processes. It also acts as a barrier to understanding the opportunities the energy industry and other sectors could provide to First Nations peoples.

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<sup>1</sup> Four Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners plus a Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) representative participated in this project. The points were reflections offered by them. Where non-Indigenous perspectives are shared, they are identified as such.





Lower Latrobe Wetlands. Image by Josef Sestokas.

Traditional Owner participants noted that the complex relationships that exist within the Traditional Owner community are also a challenge to effective participation, with not everyone wanting to be connected or involved with issues via GLaWAC, preferring to engage through other organisations or not at all.

***GLaWAC is a corporate structure. It is made to be by Native Title Law.  
This is a process that excludes some First Nations people.  
If you are not in with the corporates you don't know what is going on.***

GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER



Participants shared an aspiration to see more efforts being made to build greater respect, self-determination, capacity, and collaborative partnerships with Traditional Owners. They also identified a desire to increase the role of First Nations cultural values in decision-making processes.

Moving forward work can be done to:

1. Improve organisational engagement practices and adequately resource First Nations' organisations to be able to participate; and
2. Ensure Traditional Owners have decision-making power.



## Improving organisational engagement practices and resourcing First Nations organisations adequately

Increasing Traditional Owner leadership and capacity to engage in transition activities was a key theme of participant conversations. Many non-Indigenous people also noted the need to improve engagement approaches with First Nations peoples, particularly during the community workshop.

Traditional Owner participants called for all institutions and organisations to take more time to listen and learn from First Nations people about their culture, practices and perspectives, particularly with regards to what good collaboration and engagement looks like.



***We want to make proponents engage properly.***

GLAWAC REPRESENTATIVE

Many participants expressed that there is an opportunity and imperative to secure, extend and expand the funding to support Traditional Owner involvement in the energy transition. This will ensure Traditional Owners are resourced appropriately to be in a position to lead and participate in planning and decision-making processes.

Over the past years, GLaWAC has continued to grow in terms of the number of programs and scale of activities it is involved in. This year, GLaWAC has received government funding for eight full-time equivalent staff to respond to the vast amount of heritage, community consultation and engagement work related to new energy projects in the region. Despite this, both Traditional Owners and non-Indigenous participants noted the ongoing challenge of having sufficient Traditional Owner capacity available to attend the many meetings associated with mine remediation and new renewable energy projects across Gippsland.

***There are so many renewables proponents in the region, not much locked in. Lots of resources are needed to follow up and liaise with all of these.... 25% of my time is spent on energy related issues.***



GLAWAC REPRESENTATIVE

In addition to resourcing challenge, participants also suggested that more needs to be done to improve cultural competency across the community. Specific suggestions included:

- Encourage everyone to get to know more First Nations people and be open to learning 'another way'.
- Support First Nations People to develop/ expand Native Title law education programs in school and community.



## Ensuring decision-making power for Traditional Owners

Traditional Owner participants shared that for success into the future, it is a priority to increase their respect and power in decision-making and their roles in land management. Supporting community-led initiatives that foster greater respect, self-determination, land access, equal partnerships and funded roles for First Nations people are some of the ways in which Traditional Owner and non-indigenous participants believed that this could be achieved over time.



***We are not stakeholders, we want to partner.***

GLAWAC REPRESENTATIVE

Examples of specific actions suggested by participants included:

- Require a commitment to social outcomes and social procurement policies as part of legislated development application processes (without being prescriptive around specific benefits). This could be one early entry point for Traditional Owner engagement in benefit sharing conversations and activities.
- Resolve land access issues so Traditional Owners can engage in and benefit from good land management and carbon trading markets.
- Modify the terms of reference for the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority and others to include cultural values around country, and 'future thinking'.



Morwell National Park. Image by Richie Southerton

## THEME 6:

# New energy development



All participants recognised that changes in the local energy sector and the economy are well underway. Key markers of this change included coal mine closures, the establishment of the Latrobe Valley Authority, the development of renewable energy projects and the reinstatement of the State Electricity Commission. The vast majority of participants acknowledged that while there are ongoing challenges, considerable progress is being made.

Participants referred to the scale of renewable energy planning applications, as well as the number of approvals, construction and operational projects in the pipeline across Gippsland. They reflected that the visibility of projects under construction or in operation was starting to make the renewable energy transition “more real” and felt events like the New Energy Conference in Sale were building a sense of momentum.

Some participants reported that they were pleased to see several new renewable energy projects demonstrating good community engagement and benefit practices. Multiple participants referred to the Star of the South offshore wind farm as a developer that was demonstrating excellent community practices. Participants noted the difference that better and more appropriate engagement practices made to the community's sense of social license and legitimacy for new projects. The types of ‘good practices’ participants referenced included:

- Being “open and receptive” to community feedback
- Having a community advisory group with an independent chair
- Employing locals
- Working with coal generators to transition people with compatible skills to renewable energy projects
- Putting out an EOI for supply chain requirements
- Having information stalls at every local market
- Releasing a jobs guide for what roles/jobs they think will be needed
- Transparent communication (which one participant referred to as not seeking to “hoodwink people”)

Many participants noted the negative social, economic and psychological impacts that privatisation of the energy sector in the 1990's had on the broader community, with people describing it as having changed the community forever.

***Privatisation gutted the community and people have never really got over it.*** | 

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER



Participants described the experience as traumatic, with many connecting these memories with some people's reluctance to embrace energy changes today. Participants acknowledged this historical legacy will continue to shape people's hesitancy to embrace change but welcomed comments from the government about taking a "more hands-on approach" to energy transmission, generation and planning in the future.

To support new energy development in the region, participants suggested that more work can be done to:

1. Address existing cultural tensions surrounding the regions changing identity; and
2. Address concerns around the economic impact of the energy transition

## Addressing existing cultural tensions surrounding the region's changing identity

Throughout the project, participants celebrated the community's proud history of providing over 100 years of electricity to Victoria and its role in a critical service industry. They did however raise concerns that this contribution went underappreciated, especially in the "push for the new" across the region. Participants also felt that the fossil fuel industry continues to hold significant influence



over local community perceptions and that many in the community see coal as the “region’s best asset”. If not addressed, some participants believed that these factors would undermine advances towards renewable industries.



***The companies use the workers to advocate for coal and to fight their fight for them.***

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER

Some participants emphasised the need to tell a different ‘energy story’. They suggested that it is important to celebrate the Latrobe Valley’s strong history in coal mining and acknowledge the contribution coal workers and their families have made over many years. They also see story telling as an opportunity to highlight the health and environmental impacts coalmining has had, and document major events and changes (including privatisation and rise of renewables) that the community has experienced over time.



***There is a coal-centric mentality.***

COMMUNITY LEADER



***Locals think no-one cares outside Latrobe Valley.***

COMMUNITY MEMBER

Arts and cultural activities were suggested by many participants as a way to support healing, build a new identity, assist with the psychological process of navigating change, and strengthen community understanding.

Examples of specific actions included:

- Developing and funding a series of events, activities and outputs with local creative artists and community members that tell the region’s ‘energy story.’
- Supporting Elders and Traditional Owners to share their culture and history.
- Integrating the art and cultural sector into the change process by converting old energy assets into public cultural assets e.g. converting a power station into a museum or cultural centre for movie screenings, events, education and film locations.

***Use the power station buildings as community public spaces.  
Give them to the people and make it beautiful.***



COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER



## Addressing concerns around economic impact of the energy transition

Many people across the Latrobe Valley continue to equate the energy transition with a loss of jobs and relative economic instability.



***The Gippsland transition is lumpy. Wellington has the renewable energy growth whilst Traralgon is losing jobs [with closures]. Logistics are different for renewable energy. Latrobe Valley don't have offshore wind, and the solar opportunities are fewer.***

RENEWABLES ADVOCATE

Participants indicated that the revitalisation of the SEC could be an opportunity to support the community to move into its next chapter of energy production, and identified several positive outcomes that could be achieved through its establishment including:

- Overarching public control and coordination of the technical, planning and engineering aspects of energy transition.
- Social outcomes similar to the pre-privatisation era – including secure jobs, high quality training, high numbers of skilled apprenticeships, career advancement, employment for the “hard to employ” and people “who joined the Centrelink queue after privatisation and never left.”
- Improved cultural and gender diversity in the energy sector.
- Jobs for locals. One participant suggested introducing “local people quotas.”



***People don't really want to change, they are scared.***

COMMUNITY MEMBER

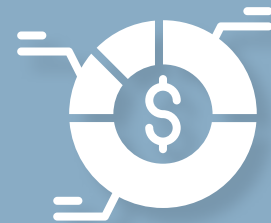


***People are ripe for extreme politicians that foster fears.***

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER

## THEME 7:

# Regional economic development



Economic development, resilience and diversification are a key focus for the Victorian Government, the LVA and regional development organisations and this strategic focus underpins many of the regional strategies and plans. While economic development was not a major theme identified by participants in interviews and the community workshop, some specifically mentioned the importance of prioritising development in the Latrobe Valley area, especially energy intensive manufacturing with environmental sensitivity.

Several participants, especially at the community workshop, questioned the paradigm driving the development of large-scale renewable energy projects and new manufacturing ideas. They perceived the current development model as a continuation of the extractive and corporatised economic models that have dominated past regional development. They associated these models with the social and environmental problems already experienced in the Latrobe Valley.

*Are the new industries simply a repeat of the historical economic models? ... Based on economic inequity, land mismanagement, disrespect of First Nations people... [and the] continued marginalisation of minority groups and poor community outcomes?*

COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Participants willingly shared their own and others' ideas for business development in the Latrobe Valley which might diversify the economy and generate new jobs in the region. A few of the interviewees also highlighted that many small to medium enterprises in the region are proactively decarbonising, diversifying their markets, moving away from dependence on the power stations, and harnessing green economy opportunities.

Examples included:

- A local fire extinguisher manufacturer looking to manufacture hydrants suitable for wind turbines.
- Local cattle farmers investing in decarbonisation strategies to achieve the industry target of net-zero by 2030.





A local banker noted that no business foreclosures were expected despite the fears expressed by many when power station closure announcements were made. However, they also noted that access to affordable and sufficient finance is constraining the speed with which small and medium sized businesses are able to decarbonise and diversify their markets, products and services, and that economic trends suggest that more hardship is on the horizon:

***An economic crunch is coming. People have had a period of good interest rates and three ripper years (in agriculture), and a soft unemployment rate. But agriculture margins are small, construction has been slowing in both residential and commercial areas, big employers are closing, interest rates are rising and we're entering a dry weather cycle.***

LOCAL BANKER

Participants identified a range of ideas to support regional economic development including:

1. Additional support for locally-led initiatives aligned to the community's vision; and
2. Targeted government investment for new industry development.

## Additional support for locally-led initiatives

Participants would like to see increased support, funding and focus on the exploration and development of business ideas identified by members of the Latrobe Valley community.

During the community workshops, multiple participants shared their vision for the growth of a strong creative industry in the Latrobe Valley. They see an opportunity for art and cultural programs to invigorate the regional economy, repurpose old buildings and improve the appeal of the region to both locals and visitors.

***A Latrobe Valley Regional Artists Hub and Impact Fund would strengthen the region's arts and culture community; attract and retain creatives to live and thrive in the region; drive regional economic growth; celebrate community identity; empower young people and marginalised groups; and support First Nations artists and culture.***

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

Participants also identified the importance of supporting the economic development initiatives of First Nations people. Participants raised that First Nations entrepreneurs experience ongoing challenges regarding procurement contracts. These challenges related to accessing new opportunities, bidding competitively and then being able to fulfill contracts when secured.





Specific initiative ideas included:

- Build relationships between investors with a “for purpose” focus and the leaders of new businesses and initiatives in the Latrobe Valley.
- Deliver an initiative to identify and promote new business ideas in the Latrobe Valley. This process could include the identification of new ideas, promoting ideas amongst locals/ entrepreneurs, and facilitating open discussions and planning activities. Financial support and expertise could be provided to develop the ideas that deliver the greatest positive social and environmental outcomes.
- Create simple pathways for local small and medium enterprises to make connections with the education sector (schools/ TAFE/ university) so they can attract local students into their workforce- via work experience, traineeships and employment opportunities.
- Provide enabling resources and support to GLaWAC and other First Nations organisations in the Latrobe Valley to develop their business models.
- Work with Traditional Owner organisations to develop innovative contract/supplier agreements that deliver benefits for all parties.

## Targeted government investment for new industry development

Industry development related to decontamination, remediation, repurposing of sites, and ongoing land management was raised as a specific area for government support. Given significant remediation work is required in the Latrobe Valley, participants felt there was potential for long term growth of this industry. Several participants were keen to encourage the LVA to foster associated business development and job opportunities and to ask them to work closely with the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority on the creation of local economic development opportunities.

Multiple participants also supported the development of an intensive manufacturing strategy for the Latrobe Valley that capitalises on the local energy infrastructure. Participants noted that this is “already on the radar”, however they wanted to see economic development strategies focus on manufacturing opportunities that enable positive social and environmental outcomes and operate according to circular economy principles.

To support SMEs to take advantage of the energy transition, participants suggested government assistance was needed to help local businesses form partnerships to collectively respond to large tenders (like Wellington Shire Council has been doing with their Renewable Energy Planning work). Assistance could include improved access to information on new opportunities, tender response support, briefings by experts, development of local supply chains, and the requirements for local procurement.



Specific government investment ideas included:

- Using the poor socio-economic statistics for the Latrobe Valley (compared with the Gippsland region and wider Victoria) to justify the importance of focusing on economic development specifically in the Latrobe Valley.
- Increasing government investment into initiatives that build the capacity of communities in the Latrobe Valley to develop new economic opportunities.
- Offering flexible financial assistance to Latrobe Valley SMEs to accelerate their decarbonisation efforts and reorient their businesses to support new industries.



*Earthworker Energy: worker-owned business in Latrobe Valley manufacturing solar and heat pump hot water systems. Image credit: Lauren Murphy Photography, Gippslandia*

## THEME 8:

# Workforce development



Workforce development was a major focus of participant discussions. Participants acknowledged that workforce development is receiving a lot of well-deserved attention, particularly from the State government, unions and education institutions. However, participants also expressed a sense of urgency regarding the clarification of future job requirements and the provision of training, re-training initiatives and job experience programs. They also highlighted the importance of inspiring and engaging local youth in future work opportunities and expanding the services and programs that focus on this.

Some participants described the low level of regional economic participation with terms like “hard to reach”, “long term unemployed”, and “generational unemployment”. Two participants connected long-term regional unemployment with the privatisation of the SEC in the 1990s and the associated loss of jobs.

*Thousands of people in Gippsland are completely disconnected from the jobs market. People have just dropped out of the system altogether.*

UNION REPRESENTATIVE



Arfa Khan presenting at the 'What Next? A community perspective on positive energy transition in the Latrobe Valley' government and industry forum, Traralgon



Given the low participation rates and existing local workforce shortages some participants are confused about the amount of effort being put into creating new jobs. Multiple times, particularly at the workshop, participants shared how local small and medium businesses are unable to recruit new employees in areas such as retail and hospitality. A few participants also described business owners struggling with employee retention.



***We're heading for a massive skills shortage.***

RENEWABLES ADVOCATE

Participants attributed the worker shortage to the decades of low numbers of apprenticeships and traineeships. Several people referenced the SEC prior to privatisation, having previously employed hundreds of apprenticeships and trainees across the Latrobe Valley generators, mines and transmission maintenance operations.



***These workers received excellent training and would have a job at the end. After privatisation, the bulk of the trades training has come through small local domestic businesses. They're good, but it's not enough ... Last year there were only 3 apprentices in the company [coal generator] at any one time.***

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER

The unions, GLaWAC and Latrobe Youth Space all described seeing good results from programs related to getting the young and non-participating workforce into work readiness, training and work. Multiple participants referred to the positive contribution that free TAFE courses are making. Additionally, the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council cited the success of groups they had facilitated where peer-to-peer support was offered to workers so they could share experiences, problem solving approaches and mental health strategies.

A Traditional Owner recognised how the school education system has improved and become more adaptive to Aboriginal learning needs, as evidenced by more Aboriginal children staying in school longer.

While efforts are being made to prepare the local workforce, there is a general acceptance that the energy transition in the Latrobe Valley is likely to need workers who migrate from other places, especially in construction. Some participants were concerned about importing skills to meet future workforce demand, expressing dismay that local unemployed Australians might miss out on emerging opportunities.

***But [at the same time] I'm not sure the community can suddenly produce 100 metal workers for example.***



GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER



Some participants questioned whether relying on migration to meet workforce needs is realistic, and wondered whether Gippsland can successfully attract skilled migrants, especially in renewable energy development, when the rest of Australia and the world also needs them.



***[I] don't see it as a solution, as renewables are being built out everywhere around the world.***

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER

The multi-cultural representative who participated in the project did not believe that clear progress had been made to attract, welcome or retain the multi-cultural community in Latrobe Valley. They explained the trend of migrants moving into an area primarily for work where they don't have family, and how if they are unable to make friends or feel part of the community, they leave if the work dries up. They pointed out the difference between recent migration trends and the experience of migrants in the 1970s and 1980s who were more likely to "set down roots, bought houses and built a new life". They also pointed out some of the cultural factors that led to migrants not feeling welcome:



***There is a clear message of 'Muslims are not welcome here' when it's hard to find cultural food basics such as halal meat, and the butcher stops selling it because other customers don't like it.***

MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE

A number of participants also raised issues regarding the culture of the coal power station workforce towards renewable energy and the transition. The workforce was described as anxious about their future employment situation. Some said many workers would like to delay energy transition changes so they can retire at the point of closure.

***Anything that is 'green' or protects the environment is seen as 'feminine'... The men who work there [power stations] are intelligent people and on board and interested in new technology, except renewable energy. Renewable energy is seen as caring for the environment, it attacks their masculinity.***

RETIRED POWER STATION WORKER



Several participants spoke of the important role the unions played in negotiating worker transitions after the Hazelwood Power Station closure. They also noted that the enterprise bargaining and worker re-training obligations at other power stations had been critical to maintaining worker security through the changes.



Participants suggested several ways workforce challenges could be addressed including:

1. Providing certainty on future energy work through improved communication and engagement;
2. Improving training and apprenticeships opportunities; and
3. Creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce in the Latrobe Valley.

## Providing certainty surrounding future energy work

In general, participants don't believe the Latrobe Valley community is aware of the planning that has been done on the future work needs in the Gippsland region. Participants asked questions regarding how this work relates to opportunities for the Latrobe Valley, especially since the majority of the proposed renewable projects are planned for other parts of the region.

The community want to know what the jobs are, what training and experience are required, when the new jobs will be available/required, which jobs will be within a reasonable daily commute from Latrobe Valley, what the pay scale will be, and whether they will be long-, medium- or short-term contracts. Participants noted the impact of this job uncertainty on people's motivation to pursue the new opportunities.



***People are scared – they don't want to travel an hour to work each day.***

COMMUNITY LEADER

***New energy and manufacturing jobs aren't now, some won't be for years.***



COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Participants actively involved in the development of the renewable energy sector described the challenge of inspiring people about future job opportunities. They described how tricky it is to inspire young people and engage the general public in the potential of renewable energy job opportunities when it doesn't yet seem real to many people.



***People need to be able to see things. There are a lot of announcements and nothing happens.***

RENEWABLES ADVOCATE

Participants clearly articulated an ambition to maximise the potential benefits of future job opportunities for local community members. They suggested gathering available reports and research on future workforce opportunities in the Latrobe Valley and sharing this information widely across the community. They noted some research may be required to fill any gaps.



Specifically, participants suggested the development of a 'Future Latrobe Valley Jobs Profile'. This work could be presented in a way that is practical, engaging and easy to understand by the general community.

Several participants requested local job information be promoted and showcased publicly, and that more effort be made to inspire young people to be a part of Latrobe Valley's future.



***It's the people in school now who we need to convince of the opportunities and inspire hope.***

RENEWABLES ADVOCATE

Specific initiative ideas included:

- Support the 'Transform- Gippsland Renewable Energy Jobs Expo' to be held in Latrobe Valley in October 2023.
- Promote awareness of the 'Australian Renewables Academy'.
- Run inspiring future jobs programs in schools that use arts and other media to make it more interesting to young people.

## Improving training and apprenticeship opportunities

Some project participants were aware that TAFE and Federation University have been preparing courses to meet the needs of future industries. Some also recognised the role the Australian Renewables Academy was playing to "connect the dots between training and industry".

However, participants also raised concerns that:

- The community isn't sufficiently aware of the training opportunities that exist.
- Workers need work experience for new jobs in renewable energy, but renewables are largely still in development in Gippsland, so experience is hard to develop locally.
- In-house/on the job training and experiences often aren't accredited.

Participants proposed an expansion of effective intergenerational unemployment and training programs that offer community connection and practical support. The Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, Latrobe Youth Space and GLaWAC were all referenced in this context.

Participants see value in greater collaboration between education and training providers and social support services. They noted that some social support providers have specialised capability to help people stay in education or work roles and they could be better utilised.

Participants also highlighted the opportunity to increase the overall numbers of people completing training and gaining work experience, with a particular focus on young people.





Yallourn Power station employee. Image supplied by Josie Hess

Importance was placed on investing in First Nations people and working with First Nations training and employment providers in innovative ways. GLaWAC offered an example of businesses providing long term procurement contracts with graded requirements so that workforce capacity can be developed in the context of guaranteed work over time.

*We can't do 'fee for service' from week one. We need a long-term commitment and plan over time that allows GLaWAC staff to recruit, train and grow the workforce to meet the needs... We can't produce 100 workers tomorrow- have to work up to it.*

GLAWAC REPRESENTATIVE

Specific initiative ideas included:

- Creating pathways for Year 10/11 First Nations students to move into apprenticeships that lead straight into positions of paid employment.
- Work with current energy generators to build up larger numbers of trainees/apprentices, to provide the base training, transferable skills and experience needed for new future industries.



## Creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce

Participants wanted to see more intentional efforts made to include First Nations, young people, women, multicultural people and people with a disability in the energy generation workforce. Suggestions included introducing organisational and government energy workforce diversity expectations and/or quotas.

Traditional Owner participants in this project identified a need for new training and apprenticeship models that encourage and support First Nations participation. Participants described how structured learning does not work well for many First Nations people and that programs should focus on experience building programs and activities.

Participants identified they would like more work to be undertaken to support migrants to feel welcome and valued members of the community. They suggested initiatives that encourage locals to invite multicultural people to participate in their social circles and community group activities, to attend migrant cultural festivals and learn about other cultures.



***We should conduct a cultural exchange program of sharing between First Nations people and multicultural immigrants.***

GUNAIKURNAI TRADITIONAL OWNER

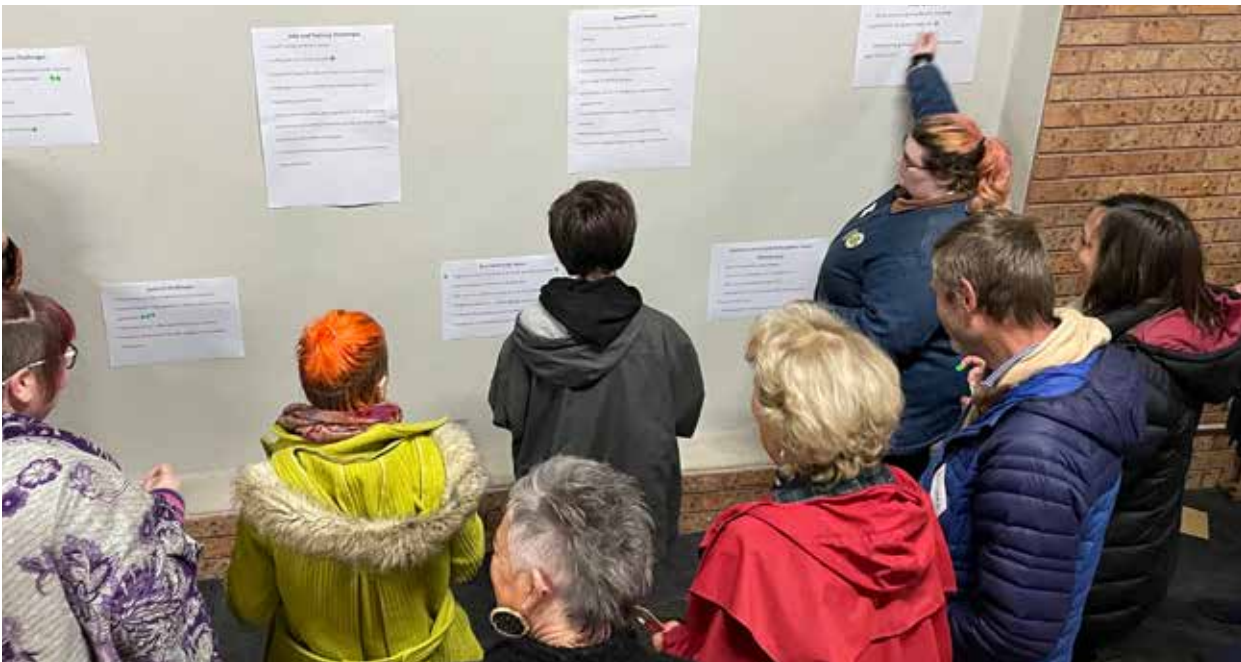
Participants also suggested introducing ways to encourage migrants to “establish roots” in the Latrobe Valley, so they are more likely to stay. One idea was to offer incentives and support for migrants to start local businesses, especially ones that respond to cultural needs.

# Good practice principles



In addition to the insights generated by participants for better management of the energy transition, this project also highlighted a range of principles that can guide future engagement activities to ensure adequate community participation in transition planning and decision-making processes. These include:

- Recognise community as a knowledgeable and influential partner in the energy transition.
- Share progress on the outcomes and impacts of transition plans and activities with the community to improve transparency and accountability, and strengthen community understanding of progress, challenges and decisions.
- Proactively seek out and involve diverse community representatives and organisations at each stage of the process so that different values, experiences and perspectives can inform process design and decision-making.
- Tailor community engagement to the different contexts and needs of community groups to enable the participation of diverse stakeholders, especially those currently under-represented in transition planning and action.
- Provide a facilitated and supported space for community members to identify their aspirations, acknowledge the complex challenges, and determine priorities prior to engagement in broader transition forums, so that they are able to participate with confidence and an informed understanding of the transition context.



*Community members participating in the What next? Community leadership for positive transition Community Workshop, Morwell*



- Build relationships and nurture trust between community organisations, industry and government so that conversations regarding transition processes, decisions and outcomes are deeper, more frequent and lead to increased collaboration.
- Build community capacity to effectively participate in transition work, through a focus on:
  - Strengthening understanding of the energy transition context, options and approaches, decisions and pathways to participation;
  - Strengthening linkages and networks across the community; and
  - Resourcing the participation of community members and organisations (including appropriate remuneration).
- Co-design and embed strategies to deliver community value in the development of transition plans, policies and agreements so that short-, medium- and long-term benefits from developments are generated with and for the local community.
- Recognise the community's historic role in industry development and the value of this contribution (e.g. enabling energy supply for Victoria).
- Measure and track the difference community collaboration has on good transition outcomes.
- Provide feedback to the community regarding the how their contribution affected decisions and outcomes.

These community engagement principles have been identified in the context of the energy transition in the Latrobe Valley, however, they are also applicable to transition planning efforts and energy developments in other parts of Australia.

# Summary



This project brought together community members from across the Latrobe Valley to contribute to the project: What next? Community leadership for a positive transition project. It provides insights into the range of perspectives across the Latrobe Valley community with regards to the energy transition.

Overall, participants reported that progress has been made regarding the energy transition in the Latrobe Valley, with the main finding being that community members see a range of potential benefits from the energy transition beyond the transfer of jobs and decarbonisation. Project participants identified that the energy transition can provide new opportunities to:

1. Directly address socio-economic disadvantage and issues of equity and liveability.
2. Deepen community participation in local and regional development processes, especially through the engagement of young people, First Nations people, multi-cultural and migrant communities, and the “hard to reach”.
3. Improve governance practices within the institutions involved in leading and coordinating the energy transition, especially with regards to transparency and accountability.
4. Increase Traditional Owner respect, leadership, participation and power in decision-making across all aspects of the energy transition.
5. Protect and rehabilitate the environment and increase Traditional Owner management of natural resources.
6. Realise the full value of new energy developments through deeper community awareness, education and participation in planning and project development.
7. Build economic resilience in the region through a stronger focus on locally-led economic development and diversification.
8. Increase local workforce participation in new industries through improved communication and education regarding future workforce opportunities, and increased support for local access to jobs.

This work has demonstrated that a significant opportunity exists to strengthen community participation in planning and development activities associated with the Latrobe Valley energy transition. At all stages of the project, participants were very interested in contributing their perspectives, especially regarding the creation of positive community outcomes for the Latrobe Valley.

This work has demonstrated the wealth of ideas that can be generated by community members when they are given the safe space and encouragement to participate in deep discussions regarding the energy transition. Participants were willing to collaborate and follow through on delivering the high priority ideas, and many expressed interest in sharing their perspectives and ideas with government, industry and the broader community going forward.