REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

SUSTAINABILITY & RESILIENCE

TOWARDS NET ZERO: BUILDING A LEGACY

Intergovernmental Shared Inquiry Program

September 2025

ABOUT THE REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) is the nation's first and only independent think-tank dedicated to empowering Australia's regions. We are a not-for-profit organisation that undertakes research to inform, educate and activate our rural and regional communities.

CITATION & CONTRIBUTIONS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

The RAI acknowledges Traditional Owners throughout Australia and the continuing connections to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all traditional custodians of this land.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The renewable energy transition is a defining moment for Australia's regions.

As our nation moves towards its legislated net zero targets, regional Australia is hosting the large-scale generation, storage and transmission infrastructure required to deliver our renewable energy goals. The transition is progressing quickly, with renewable sources supplying almost 40% of Australia's total electricity in 2024. Some regions have already experienced significant renewable energy development, while others are at the beginning of their transition journeys.

The energy transition presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a legacy in regional Australia, investing in key infrastructure and building thriving, sustainable regional communities for the future.

While regional communities are embracing the opportunities of the energy transition, many communities still share concerns about potential negative impacts from large-scale renewable energy projects in their regions. These include social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts, with major infrastructure projects creating additional strain on limited housing, infrastructure, services and employment markets. In some communities, concern has swelled to opposition, threatening social licence for renewable energy projects.

Securing and maintaining social licence for renewable energy development is essential to the progress of the transition. Community opposition can lead to costs, delays, decline in business investment and ultimately threaten our net zero aspirations.

This report, *Towards Net Zero: Building a Legacy*, examines the factors that contribute to social licence for large-scale renewable energy projects in regional Australia. The report shares examples of leading practice in the regions. It considers the key principles for building long-term benefits from renewable energy development and proposes a national framework for regional planning and investment, the Regional Energy and Legacy Deal (REAL Deal).

The report finds that many communities feel overwhelmed by the scale and speed of renewable energy development in their regions. Approval and regulation processes are complex; community engagement is fragmented; there remains a lack of clear information about the transition; and some communities are experiencing fatigue from the cumulative impacts of consultation. A lack of coordination and empowered community decision-making is impacting social licence. It's vital that regional communities understand that a win-win scenario is available to them.

The report highlights examples of the many regional communities that are taking a leadership role in planning for renewable energy development in their regions. From partnership principles in New South Wales, to collaboration frameworks in Victoria, to community benefits agreements within the planning framework in Queensland, regional communities are proactively building the foundations for long-term benefits in their regions.

The report recommends key actions for governments and industry to build and maintain social licence in regional communities: adopt just transition principles; continue to develop supportive policy and regulation; engage early with regional communities; and implement local planning and decision-making to deliver long-term benefits to the regions.

To support this process, the RAI has proposed a national framework, the REAL Deal, that would bring together government, industry and communities to deliver coordinated regional investment through the transition.

The REAL Deal would deliver a regional approach to benefit sharing, supported by government and industry co-investment, and led by communities through place-based planning and decision-making. This framework builds on innovative work already underway in many regions and offers a model for regional communities as they navigate the road to net zero and build a sustainable future.

KEY FINDINGS

Building national, state & local narratives

Building a strong narrative is important to create social licence for the energy transition and renewable energy development in regional Australia. Consultations heard that a lack of information and a compelling rationale for the transition remains a key issue for regional communities. Recent surveys show that communities have low levels of awareness about the energy transition and the role of different types of infrastructure within the transition. Governments and industry have a key role to play in building compelling narratives to support the energy transition and renewable energy development in regional communities.

Policy & regulation

Clear policy and regulatory frameworks contribute to social licence. State-wide energy roadmaps and designated renewable energy development zones provide a valuable framework for planning and regulating development and provide clear standards for developers to consider community impacts and interests. Leading practice regulatory frameworks are emerging nationwide, notably South Australia's *Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* and New South Wales's comprehensive suite of policies for the delivery of Renewable Energy Zones.

Community engagement

Transparent, accountable and participatory community engagement is essential to build social licence for renewable energy projects. Community engagement needs to recognise and acknowledge local experiences, from First Nations to farmers to coal transition communities. The RAI consultations heard that communities are dissatisfied with the quality of community engagement in their regions. Participants reported that governments and industry have insufficient presence in communities, communities are overwhelmed by the volume of consultation, and misinformation is rife. There is substantial evidence that genuine engagement that meets the needs of communities can mitigate community concern and reduce the time and cost of the transition in the long run.

Just transition

The concept of just transition provides a framework to ensure that the energy transition is structured, fair and equitable, addressing potential social, economic and environmental impacts in the regional communities that are hosting renewable energy infrastructure. Procedural and distributive justice are key factors in building social licence.

Communities leading the way

Many regional communities are taking a leadership role in planning for renewable energy development in their regions. The report highlights leading practice examples of regional communities developing strategic plans, creating partnership principles, identifying and prioritising local needs and proactively building the foundations for long-term benefits in their regions. The report finds that communities need resources and support to prepare effectively for renewable energy development in their regions. Community education and capacity building, along with funding for local strategic planning, are important to optimise benefits for communities.

Delivering lasting benefits

Communities want to be involved in decision-making about funding and benefits in their communities. Potential benefits include business development, jobs and skills training, upgrades to physical and social infrastructure, and community investment. These outcomes can only be realised through regional coordination and planning. Pooling developer contributions into regional benefits funds is a key opportunity of the energy transition.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Implement regional investment programs to build a long-term legacy from renewable energy development: the RAI's REAL Deal.

The renewable energy transition is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver long-term investment in regional communities. Governments, industry and communities should consider regional investment programs that deliver long-term benefits to the regions. The Australian Government should develop a national framework for regional legacy-building with reference to the RAI's proposed *Regional Energy and Legacy Deal* (REAL Deal).

Recommendation 2: Government transition management plans should incorporate international frameworks for just transition.

Australia's transition to a renewables-based energy will have a significant impact in many regional areas. Australia should continue to draw on international just transition models to inform transition management and planning. This will help to ensure that the energy transition is structured, fair and equitable, addressing potential social and economic impacts on communities hosting large-scale renewable infrastructure.

Recommendation 3: State and federal governments should resource regional communities to participate as partners in the energy transition.

State and federal governments must resource regional communities to participate as equal partners in the transition. Governments should fund delivery of education and capacity-building programs for landholders, councils, community members and government agencies in regions facing significant renewable energy development. Communities need to be resourced to undertake cyclical strategic planning to identify local needs, priorities and principles for partnership.

Recommendation 4: Timely, inclusive and appropriate community engagement should be mandated through policy, regulation and funding schemes.

Governments and coordinating agencies should ensure that requirements for timely, inclusive and appropriate community engagement are mandated in policy, guidelines and funding schemes.

Recommendation 5: State and federal governments should continue to strengthen policy and regulatory structures for renewable energy development.

Confidence in regulatory frameworks is a key contributor to social licence. State and federal governments should continue to strengthen policy that concentrates renewable energy development in suitable geographic locations and standardise processes for planning and implementation.

Recommendation 6: Build a cohesive narrative for the transition through public information at national, state and local levels.

Governments have a key leadership role to play in building a cohesive public narrative that promotes the rationale for the renewable energy transition. Consistent and coherent national, state and local public information campaigns are needed to communicate the practical, economic and environmental reasons for the energy transition and for renewable energy development in regional communities. Information materials should provide transparent and accessible information about benefits and impacts to specific regions.

INTRODUCTION

Regional Australia is at the heart of our nation's transition to a net zero economy.

As Australia moves towards its legislated emissions reduction targets, most renewable energy infrastructure projects will be based in regional areas.

The transition will deliver unprecedented investment in renewable energy generation, storage and transmission infrastructure in regional economies, creating jobs and employment pathways, growing local businesses and supporting regional development.

Regional communities are embracing the opportunities of the energy transition. However, the route to harnessing opportunities is not always clear, and many communities have concerns about potential negative impacts from large-scale renewable energy projects. These include social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts, with major infrastructure projects creating additional strain on limited housing, infrastructure, services and employment markets. In some communities, concern has swelled to opposition, threatening social licence for the transition.

Securing social licence for renewable energy development in Australia's regions is essential to deliver lasting benefits for regional communities from the transition.

This research report, the fourth in the RAI's *Towards Net Zero* series, examines the key factors that contribute to social licence for large-scale renewable energy infrastructure projects in regional Australia. It asks: what actions are required by governments and industry to foster social licence for renewable energy projects and build a positive long-term legacy for Australia's regions from the energy transition? The research examines key principles and leading practice examples for building social licence and benefit sharing. A detailed methodology is at Appendix 1.

The report finds that applying the key concepts of procedural, distributive and recognition justice is essential to build social licence for the renewable energy transition in regional Australia. These concepts are articulated using the conceptual framework of a just transition. The report shows how these concepts link to the CSIRO's validated model for understanding social licence for energy technologies and may support the realisation of lasting benefits for the regions.

The report identifies key actions for governments and industry to build positive social, economic and environmental outcomes for regional communities from the renewable energy transition and highlights leading practice examples of policy and programs across the nation.

The first chapter outlines the context of the research and the conceptual framework of a just transition. It provides an overview of the proposed pipeline of renewable energy development in regional Australia and the evolving policy framework supporting the energy transition.

Chapter Two examines community sentiment towards the transition and relevant considerations for key cohorts including First Nations communities, farmers, coal transition regions and residents in regions with significant renewable energy development.

The second section of the report presents strategies and recommendations to build social licence for large-scale renewables projects. Chapter Three outlines the important role of national and local narratives. Chapter Four explores the role of policy and regulation to create clear standards for developers and communities, with a focus on renewable energy generation zones and hubs. Chapter Five focuses on the importance of community planning and building local capacity for participation, and Chapter Six explores the importance of community engagement as the foundation of procedural justice.

The final section focuses on the opportunity to build a long-term legacy in the regions. Chapter Seven and Eight explore potential strategies to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits to regional communities through benefit sharing strategies. Chapter Nine presents a proposal for a national framework for regional investment and legacy-building, the RAI's REAL Deal.

Together, the findings highlight the importance of building a cohesive narrative, proactive planning and engagement, delivering equitable benefits and coordinating regional investment to ensure the energy transition has a lasting positive impact for regional communities.

1.0 ENERGY TRANSITION & THE OPPORTUNITY FOR REGIONS

1.1 A new energy system

In September 2022, the Australian Government legislated its commitment to reduce greenhouse gases by 43% from 2005 levels by 2030 and achieve net zero emissions by 2050. To achieve this, the Australian Government has set a target of 82% renewable electricity nationally by 2030. All state and territory governments have defined targets to drive and measure progress towards net zero.

The pathway to net zero requires a major transition in electricity generation in Australia. As coal-fired power stations close, the Australian Energy Market Operator's (AEMO) *Integrated System Plan* (Integrated System Plan) has identified that renewable electricity is the lowest cost pathway for Australia to meet its future energy needs and deliver reliable and affordable power. The Integrated System Plan projects the need for a threefold increase in renewable solar and wind energy capacity by 2030 and a sixfold increase by 2050 (AEMO 2024a).

This transition is already well underway, with renewables supplying almost 40% of Australia's total electricity in 2024 (Clean Energy Council 2024). Regional Australia is anchoring the transition, hosting the major renewable energy infrastructure and grid upgrades required to generate and distribute these new sources of power.

1.2 National policy framework

The national policy framework for the renewable energy transition includes legislation in each jurisdiction supported by key policy documents that outline the roadmap to a renewables-based energy system. An overview of legislation and key policy documents by jurisdiction is at Appendix 3. The *National Energy Transformation Partnership* provides a framework for Commonwealth, state and territory governments to collaborate on energy reforms to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The partnership outlines priority work including the *Capacity Investment Scheme*, *Rewiring the Nation* and the *First Nations Clean Energy Strategy*. *Renewable Energy Transformation Agreements* outline each state and territory through bilateral agreements (DCCEEW 2022). Work is also delivered through the *Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council* on priority issues of national significance and key reforms in the energy and climate change sectors.

Policy documents in each state outline planning and regulatory pathways, jobs and procurement plans, and engagement and benefits requirements. These documents are in different stages of development in each jurisdiction, reflecting the emerging policy structure. An overview of relevant legislation and key policy documents is at Appendix 2. A more detailed discussion of policy progress in key areas is provided at relevant sections of the report.

1.3 Renewable energy transformation

The Australian Energy Market Operator's (AEMO) biennial Integrated System Plans outline the optimal path to net zero in the National Electricity Market (NEM) jurisdictions - New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Australian Capital Territory.

Under AEMO's step change scenario, total generation capacity in the NEM will increase from just over 92.5 gigawatts (GW) in 2024 to more than 294.0 GW by 2050 – a 218% increase. Utility solar generation capacity will increase from 9.5 GW to 58.3 GW. Onshore wind generation capacity will increase from 12.9 GW to 59.5 GW (2024). Increases in wind and solar generation are also planned in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Across the nation, renewable energy generation, transmission and storage infrastructure will be concentrated in suitable geographic regions to maximise economies of scale. These areas, referred to as Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) in National Energy Market states and renewable energy hubs in Western Australia, are emerging as a key mechanism for delivering Australia's renewable energy transition. A detailed discussion of proposed renewable energy zones and hubs is at Section 4.2.

The implementation of renewable energy infrastructure requires the development of new transmission lines to connect renewable energy to the grid. The renewable energy system will use existing transmission lines where possible and build new transmission lines where needed. AEMO estimates that approximately 10,000 kilometres of new transmission lines are required to transition the NEM to net zero by 2050 (2024). The optimal pathway requires the building of 5,000 kilometres of transmission lines by 2030, equivalent to 10% of the existing grid network. This will unlock more than 32 GW of clean energy capacity (DCCEEW 2022).

1.4 The opportunity for regional Australia

1.4.1 The investment pipeline

The pipeline of investment in electricity supply projects across regional Australia carries with it significant economic and employment opportunities. Major investments are currently underway or being considered in solar, wind and hydro energy generation, battery storage and transmission. A relatively small amount of investment is underway or planned in gas and coal generation to supplement renewables or to sustain existing facilities.

Nationally, there are an estimated **54 major electricity transmission, generation and distribution projects** committed or under construction (DAE 2025). These projects have a combined investment value of approximately **$62.3 billion**. A further **161 projects** with an estimated value of **$224.5 billion** are under consideration or have been announced (DAE 2025). Queensland and New South Wales have the largest investment pipelines of electricity supply projects (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1: Electricity supply projects in Australia ($bn)

Source: Deloitte Access Economics (March 2025)

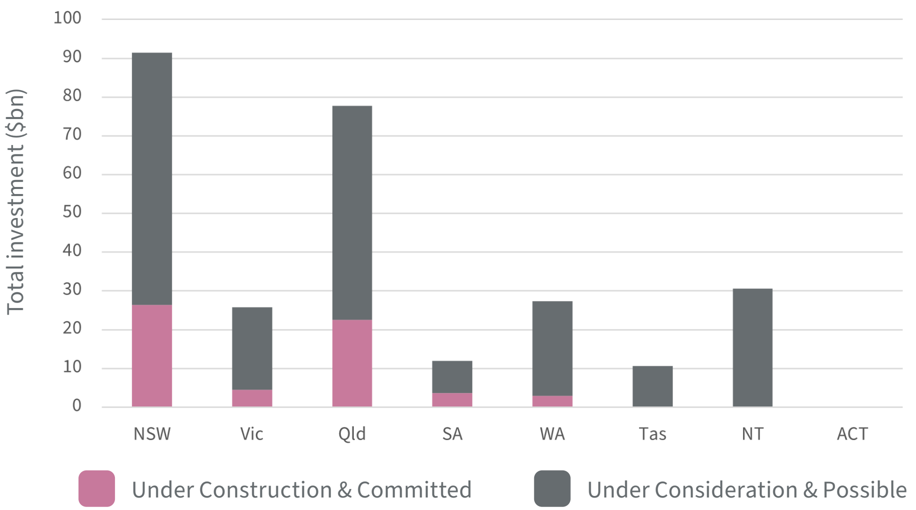
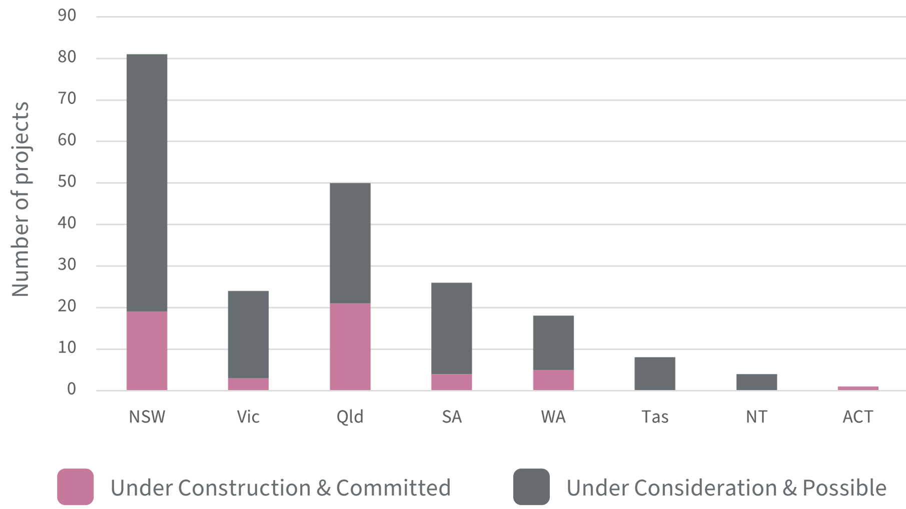


Figure 2: Electricity supply projects in Australia (number of projects)

Source: Deloitte Access Economics (March 2025)



With effective planning, these projects will create opportunities for economic and social development in the regions where they are located, during their construction phase and long into the future. Economic benefits will flow from employment and skills development opportunities, participation in supply chains, spending on local goods and services, and community investments. Social and liveability benefits in regions can also flow from the provision of housing, infrastructure and improved local services.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the transition to a renewable energy system also brings challenges to regional communities, straining limited infrastructure, services and employment markets, and changing landscapes. Transitioning from fossil-fuel powered generation to renewables involves a spatial, cultural and social transition as well as a technological transition.

1.4.2 Regional impacts

The renewable energy transition will create a broad range of economic, social and environmental impacts in regional Australian communities.

Projected economic benefits from large-scale renewable energy development include regional economic growth, local jobs and skills development, and local industry participation through procurement in local supply chains - spending on local goods and services. Economic modelling conducted by the RAI in 2024 estimates that utility-scale solar and onshore wind investments planned to be built within the National Electricity Market to 2030 could contribute **$25.2 billion** to gross domestic product. Total national economic output, including all flow-on supply chain and consumption effects are estimated at **$68.54 billion**, and up to **19,638 peak jobs** during the construction phase (RAI 2024c). These estimates were generated by the regional economic modelling software REMPLAN using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) datasets.

Potential social benefits include the provision of housing, infrastructure and improved services associated with renewable energy projects. Social benefits may include increased community capacity for civic engagement, building social cohesion and equity, and improved outcomes for individuals, groups and communities. A large construction workforce has the potential to place pressure on local infrastructure and services, particularly housing and community workers. The RAI modelling estimates the renewable energy construction projects could create additional demand for up to **597 additional services workers** – particularly nurses, primary and secondary school teachers and general practitioners – and up to **7,131 additional dwellings**, depending on the usage of a non-local workforce (RAI 2024c).

Environmental benefits may include reduced emissions mitigating the longer-term impacts of climate change, as well as improvements to air quality in regions which currently host fossil fuel powered generation plants. The environmental costs of these projects may include environmental disruption during the construction phase, as well as noise pollution from wind turbines.

Table 1 provides an overview of potential impacts from large-scale renewable energy development in the regions, broadly categorised as positive and negative. However, it is important to note that projects create potential costs, risks and benefits across locations and time, and that these impacts are experienced differently by different groups at different times (Milne et al. 2024). What one community, group or individual experiences as a positive impact, others may experience as a negative impact.

Table 1: Potential impacts on regional communities from large-scale renewables		
Domain	**Positive Impacts**	**Negative Impacts**
Environmental	• Local environmental initiatives such as biodiversity, revegetation and habitat restoration. This may include expansion of wildlife and habitat corridors, carbon sequestration, waterway health and land care initiatives. • Reduced greenhouse gas emissions compared to fossil fuel electricity generation. • Increased use of sustainable resources, such as wind and solar, compared to finite resources of coal and gas. • Reduced air pollution and improved air quality compared to fossil fuel power generation (Badreddine, et al. 2024).	• Increased land use given the lower energy density of renewables (McBain et al. 2020) • Habitat disruption and negative impacts on local wildlife, including loss of biodiversity and potential biosecurity risks (McBain et al. 2020). • Environmental damage during the construction phase of projects. • Noise pollution from wind turbines for residents in proximity. • Environmental damage during the construction phase of projects. • Noise pollution from wind turbines for residents in proximity.
Economic	• Job creation, particularly during construction phase (Clean Energy Council 2025). • Potential for regional energy independence leading to energy security (RAI 2024a). • Local procurement opportunities for local businesses (RAI 2024a) (Clean Energy Council 2025). • Skills development opportunities, particularly in trades and professional roles (DEWR 2024). • Co-investment opportunities for investors. • Creation of local infrastructure and potential for increased energy supply stability (Clean Energy Council 2025). • Local industry development and capacity building opportunities for businesses involved in the renewables pipeline (Clean Energy Council 2025). • Employment pathways for young people, particularly for trades roles (DEWR 2024).	• Changes to agricultural land use which may have negative impacts on food security (Taylor 2022). • Job losses in fossil fuel generation industries following the closure of generation assets. • Negative impacts to businesses supporting the fossil fuel generation industries. • Competition for skilled staff attracted to renewables projects, particularly skilled tradespersons (RAI 2024a). • Potential for energy supply cost increases due to transmission infrastructure upgrades (ABC News 2024).
Social	• Improvements to local infrastructure, services and housing through legacy. investments and community benefits from projects (RAI 2024a). • Potential for regional renewal and regeneration following availability of local jobs, community amenity and business opportunities (RAI 2024a) (Clean Energy Council 2025). • Potential for community investments through community benefits funds and increased local economic activity (RAI 2024a). • Increased education and awareness of environmental issues, civic engagement and local decision-making.	• Damage to roads and infrastructure and resulting disruption to travel (RAI 2024a). • Risk of poor engagement and communication, including with First Nations peoples. • Reduced visual amenity, particularly from wind farms. • Competition for land use, including recreational land usage (McRobert et al. 2023). • Housing shortages during the construction phase if using a fly-in, fly-out (FIFO)/drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) construction workforce (RAI 2024a) (RAI 2024c). • Community cohesion impacts relating to lack of social licence for projects.

1.5 Framework for a just transition

The concept of a 'just transition' provides a framework to ensure that the renewable energy transition is structured, fair and equitable, addressing potential social, economic and environmental impacts across all sectors.

A just transition is defined by the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) as a set of principles, processes and practices to achieve equitable outcomes during the shift from fossil fuel-dependent economies to low-carbon systems (IPCC 2023). This approach seeks to balance the dual goals of environmental and social justice (Snell 2018, McCauley and Heffron 2018) and aims to address, rather than exacerbate, inequalities between and within communities. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU), along with many other countries and institutions, have developed frameworks and mechanisms to promote a just transition around the world. Key examples include the OECD's *Ensuring a just transition to net-zero emissions*, International Labour Organisation's *Just Transition Guidelines*, European Green Deal and European *Just Transition Mechanism*.

In Australia, the concept of a just transition informs national, state and local transition management plans in Australia's coal-fired power generation centres. This report echoes the call of scholars, peak bodies and advocates to apply this framework explicitly to the renewable energy transition in Australia, with a particular focus on distributive, procedural and recognition justice.

Distributive justice

Distributive justice refers to the equitable allocation of resources, opportunities, benefits and burdens across individuals or groups in society.

In the context of Australia's renewable energy transition, distributive justice aims to ensure that the economic, social and environmental impacts and benefits of the energy transition are shared fairly among all communities. This includes acknowledging the impacts of hosting large-scale renewable energy projects on regional communities and ensuring that these communities receive compensation and a fair share of the benefits that result from the transition. It also includes measures to support communities that have historically hosted fossil fuel-based industries to upskill and retrain workers, develop new industries and transition their economies. Energy justice is also an important part of distributive justice. Regional and remote residents experience higher electricity costs and poorer reliability than those in urban areas (ACCC 2018). This inequity is particularly evident in remote Indigenous communities. The renewable energy transition must seek to deliver improved energy access, reliability and affordability in regional areas.

Procedural justice

Procedural justice refers to the fundamental principle that decision-makers must follow fair and proper procedures when making decisions that may affect an individual's rights, interests or legitimate expectations. In the context of social, legal and environmental issues, it ensures that all individuals and groups are given an equal opportunity to participate in decision-making, provided with relevant information and resources to participate, that their voices are heard and that decisions are transparent. Procedural justice is crucial to ensure that regional landholders, communities and individuals, particularly those with barriers to participation, perceive that the process of the transition is just.

Recognition justice

Recognition justice is about acknowledging and respecting the distinct and diverse identities, histories and lived experience of communities, individuals and groups.

For example, First Nations peoples are the Traditional Owners of the land on which renewable energy projects will be developed. Recognition justice means acknowledging the rights of First Nations peoples, their current and historical experiences and unique relationship to Country. This recognition should inform the processes, practices and objectives of transition activities.

Similarly, recognition justice means acknowledging and respecting the distinct identities, values and experiences of regional Australian communities, whether these are agricultural, manufacturing, mining or coal communities. It also requires understanding and recognising the needs of different groups within communities, particularly those that are under-represented or at risk of poorer outcomes.

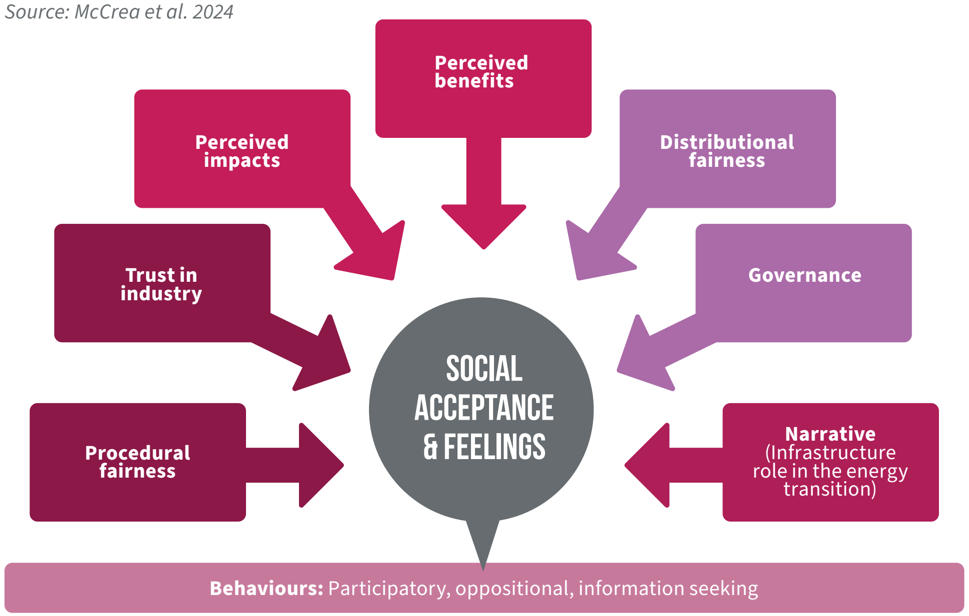
1.6 Social licence

Social licence is a key concept in this report. It is defined as the ongoing acceptance of an organisation, project or activity by stakeholders that will be affected.

The CSIRO has developed a statistical model (Figure 3) that identifies the factors contributing to social licence for energy technologies (McCrea et al. 2024). The factors are widely corroborated in literature (Terrey 2024) and include perceived impacts and benefits, distributional fairness (related to distributive justice), procedural fairness (related to procedural justice), governance of the industry and narrative.

Figure 3: CSIRO model of social licence factors and behavioural intentions

Source: McCrea et al. 2024

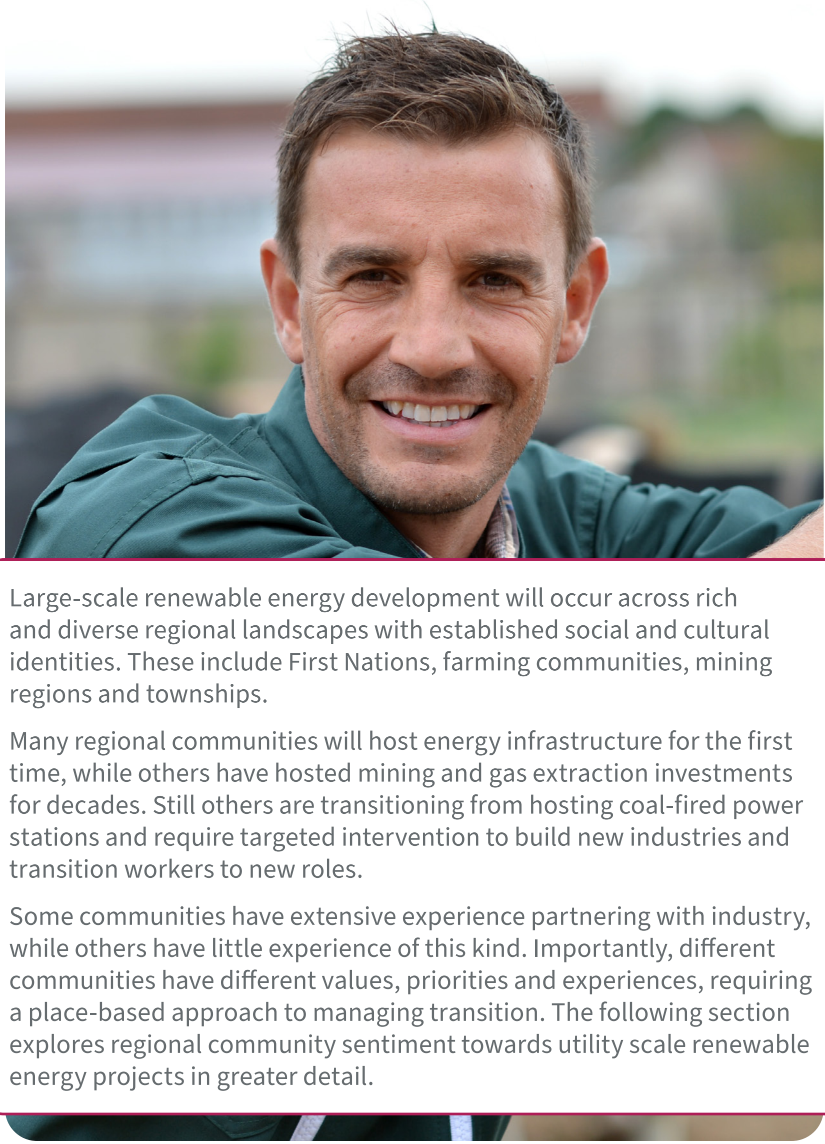


The following sections of the report examine the different factors influencing social licence in the context of large-scale renewables development in regional Australia, to provide insight into the current situation in communities and recommend key actions.

Recommendation: Government transition management plans should incorporate international frameworks for just transition.

Australian governments should continue to draw explicitly on international just transition models to inform transition management and planning. This will help to ensure that the energy transition is structured, fair and equitable, addressing potential social and economic impacts on communities hosting large-scale renewable infrastructure.

2.0 UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY SENTIMENT



Large-scale renewable energy development will occur across rich and diverse regional landscapes with established social and cultural identities. These include First Nations, farming communities, mining regions and townships.

Many regional communities will host energy infrastructure for the first time, while others have hosted mining and gas extraction investments for decades. Still others are transitioning from hosting coal-fired power stations and require targeted intervention to build new industries and transition workers to new roles.

Some communities have extensive experience partnering with industry, while others have little experience of this kind. Importantly, different communities have different values, priorities and experiences, requiring a place-based approach to managing transition. The following section explores regional community sentiment towards utility scale renewable energy projects in greater detail.

2.1 Community sentiment in regional Australia

Community sentiment surveys suggest that a majority of Australians support the renewable energy transition. However, the level and type of support differs based on factors such as proximity to projects, type of renewable energy infrastructure and level of community engagement (Poruschi et al. 2024, Ipsos 2024, KPMG 2025).

In 2023-24, surveys generally found at least 60% support the transition overall. For example, the results of CSIRO's nationally representative survey, *Understanding Australian attitudes to the renewable energy transition and renewable energy developments* (CSIRO Attitudes to Renewables Survey), found that 87% of respondents supported a moderate or high level of change towards an energy system that relies more on renewables (Poruschi et al. 2024). Similarly, *Ipsos Climate Change Report* (2024) found that 59% of respondents supported Australia's transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy generation, while KPMG's *Human Side of the Transition* report found that 63% of Australians supported the energy transition (2025).

Despite a recent focus on regional communities' opposition to renewables in mainstream and social media, levels of support for large-scale renewable energy are similar for urban and regional Australians.

Research commissioned by Renewable Energy Alliance (RE-Alliance) found that 61% of people living in regional Australia supported the development of large-scale renewable energy infrastructure in the regions (REA 2025a). Similarly, a 2024 survey, *Winds of Change: Regional Australians Real Views on Renewables*, found that 67% of urban respondents and 66% of regional respondents supported renewable energy projects in regional Australia, challenging the perception that regional communities are opposed to renewable energy development (Porter Novelli 2024). Interestingly, both urban and regional participants in the Porter Novelli survey underestimated the level of regional support for renewables. Estimated support was 49% while actual support was 66%. The report's analysis attributes this perception to a public narrative of regional resistance that has developed in mainstream and social media (Porter Novelli 2024).

The 2024 *Ipsos Climate Change Report* found that of the 59% of Australians who supported the energy transition, support was strongest in inner regional areas (66%), followed by capital cities (60%). Support was lower in outer regional areas (45%). This aligns with findings from the CSIRO Attitudes to Renewables Survey that levels of support for renewables were generally consistent between capital cities, regional cities and towns. However, people living outside towns held more negative attitudes (Poruschi et al. 2024).

Despite broad general support for the energy transition, large-scale renewable energy developments frequently generate local conflict and opposition in host regions, with different levels of social acceptance for different types of energy infrastructure.

2.2 Community sentiment across infrastructure types

2.2.1 Solar farms

CSIRO's Attitudes to Renewables Survey found that solar farms had the highest level of social acceptance of the renewable energy infrastructure examined, with 88% of respondents stating that they would either tolerate, be OK with, approve, or embrace living near a solar farm (McCrea et al. 2024). SEC Newgate's Mood of the Nation survey found that support for solar farms was sitting at 75% in April 2024. CSIRO found that despite Australians' considerable uptake of domestic solar panels there were still relatively low levels of reported knowledge about solar farms. Respondents reported concerns about potential environmental impacts including waste created from end-of-life panels (McCrea et al. 2024).

2.2.2 Windfarms

CSIRO's Attitudes to Renewables Survey found that onshore and offshore windfarms enjoyed high levels of social acceptance with 82% and 84% of respondents respectively indicating that they would either tolerate, be OK with, approve, or embrace a willingness to live near a windfarm (McCrea et al. 2024).

Despite positive attitudes toward windfarms in principle, some wind projects have faced significant community opposition, particularly in New South Wales and Victoria (Richardson and Healy 2024). The highest concerns about windfarm developments related to possible changes to the natural environment, waste generated at the end of life of the windfarm and potential devaluing of nearby properties (McCrea et al. 2024). Australia currently has no fully operational offshore wind farms. The *National Regulatory Framework* for offshore wind came into effect in 2022, and the Gippsland region in Victoria has been declared Australia's first offshore wind zone.

A nationally representative University of Western Australia survey into social licence for offshore wind projects, found that 69% of people are supportive of the offshore wind industry developing in Australia (UWA 2024). The results highlight positive perceptions of the potential of offshore wind to provide reliable electricity and contribute to economic growth. However, the report also highlighted community concerns in relation to potential impacts on the marine environment, coastal property values and visual amenity (UWA 2024).

2.2.3 Nuclear

A 2024 Lowy Institute poll found that 61% of respondents ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ support Australia using nuclear power to generate electricity, alongside other sources of energy (Lowy Institute 2024). This figure represents a significant shift in attitudes compared to the 2011 results in which 62% of respondents opposed nuclear power development.

However, recent surveys suggest that only one in three Australians would be willing to live near a nuclear power station. Polling released by the Renewable Energy Alliance in December 2024 found that only 5% of people living in Renewable Energy Zones would embrace living near nuclear power stations, and more than 50% of respondents in regions where nuclear plants were proposed by the Federal Opposition in 2024 said they would reject living near a nuclear power station (REA 2024). SEC Newgate’s *Mood of the Bush* report found that just 30% of regional Australians felt comfortable having a nuclear power station within 50 kilometres of where they lived (McCormack 2024).

2.2.4 Pumped hydroelectricity

The renewable energy transition requires large-scale adoption of both short and long duration energy storage. Pumped hydroelectricity, which involves pumping water uphill during times of low electricity demand and releasing it downhill during times of high demand, is considered a reliable form of renewable energy (Blakers et al. 2025).

Despite the potential benefits of energy security and the economic and employment opportunities, pumped hydroelectricity has been plagued by controversy due to cost blow-outs in major projects such as Snowy Hydro 2.0, and perceptions of negative environmental and cultural impacts from flooding large areas of land during construction. In some instances, strong community opposition has contributed to delays and cancellation of major projects.

2.2.5 Large-scale batteries

Community batteries in Australia enjoy strong community support and have demonstrated positive early results from pilot programs. Recent research on community attitudes to batteries found general support for community and a larger-scale batteries (OEH 2023, Ausgrid 2023). However, this relatively new technology faces a complex regulatory environment. Concerns over environmental impacts and emergency response capabilities related to lithium storage may also contribute to opposition to such facilities. For example, a development application for a *large-scale battery storage project near Bundaberg* was recently rejected by the Bundaberg Shire Council on the basis that the project's environmental and heritage impacts were not well enough understood (Courier Mail 2025).

2.2.6 Transmission infrastructure

Transmission infrastructure has the lowest level of social acceptance of renewable energy infrastructure (McCrea et al. 2024, Hay 2025).

The CSIRO Attitudes to Renewables Survey found that Australians have poor understanding of the role of transmission lines in the energy transition and elevated levels of concern related to health and wellbeing and visual impact. Other research has found that the need for transmission lines has not been well explained to communities (Wright 2024). Research suggests that social licence for infrastructure increases with understanding about the need for that infrastructure and its connection to broader social benefits (McCrea et al. 2024, Bice 2019).

Opposition to transmission lines is shaping up as a key barrier to social acceptance of renewable energy infrastructure development. RAI research participants expressed that the complex mix of regulated transmission service providers, as well as development of private transmission lines, creates cumulative impacts and contributes to community concern, particularly in regions with multiple planned developments (RAI research interviews 2025). Transmission lines are considered essential for national energy security and land can be compulsorily acquired if agreements cannot be reached with landholders, further exacerbating the controversy about this infrastructure.

State and federal governments are actively working to build social licence for renewable energy transmission projects through a combination of regulatory reform, funding, and coordination with industry. The Australian Energy Regulator's 2024 *Regulatory Investment Test Guidelines* require transmission proponents to formally consider and budget for social licence activities.

2.2.7 Opposition to transmission

Victoria is home to proposals for two transmission projects facing social licence challenges, the Western Renewables Link and the Victoria to New South Wales Interconnector West (VNI West).

Consultation for the Western Renewables Link commenced in 2020 and was met with strong opposition from farmers and regional communities who fear the transmission line will disrupt agricultural activities, reduce land values and negatively impact tourism. The planned project led to public protests, blockades and an unsuccessful legal challenge in the Supreme Court (Claughton 2023). Project planning has progressed and the proponents are undertaking an environment effects statement (EES).

The announcement of the VNI West project in 2022 also sparked opposition from farmers and landholders.

VNI West is considered a critical infrastructure project for Victoria's energy transition, with major coal-fired power stations scheduled to close within the next decade. If the project doesn't proceed, Victoria will face energy shortages, increased risk of outages and substantial increases to residential electricity bills (Nexa Advisory 2024). There is therefore a strong incentive for the Victorian Government to build social licence for the project. The RAI research consultations heard that the engagement process has faced some challenges:

> I think the VNI West team looked at what the Western Renewables Link people did and thought, how could they do better? And if that was their goal, they definitely achieved it because the outrage has increased fivefold!
>
> **(RAI research interview, Victoria)**

Farmers and landholders have criticised the proposed route of the project and the government's approach to community consultation (ABC 2024). In the face of widespread opposition, AEMO conducted additional stakeholder consultation on alternative options for the transmission route in Victoria. The Additional Consultation Report received 533 submissions, of which 491 were from concerned community members and landholders (AEMO 2024b).

A final, amended route plan for the VNI West transmission network was announced in October 2024. Despite changes made to the route in response to community feedback, opposition has continued in some parts of the community (McNaughton and Darling 2024). One subject matter expert interviewed by the RAI noted that:

> In a community where opposition has become entrenched … one of the ways we have seen that turned around is by drawing a significant line in the sand. Often, it's a change of leadership or ownership - a significant structural change to who is engaging with the community on that project. … You need to ask the community to come along with you in good faith that it will be different … and you have to make it different. Because if you say it's going to be different and nothing changes, you'll never ever get another chance.
>
> **(RAI research interview, engagement specialist)**

AEMO has created a new company, Transmission Company Victoria (TCV) to progress the VNI West project in Victoria. RAI's consultations heard some initial positive feedback on the recent approach as the new organisation came into formal operation in November 2024. As one RAI research participant expressed:

> They've got a new person in there and [they] seem to know what [they're] doing. (RAI research interview, Victoria)
>
> Probably the one glimmer of light in this, and there is a glimmer of light, is the creation of a social value approach at VNI West. This social value approach seems to be quite a change. So, in other words, all the councils and some stakeholders are in a group … and we actually get asked, what do we think about this, that and the other, before they've made a decision. And we're sort of part of it, sort of like a co-design … and it's certainly a huge difference.
>
> **(RAI research interview, Victoria)**

Whether this change is the line in the sand that's needed to turn the tide of opposition remains to be seen over the coming years. However, the motivation to find an acceptable way forward is high for all parties, with 2024 modelling finding that if the project doesn't go ahead, Victoria's electricity needs will be underserved from 2032, electricity bills will go up and the 'lights may go out' (Nexa Advisory 2024).

2.3 Community sentiment across key stakeholder groups

The following section explores sentiment data and factors impacting social licence for large-scale renewables for key stakeholder groups including First Nations communities, farmers, coal transition communities and residents in regions with renewable energy development.

Stakeholders are defined as individuals or groups that affect or may be affected by large-scale renewable energy development in their region.

2.3.1 First Nations peoples

First Nations peoples are key stakeholders in the energy transition with rights to self-determination, participation and compensation enshrined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (the Declaration). First Nations peoples are seeking active and equal partnerships to ensure long-term benefits from development in their regions:

> First Nations people are already identifying renewable energy solutions needed in homes and communities. They want to plan, build and own energy solutions that positively impact and benefit families and communities already suffering the impacts of climate change.
>
> **(Karrina Nolan, First Nations Clean Energy Network 2023)**

Energy justice is a key issue for First Nations peoples in the energy transition, particularly in remote communities:

For many remote Indigenous communities across Australia, electricity continues to be unreliable, unaffordable and inequitable, impacting quality of life and the ability to remain on Country. (Heard et al. 2023)

Approximately 100,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are estimated to face high costs, poor reliability and unique energy challenges due to extreme weather conditions, overcrowded households, and poor-quality housing (Quilty et al. 2022). Addressing this inequity will be a key focus for First Nations communities.

Research conducted with First Nations communities and Aboriginal Land Councils show that First Nations communities anticipate a range of benefits from hosting large-scale renewable energy infrastructure including economic and business development, employment, education and training, and land management opportunities (O'Neil and Thorburn 2025). However, representatives of Local Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW reported feeling that they are not fully aware of, or prepared for, the opportunities to engage with renewable projects on their land (Briggs and Apolonia 2023). This highlights the need for information and resources to facilitate engagement as equal partners (Australian Government 2024).

The doctrine of free, prior, and informed consent outlined in the Declaration offers a framework for approaching renewable energy development on Indigenous lands. Many First Nations communities have experience negotiating agreements and building long-term partnerships with industry through engagement with mining, oil and gas development over many decades. Research undertaken by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic and Policy Research at the Australian National University demonstrates that the most impactful outcomes for First Nations communities in the energy sector to date have come from small and medium scale projects where joint ventures, equity partnerships and First Nations representation are more likely to occur (CAEPR 2022).

An estimated 43% of large-scale renewable infrastructure will be located on lands with Indigenous title through freehold, shared or exclusive native title (Pascale et al. 2023) presenting a significant opportunity for partnership and engagement. A March 2025 Discussion Paper from the Melbourne Climate Futures Centre argues that Traditional Owners with native title rights and interests are in a strong position to negotiate positive long-term outcomes from large-scale renewable energy development because of the requirement for developers to negotiate Indigenous Land Use Agreements (MCF 2025). This opens the door for First Nations communities' active involvement in negotiating economic and social benefits and means that Traditional Owners can effectively veto clean energy developments if they have not been able to negotiate an acceptable land use agreement (MCF 2025).

However, all Traditional Owners, regardless of native title status, should have a formal role and benefit from renewable energy projects on their lands. As policy frameworks develop, many governments are strengthening requirements for engagement, consent, and benefit sharing with all Traditional Owners.

The Australian Government's *First Nations Clean Energy Strategy 2024 - 2030*, published in November 2024, outlines a comprehensive series of strategies to deliver just and equitable outcomes for First Nations peoples from the energy transition. Many of the goals and strategies are applicable to regional communities across the board as they seek fair distribution of benefits and equity of outcomes. Support for engagement in the energy sector has come from the First Nations Clean Energy Network (FNCEN), through the *Clean Energy Negotiations Guide for First Nations People* and *Best Practice Principles for Clean Energy Projects*. These documents have been designed with the purpose of improving First Nations engagement in the renewable energy sector.

The transition presents significant opportunities for First Nations communities, including energy security and sovereignty, co-governance and partnership, economic and community development, and advancement of values and aspirations.

2.3.2 Leading practice example: Yindjibarndi Energy

The Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation provides a leading practice example of First Nations leadership in the energy transition. Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation (YEC) is set to develop, own, and operate three major renewable energy generation projects in Western Australia's Pilbara region, with a combined capacity of up to 3 GW (YEC 2024).

In 2022, Yindjibarndi started to explore the commercial opportunities of renewable energy development in the Pilbara and identified ACEN Corporation as a capability partner. YEC provides Indigenous communities with meaningful involvement in project ownership, decision-making and operations. The partnership between YEC and ACEN specifies the requirement for:

- Yindjibarndi approval of all proposed project sites to protect culturally and environmentally significant locations.
- Yindjibarndi equity ownership of 25% to 50% in all projects, ensuring long-term financial benefits for the community.
- Preferred contracting opportunities for Yindjibarndi-owned businesses, creating local economic development.
- Training and employment programs for Yindjibarndi people, increasing job opportunities and skills development in the renewable energy sector (YEC 2024).

This model of Indigenous ownership and decision-making delivers clear benefits, including economic empowerment, environmental stewardship and the preservation of cultural heritage.

"We know that our country is well located for renewable energy development, so we made the decision early to lead.

(Michael Woodley, Chief Executive, YEC website)

2.3.3 Farmers

Farmers are a key stakeholder group in the energy transition. Farmers and graziers own or manage 51% of Australia's land mass (Australian Farmers 2025) including almost half of the land that will host renewable energy infrastructure in the regions (Dean et al. 2025). Agriculture forms an important part of Australia's regional identities and farmers are often influential voices in rural and regional communities.

There is mixed support for large-scale renewable energy development on regional farmland. A nationally representative 2024 survey by Farmers for Climate Action (FCA) found that 70 per cent of respondents with a connection to farming supported renewable energy operating on local farmland in their location. Seventy-one per cent believed that clean energy infrastructure is a form of drought-proofing and 89 per cent considered it a sustainable income diversification strategy. This led the report to conclude that there is majority support among farmers for 'renewables done right' (FCA 2024). In response to this survey, farming advocacy group *Farms for Food*, based in the Victorian wheatbelt, launched a survey that found 92% of 1800 respondents 'strongly opposed renewable energy projects on farmland' (Farms for Food 2025).

Focus groups conducted as part of the FCA research found that farmers anticipate a range of benefits from hosting renewables in their regions. At the national and regional level, these include emissions reductions and long-term environmental benefits, reduced energy costs and creation of local jobs. For individual landowners, perceived benefits include potential to diversify income, access to cheaper and more reliable energy, and infrastructure improvements on farms (FCA 2024). The RAI research participants noted that renewables provide welcome income diversification options for farmers in times of drought and natural disaster:

Farming is the most ridiculously stressful environment … so, for us [the income from hosting renewable infrastructure] is incredibly positive. It's an amazing amount, the annual fee … it equates to the leasehold of what we would get if someone leased the land. So that's, you know, certain income that you don't have to worry about. (RAI research interview, Victoria)

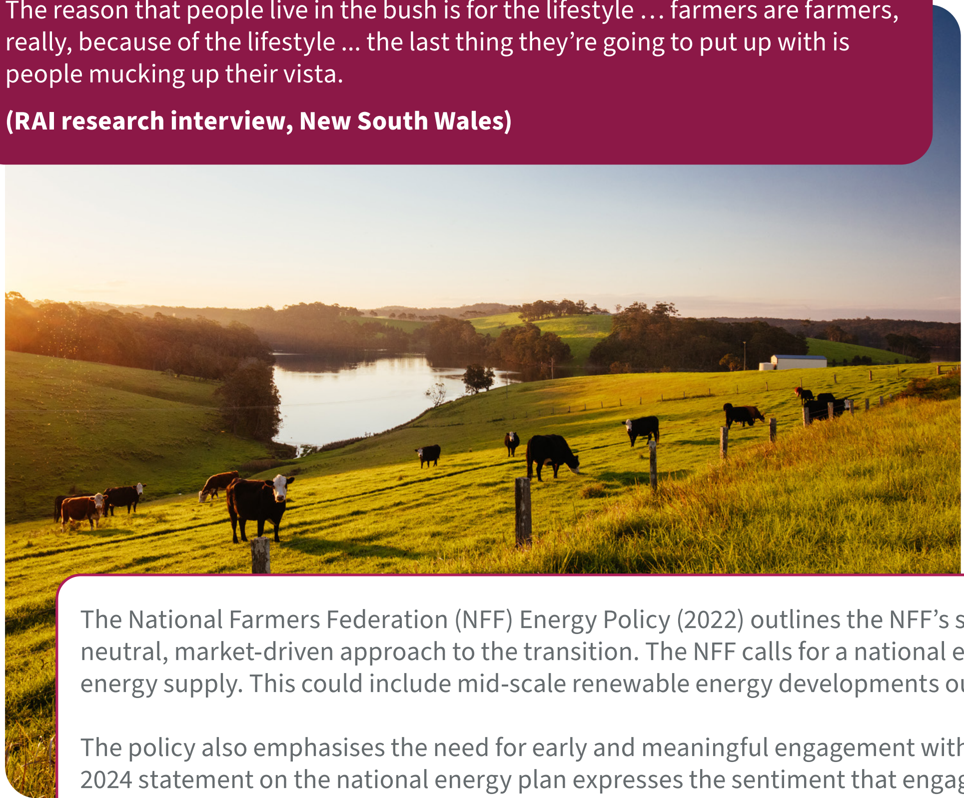
One thing about farmers is they realised many, many years ago, you can't be a one trick pony, right? You can't have all chooks because you'll go broke. You can't have all sheep because you'll go broke. You can't have all wheat because you'll go broke. We're happy to have this renewable stuff in a suitable place because we understand you can't be a one trick pony. However, the one trick pony scenario also applies to governments: you can't insist on renewables at any cost … you will go broke.

(RAI research interview, New South Wales)

The FCA survey found that participating farmers had a low level of trust in developers and a range of concerns about hosting renewables as landholders (2024). These include: negative impacts on farm operations, food production and the natural environment; potential financial costs, particularly in relation to decommissioning and remediation; devaluation of land and assets; potential insurance implications in case of fire or other disaster; and inadequate support from developers, particularly in relation to decommissioning and ongoing support in the operational stages of a project.

Visual amenity and lifestyle factors were also important to the RAI research participants:

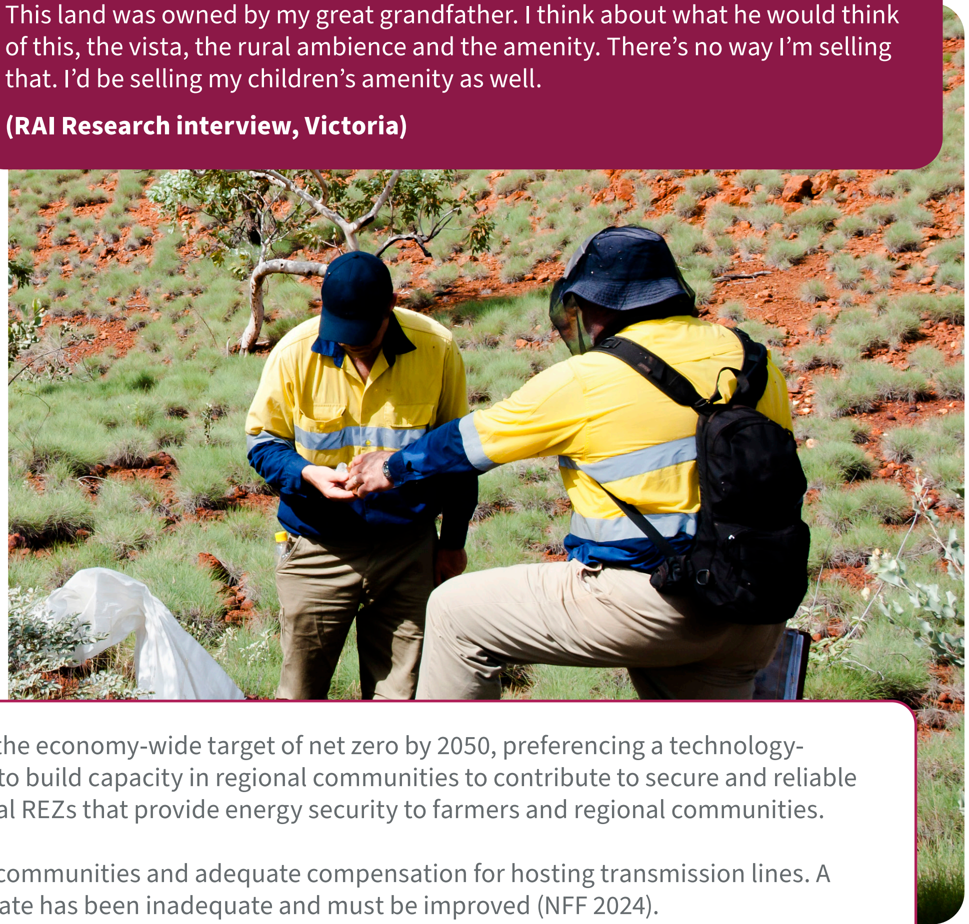
> The reason that people live in the bush is for the lifestyle … farmers are farmers, really, because of the lifestyle ... the last thing they're going to put up with is people mucking up their vista.
>
> **(RAI research interview, New South Wales)**



Participants also spoke about the intergenerational importance of farming enterprises. Farming communities have rich social identities and cultural values around land use.

They want to see this legacy continue:

> This land was owned by my great grandfather. I think about what he would think of this, the vista, the rural ambience and the amenity. There's no way I'm selling that. I'd be selling my children's amenity as well.
>
> **(RAI Research interview, Victoria)**



The National Farmers Federation (NFF) Energy Policy (2022) outlines the NFF's support for the economy-wide target of net zero by 2050, preferencing a technology-neutral, market-driven approach to the transition. The NFF calls for a national energy plan to build capacity in regional communities to contribute to secure and reliable energy supply. This could include mid-scale renewable energy developments outside formal REZs that provide energy security to farmers and regional communities.

The policy also emphasises the need for early and meaningful engagement with impacted communities and adequate compensation for hosting transmission lines. A 2024 statement on the national energy plan expresses the sentiment that engagement to date has been inadequate and must be improved (NFF 2024).

2.3.4 Coal transition communities

Australia's main centres of coal-fired power generation are undergoing significant change due to the closure of power plants that have historically provided a substantial proportion of jobs and income in the region, such as the La Trobe Valley, Hunter Valley and Port Augusta. Regions facing the closure of coal-fired power plants require targeted intervention to build new industries and transition workers to new roles.

Transition management frameworks are being developed and implemented to support the structural shift from fossil fuel-based power to renewable energy power in regions. At national level, this work is led by the *Net Zero Economy Authority*. At state level there are a range of transition plans in development and, at regional level, initiatives such as the *Collie Just Transition Plan* (see section 3.3.4) and *Hunter Jobs Alliance* coordinate local actions.

Traditional energy producing regions often have deep historical and cultural ties to the energy, oil, gas, or coal sectors that form part of community identities. Many coal-fired power plants have been operational for several decades, employing multiple generations of workers, and are often among the largest employers in a region. The RAI consultations conducted in 2024 indicate that many coal-fired power plant workers in Port Augusta relocated to other coal-fired plants, such as the Hunter Valley, rather than choosing to retrain and remain in Port Augusta. Consultations indicated that workforce transition planning needs to be based on a deep understanding of a region's culture and the social identity of the workforce to successfully position industries and workers for new opportunities (RAI 2024a).

Beyond accounting for the economic benefits of coal, there is a need for policy makers to consider regions' historical identity through cultural and social recognition. This could include public acknowledgements, cultural events, site rehabilitation and site repurposing. The Ruhr Valley in Germany, once a centre of coal mining and related industry, provides an excellent example of preserving a region's cultural heritage: former coal mines are now museums and cultural centres, while other sites have been turned into urban forests and green spaces (RAI 2024a).

2.3.5 Leading practice example: Collie Just Transition Plan

The Collie Just Transition Plan, released in December 2020 by the Western Australian Government, aims to guide the town of Collie through a shift away from coal dependency toward a diversified and sustainable economy using the international Just Transition framework (WA Government 2024). The plan was developed with a Just Transition Working Group that includes unions, industry representatives, community leaders and government stakeholders. The plan focuses on supporting workers and communities affected by the transition over the period from 2021 to 2025 within a framework of long-term commitment to supporting the region's transition.

The initiative is backed by significant funding, including more than $662 million allocated to support Collie's transition (WA Government 2024). Key objectives include maximising opportunities for impacted workers by providing skills training and career support, diversifying Collie's economy through investments in new industries and tourism, committing to ongoing government support to promote a just transition and celebrating Collie's rich history and contributions to state development. A phased retirement of state-owned coal-fired power stations in Western Australia is planned by 2030.

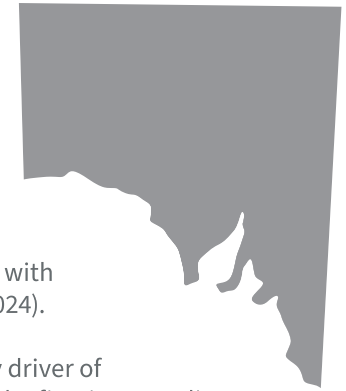
2.3.6 Regional community residents

Individuals and groups residing in regions with planned renewable energy infrastructure development are key stakeholders with the potential to impact project outcomes.

Community sentiment among residents in renewable energy development regions is comparable to overall community sentiment. A 2024 survey of approximately 1,000 people living in REZs found that 70% support clean energy projects in their local community, with 17% opposed and 12% unsure (FCA 2024). Research into community experiences in the development of the Central-West Orana REZ in New South Wales found that the community members most likely to oppose developments are non-hosting landowners nearby or other residents who anticipate or experience adverse impacts without expectation of benefits or compensation (Cass et al. 2024).

Many regional and rural areas in Australia have higher relative socio-economic disadvantage than urban centres as measured by Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (ABS 2024). It is important that the benefits of renewable energy development extend beyond landholders to create broader benefits for host communities, particularly in regions that experience high socio-economic disadvantage. This has the potential to positively impact community sentiment in these regions.

2.3.7 Leading practice example: South Australia



South Australia is widely recognised as a leader in the renewable energy transition, demonstrating how consistent government policy and action influences community sentiment over time. The state began its transition in 2002, setting a clear strategy to shift from fossil fuel reliance to a system dominated by renewables. By June 2023, South Australia had achieved 73.3% renewable electricity generation with ambitions for 100% net renewables by 2030 (SA Government 2024).

Government leadership in policy and regulation has been a key driver of community sentiment. The South Australian Government was the first in Australia to enact legislation supporting wind farm development in 1993. More recently, the introduction of the *Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA) established a unified regulatory framework for large-scale hydrogen and renewable energy projects. This approach streamlines land access, environmental approvals, community and First Nations engagement and native title processes (SA Government 2024).

Throughout the transition, the government has maintained its course despite significant challenges, including a 2016 statewide blackout and periods of high retail electricity prices (McGreevy et al. 2021). Rather than scaling back, the state invested in grid resilience, local storage and new regulatory measures, reinforcing the narrative that renewables are central to South Australia's future (McGreevy et al. 2021).

South Australia now exhibits higher levels of community support for renewable energy than most other Australian states. Australia Institute polling in 2019 found that majority of voters for all parties supported the state's transition to 100% renewables by 2030. Public sentiment is underpinned by visible economic benefits, job creation and proactive community engagement. Many South Australians now see the transition as both an economic opportunity and a positive part of the state's identity.

The following sections of the report examine key factors that contribute to building social licence for renewable energy infrastructure, starting with the importance of an overarching national narrative and shared vision for a renewable energy future.

The report then moves into a discussion of key elements of procedural justice and distributive justice.

3.0 BUILDING A NARRATIVE

Building a compelling narrative for the energy transition is vital for the social licence of renewables infrastructure in regional Australia. It contributes to building knowledge, confidence and a rationale for local development.

The Australian Electricity Infrastructure Commissioner (AEIC)'s 2024 *Community Engagement Review: report to the Minister for Climate Change* (AEIC Community Engagement Review) reported the need for an overarching national narrative about the energy transition (Dyer 2024). Similarly, CSIRO (McCrea et al. 2024) and RE-Alliance (2024) found that the narrative around renewables influences social licence of renewable infrastructure development in the regions.

However, a national narrative is not sufficient to build social licence for renewables in the regions. Public information needs to highlight the connections between broader national and global goals, while also providing specific and locally tailored information.

Recommendation Six of the AEIC Community Engagement Review calls on the Minister for Climate Change and Energy to 'initiate a process for the development and execution of a communications program that provides local communities with a clear narrative about the pragmatic reasons for the energy transition'. The recommendation specifies that the narrative should go beyond the current messaging about emissions reduction targets and specifically articulate the need for this infrastructure in the relevant locality, the details of proposed developments and the proposed benefits for regional communities (2024). Additionally, public information should be accessible, targeted and written in plain language.

Regional Australians obtain news and information from diverse sources including mainstream and social media, friends and family (Essential Media 2024). Over the past twelve months, coverage of regional community opposition to renewable energy in mainstream and social media has grown, with social research finding that misinformation and disinformation are widespread and impacting the public narrative about renewables (Porter Novelli 2024, Essential Media 2024, Ipsos 2024).

Recommendation: Build a cohesive narrative for the transition through public information at national, state and local levels.

National and state public information campaigns are needed to promote the rationale for the transition.

Governments have a key leadership role to play in building a cohesive public narrative that promotes the rationale for the renewable energy transition.

A national narrative should focus on the practical, economic and environmental reasons for the transition and the diverse benefits to communities.

Local information materials and resources should provide transparent and accessible information that clearly outlines benefits and impacts to specific regions.

Local information materials and resources need to be plain English, accessible and tailored to local needs and context. Clarity and transparency around expected benefits and impacts contributes to building relationships of trust.

Communities and researchers are calling on governments to take the lead in building a cohesive narrative at national and local levels:

> We're in a space where misinformation is everywhere, and the anti-renewables opposition is very organised. We need constant, consistent information from a voice that's credible. We need a constant reiteration of scientific fact, just coming out all the time. It's the only thing that will do it, there's been an absolute void of anything.
>
> **(RAI research interview, Victoria)**

Government has a key leadership role in providing a coherent narrative to support the energy transition. Where a vacuum exists, it will often be filled by misinformation, disinformation, or commentary from vested interest groups. Fundamentally, an over-arching public narrative around the energy transition supports project-related discussions at a local level (Hay 2025).

To address growing community opposition and the spread of misinformation, there is an urgent need for governments and industry to communicate practical and credible information to communities through trusted channels. This may include specialised government agencies and research organisations such as CSIRO, local champions and spokespeople, or bespoke channels designed in consultation with communities. Informal dissemination of information through community networks and champions is also important.

4.0 POLICY AND REGULATION

Clear policy and regulatory frameworks contribute to social licence (McCrea et al. 2024). State-wide energy roadmaps and designated renewable energy development zones provide a valuable framework for planning and regulating renewable energy development and provide clear standards for developers to consider community impacts and interests.

4.1 Renewable energy zones and hubs

Australia's energy system was not originally designed for the scale and complexity of renewables integration that the transition will bring (ARENA 2020). New regulatory frameworks are required to meet technical, commercial and regulatory challenges, enabling coordinated network and project development (ARENA 2020).

Most Australian jurisdictions have introduced or are developing policy to coordinate site selection, project selection and developer selection for renewable energy projects. An overview of legislation and states roadmaps is provided at Table 2.

Renewable energy zones (REZ) are a key planning mechanism for renewable energy development in NEM states. In Western Australia, renewable energy hubs form a similar approach to planning and regulating development. REZs concentrate renewable energy development in geographic areas with favourable natural resource potential and facilitate government regulation, planning and mitigation of impacts.

Table 2: State legislation and roadmaps for establishing Renewable Energy Zones			
Jurisdiction	**Legislation**	**Roadmap Documents**	**Roadmap Overview**
New South Wales	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap	The Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap is a 20-year plan to transform the energy system in NSW. It focuses on new generation and transmission infrastructure, as well as storage and firming capacity to address the needs of energy consumers and achieve net zero emissions by 2050.
Queensland	*Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Act 2024* (Qld)	Energy Roadmap (in development) (Qld)	The Queensland Government is developing a five-year Energy Roadmap to be released by the end of 2025, identifying priorities for the energy sector to deliver an affordable, reliable and sustainable energy system for the state. Efficient coordination of transmission infrastructure to facilitate new generation will be considered as part of the development of the Roadmap.
Victoria	*National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid) Act 2024* (Vic)	Cheaper, cleaner, renewable: Our plan for Victoria's Electricity Future Draft Victorian Transmission Plan 2025	The Draft Victorian Transmission Plan lays out the state's renewable energy zones and transmission infrastructure planning for the next 15 years to ensure low cost and reliable renewable energy can be delivered across the state. The final plan will be released in 2025.
Western Australia	State Climate Change Bill 2023 (proposed) (WA)	Energy Transformation Strategy	The Energy Transformation Strategy is the state's overarching plan to secure reliable, sustainable and affordable electricity as the state transitions to renewable energy.
South Australia	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	Renewable Energy Resource maps	These maps provide investors and developers with suitable sites for renewable energy projects in South Australia, with a particular focus on the Gawler Ranges and Whyalla.
Tasmania	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment Renewable Energy Zones Bill (2024) (Tas)	Tasmanian Renewable Energy Action Plan	The Renewable Energy Action Plan outlines the actions to be taken by the state to transform Tasmania into a global renewable energy powerhouse, making energy work for the Tasmanian community, growing the economy and providing jobs.
Northern Territory	No dedicated legislation	Sustainable Energy Overview	Department of Mining and Energy drives energy reform through a range of programs and initiatives.
Australian Capital Territory	No dedicated legislation	The Integrated Energy Plan: Our pathway to electrification	Outlines the ACT's path to achieving net zero emissions by 2045.

The AEMO Integrated System Plan has identified forty-three potential REZ sites in NEM states. This national plan informs and contributes to state level planning. Table 3 provides an overview of proposed regional energy development zones by state.

Table 3: Overview of proposed REZs and hubs by state

Jurisdiction	Renewable Energy Zones	Current status
New South Wales	Central-West Orana, New England, South West, Hunter-Central Coast, Illawarra	All five REZs are declared with the access rights process underway or completed for most zones. Central-West Orana most advanced.
Queensland	Southern Downs, Western Downs, Far North QLD, Woolooga, Darling Downs, Tarong, Callide, Calliope, Isaac, Capricorn, Collinsville, Flinders	The Queensland Government is considering the future role of coordinated transmission infrastructure frameworks in the state's energy system, including locations, as part of the development of Energy Roadmap.
Victoria	Central Highlands, Central North, Gippsland, North West, South West, Grampians Wimmera, Wimmera Southern Mallee	Proposed REZs have been published in Draft Victorian Transmission Plan with a formal declaration process to follow in final Transmission Plan. Victoria also hosts two declared offshore wind areas - Gippsland and Southern Ocean.
Western Australia	Mid West, North West, South West, Gascoyne, Goldfields, Wheatbelt, Pilbara, Kimberley	WA operates outside the NEM. Regions have been identified for renewable energy hubs by the WA Government.
South Australia	Eyre Peninsula, South East, Mid North, Riverland, Yorke Peninsula, Far North	REZ sites have been identified in the AEMO ISP but are not all formally declared. South Australia uses *Renewable Energy Resource maps* to guide network planning and investment.
Tasmania	North West, North East	Tasmania's North West REZ has been declared and is the focus for Marinus Link. Progressing. North East REZ has been identified in AEMO ISP.
Northern Territory	No formal REZ identified.	No formal REZs but several major renewable projects planned.
Australian Capital Territory	No formal REZ identified.	No formal REZs but several major renewable projects planned.

The declaration of a REZ is governed by legislation and generally includes requirements for strategic planning, technical and regulatory design, community policies and programs, and coordinated investment and infrastructure projects. Consultation with industry and the community, along with other government stakeholders should be a requirement for REZ declaration in each of the five states implementing this approach, although research participants note that the extent to which this is occurring in practice is variable (RAI research interviews 2025).

4.2 Site selection

Selecting suitable sites for REZs, through a combination of mapping and local engagement, is a key step in building social licence and mitigating community opposition.

The AEIC Community Engagement Review recommends that states and territories should undertake contemporary land use planning to identify suitable sites for renewable energy development (Dyer 2024). The mapping needs to occur at a state and territory level in the first instance to identify broad REZs.

Mapping could also include identification of natural resources; existing infrastructure; environmental, social and cultural heritage values; as well as existing key land uses such as high value agricultural land. The *Mapping Important Places* project in North West Tasmania (see section 4.1.3) provides Australia's first example of spatial mapping of social values with community in preparation for REZ declaration.

Once REZ boundaries have been established, more detailed planning and engagement should occur to identify specific sites and locations for development. For example, RAI research participants wanted to see collaborative land-use planning that identified high value and shared use regions:

> Council itself has approved a temporary planning instrument that will now be forwarded to the Minister … that's around protecting prime agricultural land from solar developments. So, when we say do it, we say do it in the right place - not in our prime agricultural land, our most productive land.
>
> **(RAI Research interview, Queensland)**

> The requirement for shared land-use planning which incorporates the continuation of farming practices on development sites should also be considered - for wind and solar, this is very compatible.
>
> **(RAI Research interview, New South Wales)**

Collaborative approaches to mapping and site selection have the potential to optimise outcomes for regional communities. To improve mapping resources and support more considered land use, the Australian Renewable Energy Agency has committed funding to accelerate the development of software to assess land for hosting renewable energy (ARENA 2025).

4.3 Leading practice example: Mapping Important Places - North West REZ, Tasmania

The site for the proposed North West REZ in Tasmania was informed by two years of government analysis and community consultation.

The Tasmanian Government commissioned a comprehensive spatial analysis that incorporated over 60 spatial data layers including land use, environmental, heritage, wind speed and solar values. Land use planning, residential areas, hydrology, existing infrastructure, hazards and terrain were also included in the analysis.

The Mapping Important Places project formed part of the site identification process. Community members were invited to identify places of significance using an interactive mapping tool as well as participating in surveys. Two rounds of participatory engagement contributed to defining the REZ boundaries and identifying important places inside the proposed REZ.

Areas with threatened species, sites of cultural heritage, and protected habitats within the REZ have been identified as unsuitable for development.

Recommendation: State and federal governments should continue to strengthen policy and regulation for renewable energy development.

Confidence in the regulatory frameworks is a key contributor to social licence. State and federal governments should continue to strengthen policy that concentrates renewable energy development in suitable geographic locations and standardises planning, approval and implementation processes.

5.0 COMMUNITY PREPARATION AND PLANNING

Community strategic planning and capacity building needs to begin as early as possible in regions with significant renewable energy development planned. Community planning needs to be resourced by governments with a view to developing community or regional plans that can inform negotiations, regional initiatives and investment in long-term legacy outcomes. As outlined in the *First Nations Clean Energy Strategy*, 'equitable partnerships require a common understanding, shared practices, and effective support'.

5.1 Building community capacity for participation

Regional communities need skills, knowledge and resources to participate in the energy transition as equal partners.

Regional communities and local governments across Australia have varied experience, capability and resources to participate in negotiations with governments and developers. However, communities need to be supported to participate as equal partners if they are to optimise potential benefits from renewables projects. Capacity development approaches should include: education programs, support for strategic planning and mentoring local leaders and champions.

Institutional capability-building for industry and government are also key to building better practices. The RAI's consultations heard that staff turnover in government agencies and capability within agencies was a huge issue for communities, creating duplication, delays and frustration (RAI research interviews 2025).

At present, a handful of for-purpose organisations are working with communities nationally to deliver education, prepare communities and build capacity for participation. Examples of these programs are at Table 4. Education and capacity building programs make an important contribution to regional outcomes. However, programs often lack sustainable funding, relying on ad-hoc grants and philanthropic donations (RAI research interviews 2025). Medium-term funding is required from governments to facilitate a proactive, coordinated national approach to education and community capacity building.

Table 4: **Australian education and capacity building program examples**

Organisation	Course Title	Audience
International Association of Public Participation	*Certificate of Public Participation*	Industry and government
Community Power Agency	*Socially Responsible Renewable Energy Development*	Industry, government and community
The Energy Charter	*Landholder and Community Engagement Training*	Industry
First Nations Clean Energy Network	*First Nations PowerMakers*	First Nations
Clean Energy Council	*Social Licence Leading Practice Course*	Industry and government
Regional Australia Institute	*Regions Leading the Way: Executive Education Program*	Regional development practitioners

5.2 Planning for success

The RAI's research found that many regional communities are proactively planning to ensure economic, social and environmental value from renewable energy development. Leading practice examples include the *Gladstone Region Economic Transition Roadmap* and the *Western Downs Regional Council Communities Partnering Framework*. The Communities Partnering Framework outlines a clear expectation that developments in the Western Downs region will support strong economic, social and environmental outcomes. The framework includes a self-evaluation for developers to assess their impact and celebrate their contribution to the region (WDRC 2025).

The community of Hay in western New South Wales has set a benchmark for participatory community planning for the renewable energy transition (see section 5.1.2). Through a community-centred process, the shire has developed a series of principles for partnering with developers, ensuring that the region is strategically positioned to benefit from renewable energy development.

There are several features that contributed to the success of the Hay example. First, the Hay Shire Council has only one major population centre, which means building a shared vision was less complex than in larger regions with multiple towns. Second, the process has benefited from the leadership of a strategic champion in the council's Economic Development Manager. In this example, the council has self-funded this project which has required trade-offs in services delivered to the community and may not be replicable in other regions without support.

These examples highlight that all regional communities need resourcing and guidance to undertake strategic planning as part of the energy transition.

All regional communities need resourcing and guidance to undertake strategic planning as part of the energy transition.

5.2.1 Case study: Hay's community roadmap

Hay Shire, in the western Riverina region of New South Wales, was designated as part of the South-West Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) in 2022 due to its abundant wind and solar resources, proximity to transmission infrastructure, and existing compatible land uses (Hay Shire Council 2023). This has positioned the region as a strategic hub for renewable energy development, creating new opportunities for the community.

> Hay's topography, the scale of our primary production and the sparsity of our population really lends itself to this kind of development… our community recognises the need to diversify our economy because we are very exposed to climate change and international market pressures.
>
> **(RAI research interview, Hay)**

Renewable energy development in Hay will bring substantial change to the physical, social and economic landscape of the region. Potential impacts include: a population surge as workers arrive in the region; pressure on already strained housing, transport, infrastructure and services; and economic and social change.

Hay Shire Council recognised that a strategic, coordinated approach was needed to leverage the benefits of this transformation while managing disruption to the community and traditional industries. In 2022, the council partnered with RE-Alliance to ensure that the community was prepared for the journey ahead.

> Our primary goal was to ensure that our community did not become divided. So, we went in early with that community education piece and, through that process, the community felt respected.
>
> **(RAI research interview, Hay)**

While the original intention was to undertake local capacity-building with council staff and councillors, the process evolved into a three-year community-centred planning process culminating in a series of partnership principles for prospective developers and a commitment to develop a 10-year strategic economic roadmap.

Mapping the journey

The council moved quickly to harness momentum and minimise the potential for division and misinformation in the community, which was already experiencing outreach from potential developers.

> One of the interesting things that we discovered is about the moment of impact. There is a general misunderstanding … that the moment of impact is when the first shovel goes into the ground. The moment of impact is the moment that the first developer speaks to the first landholder. And at that time, we had nine developers speaking to landholders … so we did it really quickly … because in small towns the grapevine will beat you every single time.
>
> **(RAI research interview, Hay)**

The first step in this journey was a series of workshops facilitated by RE-Alliance for council members. These focused on understanding the reasons for the energy shift, what was proposed for Hay, and potential opportunities for the community from renewables development.

The next step was to bring together a small group of influential community members for an open conversation (REA 2025). Many of these community members were opposed to, or sceptical about, renewables. The workshop created a space for participants to speak about concerns and potential impacts from renewables as well as current challenges facing the community. These challenges included a lack of health and aged care services, economic reliance on agriculture, housing pressures and the rising costs of electricity. As the workshop progressed, the group explored whether a REZ could potentially help solve some of these problems (REA 2025).

These explorations continued in a series of public forums organised by council for the whole community. The community had the opportunity to ask questions, express concerns and articulate their hopes for the future. According to RE-Alliance, 'most ultimately supported any move that would bring jobs and investment to Hay' (REA 2025).

The outcome

The outcome of the community engagement process was *Fundamental principles for successful renewable development in Hay*. This document provides a clear, unified message from the Hay community to government, industry and other stakeholders. The message is that the community is supportive of the clean energy transition and will ensure that it happens 'with us, not to us.' It explains that the town has a vision for its future and invites others to contribute to realisation of that vision. Finally, it outlines principles and a process for coordinated engagement.

The document has been instrumental in Hay's negotiations with potential developers. So far, the community has secured commitments for cheaper electricity, as well as contributions to education, housing, transport and an aged care facility if developments proceed. The benefits of this approach are clear:

> Normally, renewable energy projects face significant opposition in rural areas, with as much as 90% of submissions typically being objections. But in Hay, that ratio has flipped – a situation Hay attributes to community and council engagement.
>
> **(REA 2025)**

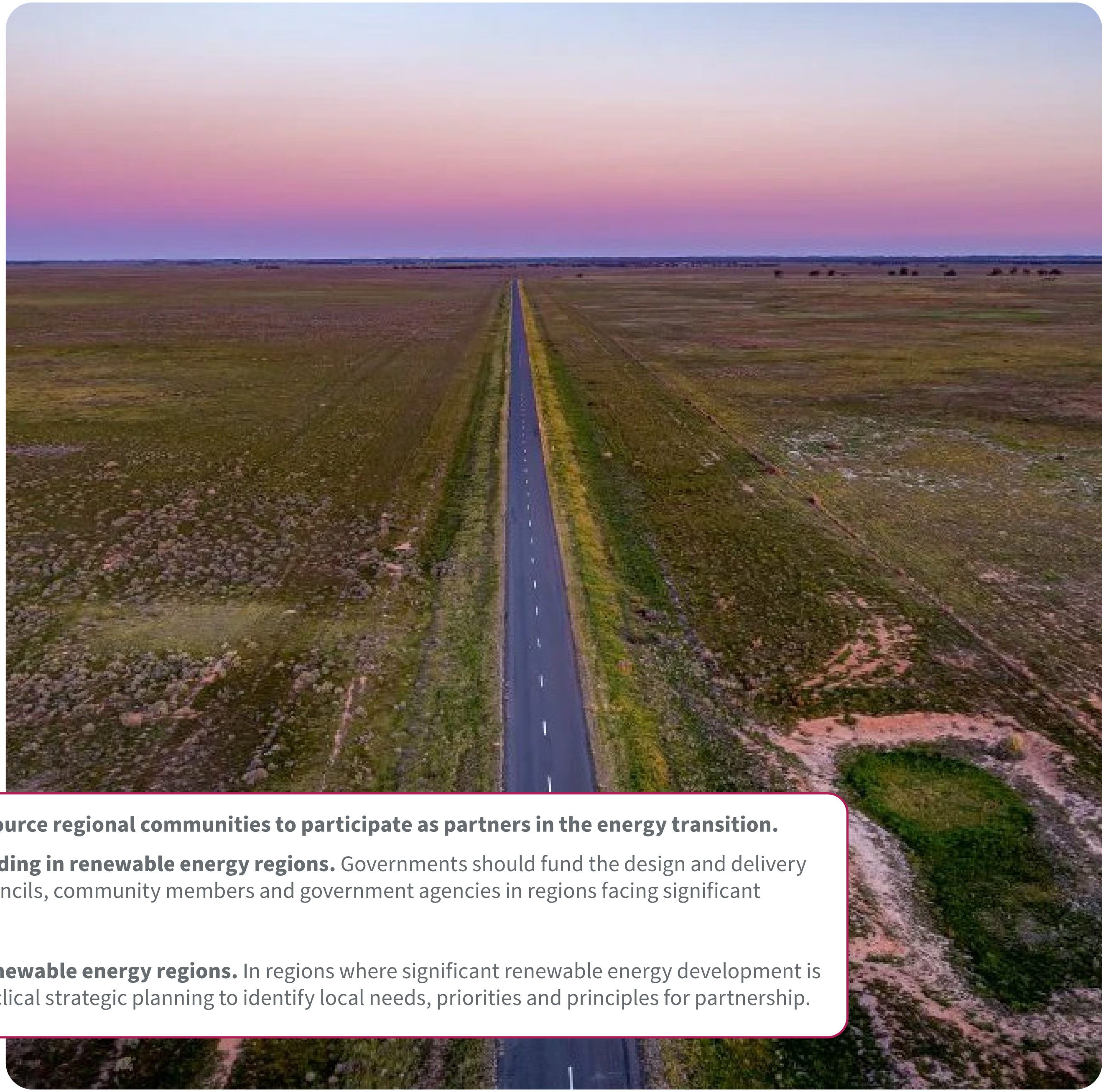
A detailed roadmap

The next step for Hay is the development of its 10-year Economic Transition Roadmap.

The council has partnered with The Next Economy to lead a participatory co-design process with community to develop the roadmap. Council views ongoing engagement with the community as central to the development of the town's future.

> We've been doing these consultations and this work for three years now and it continues. To be able to get the most out of it, it's a long process. We've got to give our community the support to think bigger than footy sheds and toilet blocks to deliver truly transformational projects.
>
> **(RAI research interview, Hay)**

Hay's experience has set a benchmark for rural communities in participatory planning for the renewable energy transition. By focusing on long-term planning and inclusive community engagement, the shire is well-positioned to take advantage of future opportunities and face associated challenges.



Recommendation: State and federal governments should resource regional communities to participate as partners in the energy transition.

Governments to fund community education and capacity building in renewable energy regions. Governments should fund the design and delivery of education and capacity-building programs for landholders, councils, community members and government agencies in regions facing significant renewable energy development.

Governments to fund community-led strategic planning in renewable energy regions. In regions where significant renewable energy development is planned, governments should fund communities to undertake cyclical strategic planning to identify local needs, priorities and principles for partnership.

6.0 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The requirement to engage with communities is well established in legislation and regulatory frameworks for infrastructure and major projects. There is substantial evidence to show that early, transparent engagement with communities increases social licence and leads to better outcomes for communities. Despite this, dissatisfaction with community engagement is frequently reported in regional communities and poses a risk to social licence.

Community engagement for major infrastructure projects may be defined as a series of 'commitments and activities to involve community members in policy and project planning, delivery, or evaluation processes' (Bice et al. 2019). Community engagement involves a 'coordinated network' of relationships and solutions with the goal of delivering projects with minimal negative impacts and optimised community benefits (Head 2007 cited in Bice et al. 2019).

Timely, genuine and effective community engagement is critical to securing and maintaining social licence for renewable energy projects. A key message of this report is that the costs, delays and community opposition that arise from poor engagement are a genuine risk to the energy transition and quality engagement cannot be neglected. As expressed by Hay below, investment in the preparation and planning stages will help to mitigate community opposition and ultimately save time and money:

6.1 Planning for success

Various legislation and guidelines mandate the requirement to engage in good faith with communities. At a Commonwealth level, community engagement is mandated through the national regulatory framework for offshore wind and the *National guidelines for community engagement and benefits for electricity transmission projects*. For onshore renewables, engagement is primarily governed by state frameworks, but national best practice guidance exists as outlined in Table 5. The Australian Government's expectations in relation to community engagement will be further developed through the *Renewable Energy Developer Rating Scheme*, which is currently under development.

In most states, large-scale renewables projects are assessed under Major Projects legislation, which requires public consultation and stakeholder engagement. Leading practice examples include South Australia, where proponents must comply with strict consultation requirements and transparent stakeholder engagement is a mandatory condition for licensing under the *Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA), and Queensland where a code of conduct for renewable energy proponents is being developed. Table 5 presents national and state guidelines governing community engagement requirements for renewables projects, as well as guides developed by industry and non-government organisations.

National and state funding schemes and tender processes provide an effective mechanism for mandating community engagement in relation to renewable energy development. New South Wales and Victorian REZ tender processes, along with the Australian Government's Capacity Investment Scheme, require comprehensive community engagement to be demonstrated as a mandatory, weighted criterion in tender processes. Successful proponents are contractually required to deliver their community benefit commitments.

> It is quicker and easier, in the long term, to bring communities along on the journey. The costs and delays associated with community opposition can be mitigated by engaging with and involving potentially impacted communities early in the planning and development process. This may take longer and cost more in the early stages of project development but saves money and time later.
>
> **(Hay 2025)**

Table 5: Overview of national and state guidelines governing community engagement for renewable energy developments

Jurisdiction	Department	Guideline
Commonwealth	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	*National Guidelines: Community engagement and benefits for electricity transmission projects*
	Australian Energy Regulator	*Directions paper – Social licence for electricity transmission projects*
New South Wales	Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure	*Benefit Sharing Guideline*
Queensland	Queensland Treasury	The Queensland Government is working with industry to progress a code of conduct for renewable energy proponents, with a focus on legacy community benefit and addressing current community concerns
	Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning	*Social Impact Assessment Guideline* (Queensland Government, 2018, updated 2025) as required under State Code 23 and 26
	Powerlink	*Powerlink Community Engagement Strategy*
Victoria	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action	*Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development: A guide for renewable energy developers*
South Australia	Plan SA	*Community Engagement Charter and Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024 (SA)*
Tasmania	Renewables, Climate and Future Industries Tasmania	*Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement*

6.1.1 Guidance for governments, developers and communities

A range of guides and toolkits for effective community engagement in renewable energy have been published by non-government organisations. A selection of these documents is summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Selected community engagement guides and toolkits

Organisation	Course Title	Audience
Clean Energy Council	*Community engagement guidelines for the Australian wind industry*	Outlines the foundations for effective community engagement, openness, inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability.
Clean Energy Council	*First Nations engagement guide for the renewables industry*	This guide is a comprehensive national guide on meaningful engagement, consent, participation and benefit sharing with First Nations people on renewable energy projects.
The Energy Charter	*Better Practice Social Licence Guideline*	Principles of maintaining social licence; procedural fairness, distributional fairness, stewardship, and partnership.

6.2 What's happening on the ground in regions?

The AEIC Community Engagement Review found that poor engagement practices have led to a 'material distrust' of project developers in communities. Survey results revealed extremely high levels of dissatisfaction with the quality and extent of community engagement from developers (Dyer 2024). Of 250 total respondents, 92% were dissatisfied with the level of engagement from project developers, 85% were dissatisfied with explanations given by developers in response to their questions and concerns, and 89% stated that the information they received from developers was not relevant to the concerns that they raised.

Participants identified that uncertainty around approvals and timelines for projects was causing negative impacts to mental health and creating social tensions in regional communities. The Review also found that developers' level of skills, experience and knowledge in engagement is 'below community expectations' (Dyer 2024:38).

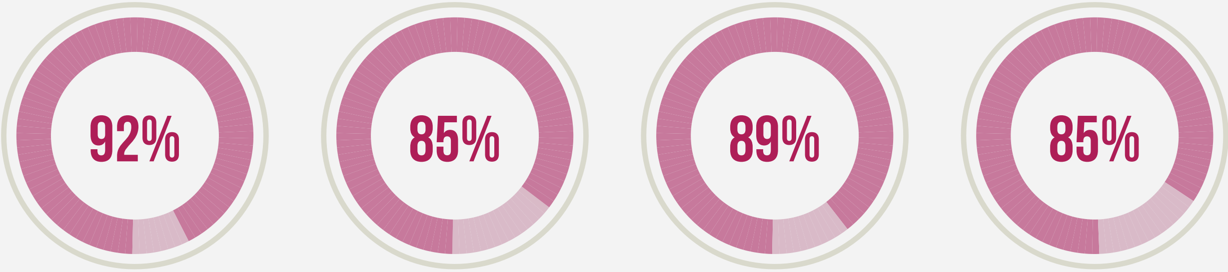
The AEIC Community Engagement Review highlights that poor practices by developers create a risk to social licence for renewable energy projects, a finding echoed in Essential Media in their 2024 study *Talking Renewables to the Regions*:

> Social licence for these developments is becoming contested, with ... low trust in government and energy companies; lived experience of poorly planned developments. Negative experiences and uncertainty about projects may spark community opposition which can be difficult to overcome.
>
> **(Essential Media 2024)**

These findings underscore a critical need for improvement in how renewable energy developers interact with local communities affected by their projects.

Figure 4: **Select results from the AEIC Community Engagement Review 'Your Say' survey**

Source: AEIC Community Engagement Review p38



of respondents were dissatisfied with the extent to which project developers engaged the local community

of respondents were dissatisfied with the explanations provided by project developers in response to their questions

of respondents stated that the information they received from project developers was not relevant to the concerns that they raised

of respondents stated that their concerns were not addressed in a timely manner

6.3 What does good engagement look like?

Genuine and effective community engagement is essential to building relationships of trust and establishing procedural and distributive justice in the energy transition.

Community engagement is an established professional discipline with a strong evidence base and broadly accepted principles and standards (I2S 2023). The *International Association for Public Participation* (IAP2), an international leader in public engagement, has developed a series of foundational documents that inform best practice public engagement. The IAP2 Core Values outline the expectations and aspirations of the public participation process. They are:

- **Right to participate:** Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- **Influence on decisions:** Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- **Sustainable decisions:** Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
- **Inclusivity:** Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
- **Collaborative design:** Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
- **Relevant information:** Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- **Feedback loop:** Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

The Association has also developed the Public Participation Spectrum, (detailed in Figure 5) that defines different levels of public participation in relation to the increasing impact that stakeholders may have on a decision, outlining goals and commitments to the public at each level.

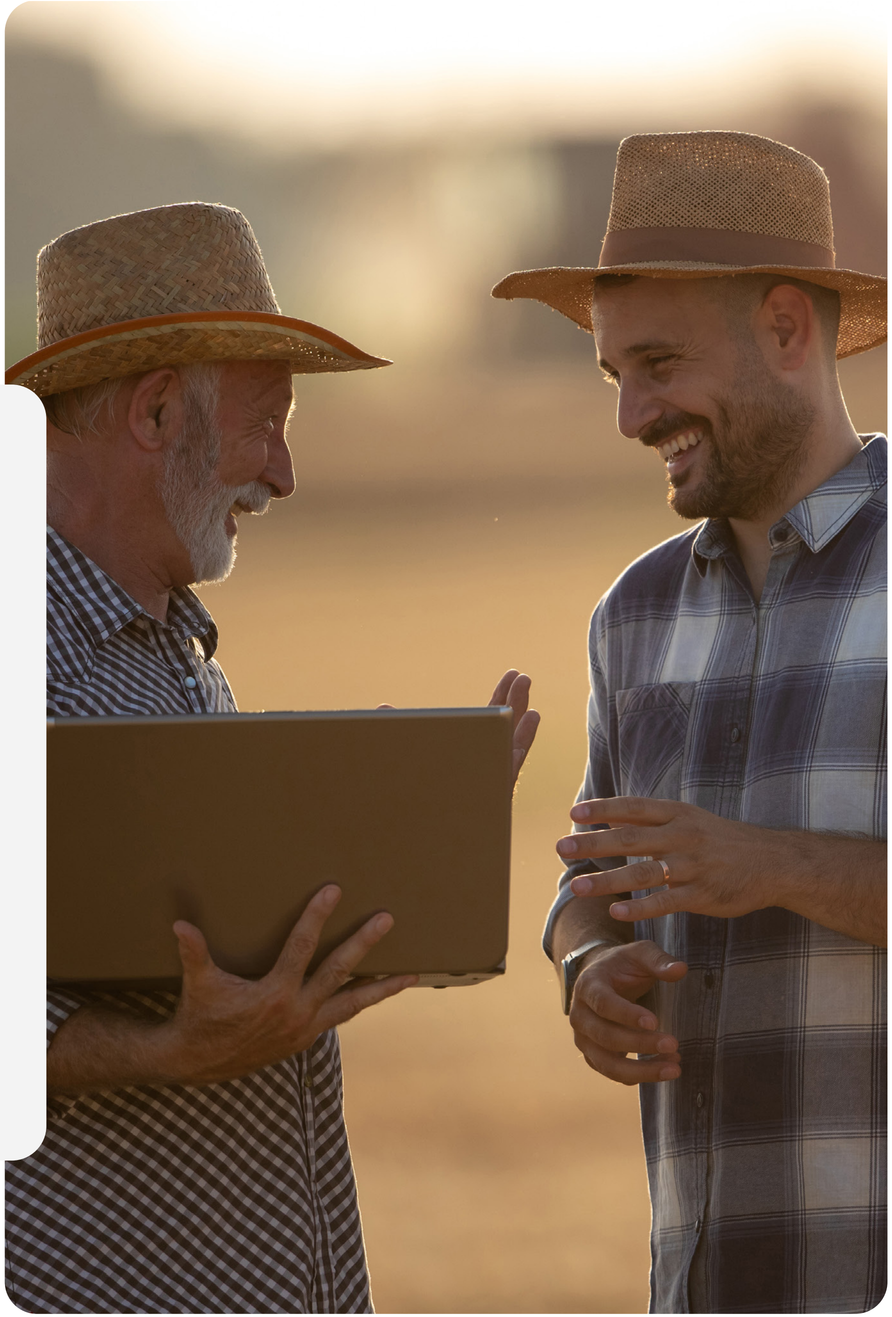


Figure 5: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

Source: International Association for Public Participation (reproduced with permission)

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Higher levels of community engagement have been recognised as critical for positive relationships between communities and large-scale renewable energy developments (Colvin et al. 2015, Hindmarsh 2010). Where projects have the potential for significant impacts on regional communities, engagement needs to be at the higher levels of the spectrum. A leading practice example of engagement is highlighted at section 6.3.1.

6.3.1 Leading practice example: Star of the South

Star of the South is Australia's most advanced offshore wind project, proposed off the coast of Gippsland, Victoria.

According to the proponents, Southerly Ten, community sentiment towards Star of the South has evolved over time from 'initial scepticism' to 'cautious optimism' to 'strong support' driven by the anticipated economic and employment benefits for the region.

Over 90% of participants in consultations reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their opportunity to have a say, and 83% were satisfied with the information provided at the early stages of the project process. The organisation highlights several leading practice engagement strategies that have contributed to building trust with the community:

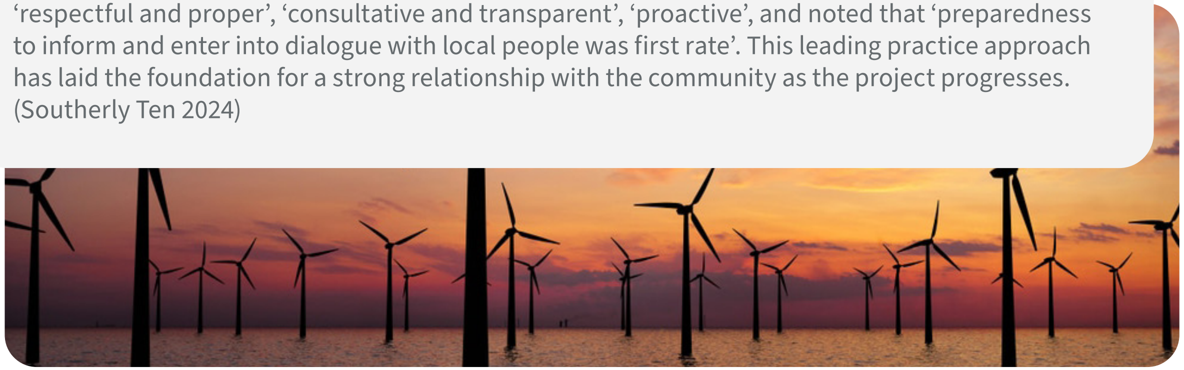
Local presence: Star of the South has had a physical presence in Gippsland since 2018 and views itself as an active participant in the local community.

Early and proactive engagement: The organisation invested in local community engagement five years before applying for a Feasibility Licence.

Building capacity in the community: A Community Advisory Group was founded in 2020 with nearly 30 meetings held to date. This forum has resulted in 21 local champions who share news and information, correct misinformation and connect people with the project team.

Showing the benefits: The company uses local service providers and suppliers to strengthen the local economy.

Feedback from community members described the engagement process as 'gold star', 'respectful and proper', 'consultative and transparent', 'proactive', and noted that 'preparedness to inform and enter into dialogue with local people was first rate'. This leading practice approach has laid the foundation for a strong relationship with the community as the project progresses. (Southerly Ten 2024)



6.3.2 Coordinating engagement to avoid fatigue

Given that the principles and practice of community engagement are well established, it seems surprising that regional communities are reporting such negative experiences with developers.

Sara Bice from ANU's Institute for Infrastructure in Society notes that Australia is in a period of intensive infrastructure development and the speed, volume and intensity of development is creating cumulative impacts in communities (Bice 2023). In the planning stage, more renewable developers prospect in each area than projects will ever come to fruition. Being approached by multiple developers on multiple occasions can cause confusion and engagement fatigue for communities (Dyer 2024).

In some regions, such as the Wimmera Southern Mallee in regional Victoria, communities are feeling inundated with consultation and engagement requests (RAI research interviews 2025). Multiple wind and solar projects, transmission lines and exploration licences for critical mineral sand mining are all converging in the region. The cumulative impacts of multiple approaches, combined with extended timeframes and uncertainty about projects, takes a toll on communities and can lead to reduced social licence. To avoid this, engagement should be coordinated across projects within regions wherever possible.

A coordinated approach might see groups of developers working together to conduct information sessions in the same place, such as at a community open day or event, or government departments coordinating visits of planners and developers to regional communities through forums or roundtables. Developers and government departments can also make themselves available to join in on existing local events or local efforts for collaboration and strategic planning to capture the information they require without duplicating processes for the communities. Section 6.3.3 provides a leading practice example of industry-led coordination and collaboration for better outcomes.

6.3.3 Case study: Wimmera Southern Mallee Renewable Energy Collaboration

The Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) region in Western Victoria faces significant renewable energy investment in the coming decades. This includes transmission infrastructure, wind and solar generation, and the potential for critical mineral sands mining.

The cumulative impact of multiple proposed developments, along with a perceived lack of information from developers and concerns about negative impacts, has led to heightened anxiety among local communities and raised serious social licence concerns (WSM 2024). The community has identified concerns about:

- Low levels of trust between the community and energy companies.
- Lack of genuine engagement and communication
- Negative impacts of renewable infrastructure development
- The need for benefits to be shared with landholders and communities (WSM 2024).

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development is a regional development association funded by five local governments in western Victoria. The organisation's purpose is to shape the region's economic, cultural, social and environmental opportunities by working collaboratively to enable growth, remove barriers and build resilience and sustainability across the Wimmera Southern Mallee region. In November 2023, Wimmera Southern Mallee Development initiated an industry collaboration process, bringing together representatives from renewable energy and transmission companies to explore ways to work together to ensure the region genuinely benefits from the transition to renewable energy.

Mapping the journey

The process began with a workshop in Horsham in November 2023. Representatives from all renewable and transmission companies working in the region were invited along with observers from government, non-government organisations, First Nations groups and Regional Development Victoria. Guest speakers shared their knowledge, insights and ideas to achieve positive community outcomes. Speakers included social and energy policy academics, The Energy Charter, and representation from the First Nations, farming, skills and training, local business, local government, settlement services, youth, housing, mining and regional development sectors.

Energy companies made a commitment to explore options to work together to build genuine benefits in the region, supported by The Energy Charter.

A vision for success

Over a six-month period, the energy partners developed a vision, purpose statement and values, facilitated by The Energy Charter and a local facilitator. The group formalised their relationship as the Wimmera Southern Mallee Renewable Energy Collaboration, consisting of key members from 12 renewable energy and transmission development companies. The group committed to:

- Collaboration to minimise negative impacts from energy development on Wimmera Southern Mallee communities.
- Better engagement, information and insight sharing between energy businesses and Wimmera Southern Mallee communities.
- Alignment and coordinated investment in projects that deliver tangible and lasting community benefit.
- Continuous improvement, transparency and accountability for energy businesses operating in the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

This was formalised through the development of a Collaboration Framework. The first stage partnership has three core activities:

- **Regional Partners Forum:** The forum is a network group that supports coordination between energy businesses, community leaders, representatives and organisations. The forum is coordinated by WSM Development and consists of quarterly meetings, liaison and coordination support and information sharing.

- **Collective Action Partnerships:** The energy partners have committed to work together in a coordinated way to deliver projects that achieve positive community outcomes. Through the collaboration process, the energy partners and community have identified several possible action areas, with three priority projects to be selected and delivered over the next three years.

- **Better Business:** The Better Business initiative encourages transparency, accountability and continuous improvement for energy businesses. Areas identified include best practice landholder compensation, cultural safety practices and innovative benefits approaches. The initiative provides a framework for individual businesses to measure their impact and showcase their achievements to model best practice, innovation and knowledge sharing with the other partners. This stream has the potential to expand into full collaboration over time.

Figure 6: Wimmera Southern Mallee Energy Collaboration Framework

Source: Wimmera Southern Mallee Energy Collaboration Framework

REGIONAL PARTNERS FORUM

What: An ongoing, place-based forum, bringing community leaders and energy businesses together.

Why: To build trust, we need to create a space to listen, understand each other and develop new relationships.

Together, we can: Share and learn, elevate issues and define what 'better' solutions and outcomes look like.

COLLECTIVE ACTION PROJECTS

What: Regionally coordinated action projects that deliver positive community outcomes and drive action in line with community interests.

Why: To build trust, actions must match our words. We must work together to deliver meaningful projects for the collective good.

Together, we can: Better manage the impacts of energy development and harness the opportunity to deliver tangible and lasting benefits on a regional scale.

BETTER BUSINESS

What: Individual commitments from energy businesses that improve the communities' experience of energy development.

Why: To build trust, we must commit to continuous improvement, being transparent and accountable to the actions we take and progress we make.

Together, we can: Encourage and track action at an individual business level, show leadership by pioneering new approaches and demonstrate our individual impact.

Outcomes and impacts will be measured using *'The Energy Charter' Impact Assessment Framework*.

The commitment

Foundation Energy Partners have committed to an initial partnership period of three years. The participation investment paid by Energy Partners provides:

- Resourcing for coordination, administration, communication and reporting
- Project management support and seed funding for collaborative projects
- Coordination of the Regional Partners Forum
- Access to professional development, research, training and events
- SME support, speaker and community participation fees
- Through the collaboration, energy developers have committed to work together and with the Wimmera Southern Mallee community, to create partnerships that ensure that the region can genuinely benefit from the transition.

The WSM Renewable Energy Collaboration seeks to build a new way of working together for industry. The model recognises that time is needed to establish trust and build new ways of working together. The project is in its early stages and, importantly, has identified a staged pathway that reflects the current level of trust and builds momentum for joint action over time. In a region where the community is divided, this collaboration reflects the concept of 'starting where you're at' and exploring new ways of working together.

This pioneering project has led to the development of the *Regional Energy Collaboration Framework* by The Energy Charter for national application. This allows other regional communities to adopt a similar approach to co-designing collaboration across energy companies for the benefit of their communities.

Recommendation: Timely, inclusive and appropriate community engagement should be mandated through policy, regulation and funding schemes.

Governments and coordinating agencies should ensure that quality community engagement is mandated in policy and guidelines. National standards would promote consistency across jurisdictions. The requirement to demonstrate quality engagement should be included in selection criteria for project tenders and funding schemes as per the Australian Government's Capacity Investment Scheme. Once tenders are awarded, engagement obligations should be included as contractual requirements in funding agreements.

Government agencies and developers should locate staff in regions with significant planned renewable energy development. Coordinating agencies and major developers should locate key engagement staff in regional centres in Renewable Energy Zones and other regions experiencing significant renewable energy development. This will assist with building relationships and trust with communities and increase responsiveness and accountability.

Governments and developers should provide transparent, timely and accessible information about planned developments, impacts and benefits to regional communities. The renewable energy transition is visible and immediate for regional communities. Communities experiencing renewables investment need specific, detailed and localised information from trusted channels to resource them to participate in engagement processes in their communities.

Government agencies and developers should pursue a coordinated approach to engagement. Coordinating agencies and project proponents should coordinate engagement activities wherever possible to minimise duplication of effort and consultation fatigue in regions (Dyer 2024). Partnership models such as the WSM Energy Partnership can facilitate better regional collaboration and streamline community experience.

6.4 Social licence, landholders and agreement making

Regional landholders play a key role in social licence of renewable energy developments. Renewables are usually situated on private land (DHPI 2024). Landholder and neighbour payments provide compensation to infrastructure hosts and may help to increase social licence of renewable energy projects. Landholders who host renewable energy infrastructure are paid for the use of their land with typical fees in the range of:

Wind farms
$5,500-$6,500 per MW (though may also be calculated on a per turbine basis), or $40,000 per turbine per year.

Solar farms
$750-$1,250 per hectare or approximately $1,500-$2,500 per MW, or $1,500 per hectare per year. Sheep grazers may also be contracted to have sheep graze under solar panels to keep grass low.

Transmission
Paid per km based on the value of the property, plus reasonable reimbursement of costs including legal, tax, financial valuation and insurance advice.

(Clean Energy Council 2019)

The terms of individual agreements are negotiated privately between developers and landholders. Concerns about a lack of uniformity and transparency are a potential source of division within communities. Introduction of standard terms and conditions across jurisdictions is recommended to increase transparency and equity. Some states and territories have established standard amounts for landholder payments as outlined in Appendix 3.

6.4.1 Landholder resources

Leading practice guides are emerging to assist landholders understand their rights in relation to the acquisition of land and how to successfully negotiate agreements with developers. Significantly, the Queensland Government has also created an independent statutory body, Coexistence Queensland, to support landholders, community and industry to work together. Table 7 provides an overview of resources to support landholders.

Table 7: Resources for landholders

Organisation	Document title	Summary
Queensland Farmers Federation	Queensland Renewable Energy Landholder Toolkit	Queensland Farmers' Federation, in partnership with the Queensland Government, prepared the *Queensland Renewable Energy Landholder Toolkit* to assist and inform landholders as they respond to and negotiate with energy industry representatives about accessing land and developing renewable energy projects.
NSW Farmers	Renewable Energy Landholder Guide	The *Renewable Energy Landholder Guide* has been produced by NSW Farmers with funding from the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment.
The Energy Charter	Landholder and Community Better Practice Engagement Guide	The *Better Practice Engagement Guide* is a collaboration between transmission network service providers, landholder representatives and other community stakeholders including the National Farmers' Federation, Queensland Farmers' Federation, NSW Farmers, Victorian Farmers' Federation, AgForce Queensland and Cotton Australia.

Individual agreements may contribute to regional economic development by increasing spending in the local economy. However, they may also reinforce ownership patterns and reproduce existing inequalities. Large landholders receive disproportionate compensation compared with smaller landholders, renters, residents of towns or First Nations peoples who have been historically displaced. For this reason, community and regional benefit sharing, examined in Chapter 8, is vital to create distributional fairness in regions.

6.5 Conflict resolution

Conflict between stakeholders about proposed energy developments can create significant challenges to project timelines and communities. Early engagement to prevent polarisation and community division is a key recommendation of this report. However, in situations where community division has become entrenched, conflict resolution approaches can be helpful.

A social identity approach explores how different people and groups engage with social, policy, and political conflict about climate and energy issues, particularly through the theoretical lens of the social identity approach (Colvin et al. 2015). This approach recognises that each person's social identity influences how they act and how social groups are formed (Colvin et al. 2015). In a conflict environment, groups can become entrenched in their positions and act in ways that reinforce their own social identity and group cohesion, rather than focusing on achieving the best possible outcomes in a situation. When this dynamic emerges, conflict becomes dysfunctional and conflict legacy can impact public opinion and prevent resolution (Colvin et al. 2015).

To transform dysfunctional conflict dynamics, Colvin's (2015) social identity approach to conflict resolution recommends:

- Focusing on shared values to build shared identities that transcend community division. For example, the shared values of environmental stewardship, economic resilience or regional pride may overcome traditional divisions between opposing groups within a community.
- Involving trusted community members in leadership roles can shape public opinion and may also influence group dynamics to build collaboration over time.
- Implementing participatory processes where diverse groups collaboratively make decisions or design projects to align with local identities. These could include community planning, citizen's juries, deliberative decision-making processes and co-design.
- Integrate social identity considerations into engagement planning to pre-empt and avoid polarisation.

This approach has been used effectively in natural resource management in Australia and internationally. For example, Colvin notes that water policy in Australia and New Zealand has been 'enriched' by collaborative governance approaches which build relationships across groups with different backgrounds and perspectives. By meeting in a safe space quarantined from external contexts and conflicts, the process facilitates an open exchange of opinions and ideas and builds a shared understanding. When people form new, solution-focused groups, they can start to see themselves as collaborators rather than opponents, which makes it easier to find shared solutions (Colvin et al. 2015).

Colvin notes that natural and environmental resource conflicts are often most acute in regions undergoing tangible landscape change, such as transmission or renewables generation infrastructure. When communities confront major change, it is particularly important to prioritise place-based solutions that respect existing local identities and experiences.

Recommendation: Timely, inclusive and appropriate community engagement should be mandated through policy, regulation and funding schemes.

Requirements for timely and inclusive community engagement should be mandated through policy and enforced through state and federal funding schemes. Governments and coordinating agencies should ensure that community engagement requirements are mandated in policy and guidelines. The requirement to demonstrate quality engagement should be included in selection criteria for project tenders and funding schemes such as the Australian Government's Capacity Investment Scheme.

Government agencies and developers to locate staff in regions with significant planned renewable energy development. Coordinating agencies and major developers need to locate key engagement staff in regions with significant planned renewable energy development. This will assist with building relationships and trust with communities and increase responsiveness, information provision and accountability.

Governments and developers should provide transparent, timely and accessible information about planned developments, impacts and benefits to regional communities. The renewable energy transition is visible and already impacting many regional communities. Communities experiencing renewables investment need specific, detailed and localised information from trusted channels to resource them to participate in engagement processes in their communities.

Government agencies and developers should pursue a coordinated approach to engagement. As recommended in the AEIC *Community Engagement Review*, coordinating agencies and project proponents should pool engagement activities in regions wherever possible to minimise duplication of effort and consultation fatigue.

7.0 BUILDING A LEGACY FOR REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

The renewable energy transition has the potential to deliver a broad range of economic, social and environmental benefits to regional Australian communities as outlined in section 1.4.2. This chapter provides an overview of mechanisms currently used by government and industry to mitigate negative impacts and create benefits within regional communities from utility-scale development.

7.1 Jobs, employment and local procurement strategies

Local jobs and business opportunities are key to creating local economic benefits in regional communities. National and state policies provide a framework for jobs and skills development for coal transition communities and regions hosting renewables (see Appendix 3).

The Commonwealth has plans in place, and in preparation, to assist regions to develop a clean energy workforce. The *Energy Industry Jobs Plan* will provide support for workers to transition to new opportunities when eligible coal-fired and gas-fired power stations close. This support can extend to workers of businesses who work directly with the power station where their operations will be substantially impacted by the closure, such as a coal mine that supplies a power station.

Regional Workforce Transition Plans will be place-based plans that will help coordinate employment and skills supports to enable regions to manage the impact of coal and gas power station closures while maximising the benefits of the transition. The Transition Plans will support workers, their families and communities in impacted regions, and includes workers not covered by the *Energy Industry Jobs Plan*.

State and territory plans also include mechanisms to identify jobs and skills opportunities for coal transition communities and regions hosting renewables. Plans have a strong focus on building an appropriately skilled workforce through education and training, reskilling existing workers and facilitating business development opportunities in regions. While state policies provide a framework for local employment, training and procurement options, place-based, region-level planning is also important to meet the needs of individual communities and facilitate skills training to meet workforce demand.

Regional communities consulted as part of the RAI's Empowering Regions report expressed a desire to 'grow their own' workforces to build a long-term legacy from the energy transition (2024a). Partnering with local education and training providers to develop education opportunities is a key initiative to build skill development, apprenticeships and employment pathways in line with changing workforce needs.

7.2 Local government contributions

Local governments receive contributions from renewable energy developments through various mechanisms. These contributions are intended to fund the increased demand or impacts on regional roads, services and infrastructure created by renewable energy developments. These vary from state to state but generally include:

- **Council rates:** All landowners, including renewable energy developers, pay annual council rates on land within a local government area.
- **Infrastructure contributions:** Payments required as a condition of development consent to fund local infrastructure such as roads, drainage, parks and community facilities.
- **Levies:** Some states have special levies or charges related to different types of development.

RAI's 2024 research consultations found that the impact of development on infrastructure and services often exceeds the amount that local governments receive through ordinary rates and developer contributions (RAI 2024a). Increased demand combined with ongoing expenses related to asset management mean that these contributions may not result in long-term improvements or expansion of regional infrastructure.

To address this issue, the Victorian Government has legislated requirements for standard 'Payments in Lieu of Rates' to be paid by renewable energy developers to local governments. The RAI's 2024 Empowering Regions report recommended the extension of this model to all states and territories to fund essential service delivery at a local government level.

In most states, renewable energy developers may also enter into agreements with local governments to deliver benefits to the community from renewable energy development. This process is discussed in Chapter 8.

8.0 BENEFIT SHARING

Benefit sharing has become an important part of the renewable energy landscape in Australia and will play a key role in building a long-term legacy from the energy transition.

8.1 What is benefit sharing?

Benefit sharing refers to formal arrangements established by renewable energy developers to distribute financial and other benefits to communities that host renewable energy infrastructure. Benefit sharing exists across many industries, notably oil, gas and mining in the Australian context.

Typically, a renewable energy developer will allocate funding to a community benefit program, which is then distributed among immediate neighbours, and nearby towns and villages affected by a renewable energy project. Benefit sharing is a key mechanism of distributive justice. It acknowledges that hosting renewable energy infrastructure impacts regional communities and provides a mechanism for developers to build a relationship of trust with host communities, mitigate impacts and contribute to building positive social, economic and environmental outcomes (CEC 2019).

Community benefit sharing can take many forms including neighbour benefit schemes, community funds, First Nations investment, or funding agreements with local councils. Initiatives can range from small grants to strategic partnerships to service commissioning and infrastructure funding.

8.2 Principles of benefit sharing

Best practice benefit sharing programs should be designed collaboratively with local communities and reflect the following principles:

- **Appropriate:** Benefit sharing is tailored to local circumstances, culture and needs, helping to address (not create or reinforce) patterns of conflict or inequality.
- **Proportionate:** The distribution of community benefits should reflect the scale of the project and the level of change experienced by the community. Those who experience greater impacts should receive a proportionate benefit.
- **Flexible:** Benefit sharing outcomes will be improved by community involvement, influence and negotiation. Programs should be designed to respond flexibly to local context and evolve with community needs.
- **Collaborative:** Benefit sharing programs should be designed in partnership with local communities.
- **Transparent:** Information on benefit sharing arrangements should be publicly available, including details of governance, administration and distribution.
- **Strategic:** Benefit sharing should have a positive, lasting, and meaningful impact on the community and provide tangible social, environmental, and economic outcomes.

(Adapted from Clean Energy Council 2019)

8.3 Examples of benefit sharing strategies

Benefit sharing strategies may cover a wide range of community needs and aspirations across social, environmental and economic domains. A variety of benefit sharing examples is outlined in Table 8.

Table 8: Examples of community benefit sharing approaches

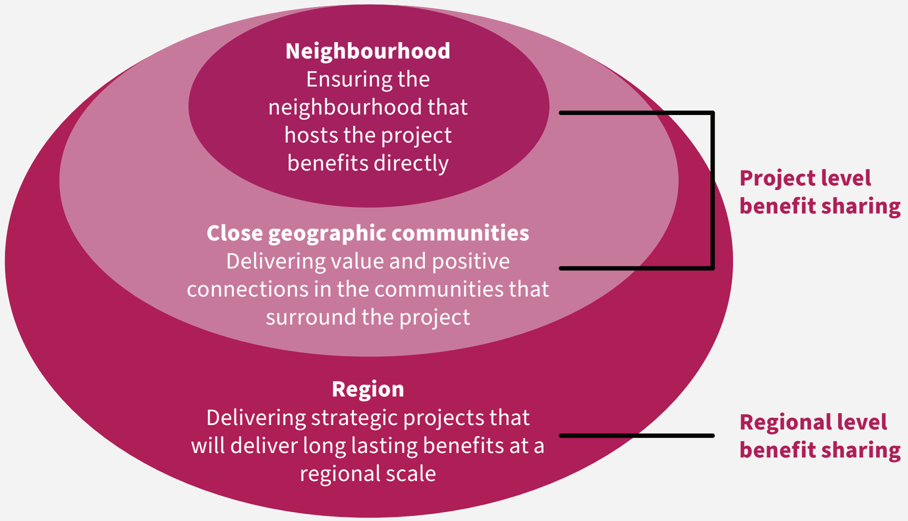
Domain	Description	Examples
Jobs and skills	Employment and training outcomes are key aspirations for regional communities. Benefit sharing programs may focus explicitly on jobs creation or fund initiatives such as innovation hubs, training programs, scholarships, employment pathways, local recruitment strategies etc.	• *Scholarship Program – ACCIONA Energía* • *The Asia Pacific Renewable Energy Training Centre - Dundonnell Wind Farm* • *NSW Community and Employment Benefit Program*
Energy	Visible injustice exists when regional communities host renewables infrastructure but do not have access to a reliable and affordable clean energy supply. Many developers offer clean energy products and discounts to communities on energy bills as part of their benefits strategies.	• *Community Energy Program - Golden Plains Wind Farm* • *Energy Storage as a Service (ESaaS) - Ausgrid* • *Future Host Community Rebates – Engie* • *Dundonnell Wind Farm Mini Grid – Tilt Renewables* • *Community Benefit Scheme – RE Futures*
Physical infrastructure	Benefit sharing may deliver or contribute to large-scale infrastructure developments such as hospitals, schools, or telecommunications and digital infrastructure. It may also focus on smaller community facilities such as playgrounds, community halls, sports facilities etc.	• *Telecommunications infrastructure - ACCIONA Energía* • *Community Grants Program - Winton Solar Farm*
Health and social services	Contributions to improved health and social outcomes through provision of services, programs or enabling infrastructure. Recent Australian examples include suicide prevention and mental health programs, safe house and domestic violence services, and youth services.	• *Voluntary Planning Agreement – Culcairn Solar Farm* • *Community Hub - Merriwa Microgrid* • *Safe Housing Program for Women - Dundonnell Wind Farm* • *Support for the Kids (Mental Health Program) – Rye Park Wind Farm* • *Community Benefit Sharing Program – Goyder Renewables Zone*
Environmental	Benefit sharing can support programs that enrich the local environment such as urban design, community green spaces, bush regeneration, habitat restoration or biodiversity initiatives.	• *Landscaping Program – Golden Plains Wind Farm* • *Regent Honeyeater Project - Winton Solar Farm* • *Funds for Seedlings – Waddi Wind Farm*

8.4 Levels of benefit sharing

Community benefit sharing programs operate at several levels in renewable energy landscape, as outlined by Community Power Agency in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Levels of benefit sharing

Source: Community Power Agency 2023



8.4.1 Neighbourhood

Neighbourhood level benefit sharing targets the immediate neighbours of large-scale renewable energy developments or those whose amenity is directly impacted by the project. These benefits often apply within a geographic radius of 2-5km of a project (CPA 2023).

8.4.2 Close geographic communities

Community-level benefit sharing also generally targets the villages and town centre in the geographic area surrounding a project. Both neighbourhood and community level benefit sharing programs generally relate to a single development project (CPA 2023.)

8.4.3 Region

Regional benefit sharing targets a geographic region where multiple developments are occurring, for example a REZ or renewable energy hub. At this level, funds from multiple development projects in a region are pooled into a single fund. Further funds may be leveraged from other sources such state and local governments to deliver strategic long-term legacy projects. Regional benefit sharing is a key opportunity from the transition and is discussed in detail at Section 8.7.

8.5 Collaborative design

Benefit sharing models should be collaboratively designed with communities to reflect local needs and context. As expressed by Hay, ‘true community benefit schemes have communities at the centre, in decision-making roles’ (2025). This includes participatory processes to identify the type of program, specific benefits, governance, priorities and outcomes. TasNetworks provides a leading practice example of community co-design for a smaller benefit sharing program in North West Tasmania.

8.5.1 Leading practice example: TasNetworks Community Benefits Sharing Program

In 2022, TasNetworks co-designed a community benefit sharing program with local communities and stakeholders impacted by the North West Transmission Development project. The program will provide a total of $10 million for initiatives across the six LGAs affected by the project. A highlight of the program co-design was the creation of a Youth Panel to ensure the values, concerns and priorities of young people are reflected in the program.

The Youth Panel identified seven potential focus areas based on feedback from local community members: health and well-being; community infrastructure; environment/sustainability; accessibility and availability of services (e.g., transport, medical services); community arts initiatives and events; education, employment skills and training; and sense of community. Each of the programs need to reflect the community’s identified values and priorities.

8.6 Benefit sharing contributions

Developer contributions to benefit sharing programs are generally negotiated between the developers and host communities, although additional guidance and standardised contributions are developing nationally. To date, New South Wales is the only state to prescribe mandatory benefit sharing contributions for developers. The mandated rates are:

- **Community benefit sharing:** $1,050 per MW capacity per year for wind, and $850 per MW capacity per year for solar. The Clean Energy Council (2024) estimates that community benefit sharing programs will deliver an estimated $1.9 billion in contributions to regional communities and councils between 2024 and 2050.
- **REZ Access Fees:** $575 per MW capacity per quarter, of which $425 per MW per quarter is allocated to community benefit initiatives and $125 per MW per quarter is allocated to employment initiatives. These fees are projected to contribute approximately an addition $80 million per year in New South Wales for long-term legacy and employment investment through the Community and Employment Benefit Program (see section 8.7.7)

Other jurisdictions provide best practice guidance and suggestions for benefit sharing contributions (see Appendix 3). Regional benefit sharing programs for long-term legacy infrastructure and investment are also proposed in Victoria.

Contribution rates for developers need to be set carefully so that they are not so high that they impact project feasibility or discourage ongoing capital investment. When states introduce multiple levels of compulsory contributions, these need to consider cumulative impact for developers and be aware of the potential for duplication and fragmentation in governance and outcomes.

As renewable energy developments ramp up, regions with multiple renewable energy projects are experiencing the emergence of multiple benefit funds, often with several streams of funding, multiple layers of governance and overlapping benefit groups. The increasing complexity in benefit sharing arrangements creates the need to consolidate or streamline initiatives through regional benefit sharing models.

8.7 Regional benefit sharing models

Regional benefit sharing refers to the strategic aggregation of community benefits funding from multiple energy projects in a geographic region into a single funding program (CPA 2023). This approach is emerging as a key opportunity to build a long-term legacy from the energy transition in regions and communities that host renewable energy projects.

8.7.1 The opportunity for the regions

As the number of renewable energy projects in designated geographic areas increases, the benefit sharing landscape is becoming increasingly complex. Navigating multiple benefits schemes can be challenging for communities faced with several application processes with varying scope and eligibility criteria. Multiple levels of governance increase costs and administration, and regions experience diminishing returns over time as the need for small grants traditionally filled by benefits programs becomes exhausted (CPA 2023).

Regional benefit sharing is a key strategy to enable the delivery of more impactful, long-term initiatives in regional communities than is possible through individual benefits programs. This approach has the potential to streamline and coordinate administration, facilitate co-investment, and invest in long-term legacy-building projects in the regions. However, while the need for regional benefit sharing has been widely identified, this model is in the early stages of development in Australia. Examples are emerging across the nation, driven by state and local governments and regional organisations.

8.7.2 Leading practice example: Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) Power Grid Community Benefit Royalty Agreement

The Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD), an organisation of seven councils in Central Western Queensland, has created a unique framework, the *Community Benefit Royalty Agreement*, to deliver significant long-term benefits to its region from future transmission and clean energy infrastructure related to the proposed RAPAD Power Grid.

The RAPAD Power Grid is a community-led energy infrastructure development project that will be delivered through a collaboration agreement between RAPAD, Barcaldine Regional Council and Queensland-owned company VisIR Pty Ltd (RAPAD 2025). The Agreement acknowledges that while communities located in and around energy transition projects often gain employment and investment benefits during the construction phase, the broader and longer-term advantages are typically distributed at the state or national level – leaving local communities inadequately compensated. To remedy this, the CBRA will deliver approximately $183 million over a 25-year period to communities to support social and economic infrastructure development.

Fund allocation decisions will be made by local councils and the community via a governance framework. Funds will not only be allocated to local government areas hosting renewables and transmission but also to adjacent communities to improve infrastructure. Funding will focus on social infrastructure through skills development and environmental management capacity building, as well as improving agricultural infrastructure (e.g. water, transport and logistics) to increase livestock production capacity and efficiency.

This example highlights the potential for a coordinated approach to developing both energy and agricultural infrastructure, aligning the goals of energy transition with those of agricultural production. In addition, the Agreement also ensures that First Nations people will be key decision-makers in determining the allocation of the funds and that a minimum allocation to the benefit of First Nations communities will be established.

8.7.3 Benefit sharing in Renewable Energy Zones

Within the REZ framework, the New South Wales and Victorian governments are both planning to implement REZ-level benefits programs, separate from and additional to, local community benefit funds. REZ boundaries typically span several local government areas. The NSW Community and Employment Benefit Program is the first to commence in Central-West Orana and offers several streams of funding with the goal of delivering long-term benefits that contribute to liveability in communities.

8.7.4 Leading practice example: NSW Community and Employment Benefits Program

The NSW Community and Employment Benefits Program is the first REZ-level benefit sharing program to be implemented in Australia.

Under the scheme, mandatory REZ Access Fees paid by developers are used to deliver employment and community benefits in NSW REZ communities. The program is administered by EnergyCo and will deliver initiatives focused on liveability, employment, economic development, resilience and First Nations initiatives. The fees are expected to generate approximately $80 million per year across NSW, with *$128 million announced in Central-West Orana REZ* over the next four years.

Consultation will be undertaken in each REZ to understand community priorities through engagement with councils, community reference groups, First Nations working groups, REZ steering committees and public participatory processes. The program will allocate funds through three funding modes:

- **Grants** to not-for-profit community organisations, local councils, incorporated First Nations bodies, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, and other eligible stakeholders;
- **Strategic partnerships** with NSW Government agencies, statutory bodies and the renewable energy industry; and
- **Direct procurement or commissioning** of programs, services, or infrastructure on behalf of communities.

The intention of the program is to build a long-term legacy in REZ communities. Strengths of this model include its grounding in legislation, management of the administrative burden on behalf of communities, and whole-of-(REZ)-region approach. However, it does represent an early iteration of regional benefit sharing and has limitations including a commitment to ‘community consultation’ rather than community-led decision-making and potential fragmentation through a competitive grant application approach.

8.8 Governance models for benefit sharing

When identifying an appropriate governance model for regional benefit sharing, communities should consider their goals and future aspirations, as well as policy and regulation in the relevant jurisdiction. Importantly, the governing entity needs to be able to hold and divest funds. Communities may also like to consider other functions such as future funds or co-ownership schemes. Table 9 provides an overview of potential governance models for coordinated or regional benefit sharing. The first column identifies the administering entity – this may be a government department or independent organisation. In each of the models, the role of community and the process for decision-making can be determined in collaboration with communities.

Table 9: Potential governance models for regional benefit sharing

Administrator	Description	Example
State or local government	Government receives contributions from multiple developers and coordinates distribution.	NSW Community Employment and Benefit Fund
Existing incorporated association	Communities identify an existing independent organisation to administer benefits from aggregated funds.	Non-for-profit organisation, regional development organisation or joint association e.g. RAPAD, WSM.
Cooperative	Communities form a member-owned and democratically governed legal entity.	Hepburn Energy
Purpose-built entity	Communities form a for-purpose legal entity to manage and distribute funds to the community.	Community Foundations

8.8.1 Administration and decision-making

Community benefit funds require administration. Administration is likely to be more intensive in the design phase and require ongoing operational support to identify community needs, build strategic partnerships, allocate and distribute funding, conduct engagement and support governance or community reference groups. Administration may be managed in-house by developers or outsourced to government or an independent organisation as described in Table 9.

Community decision-making may be enacted in various ways. A common model is a representative Community Reference Group. The role of the Community Reference Group will depend on the community and may range from consultation to full decision-making about funding allocation. Transparency around decision-making, prioritisation and allocation is key to public confidence in decision-making. It is also important to note that many communities are likely to need resourcing and support to participate in decision-making processes (Hay 2025).

In regions with multiple renewable energy developments and associated community benefit funds, nominating an independent organisation to coordinate governance and administration can reduce administration costs, reduce duplication and streamline outcomes for communities (RAI 2024a).

Internationally, a range of options have been developed to support communities with the establishment and administration of benefit sharing funds. In Scotland, several independent not-for-profit organisations, as well as statutory authorities, support communities and developers to set up community-led benefits programs by providing resources, funding and education, or managing and distributing funds.

8.8.2 Leading practice example – Foundation Scotland

Foundation Scotland supports communities and industry to develop community-led benefits programs. The foundation works with funders, donors and philanthropists, in partnership with communities to work in supporting and strengthening communities. They provide a conduit for the renewable energy sector to provide community benefit funds. They provide a pathway for developers to access communities and providing place-based funding through corporate partnerships, including renewable energy developers. The foundation is a suggested mechanism in the *Scottish Government Good Practice Principles for Community Benefits from Offshore Renewable Energy Developments* to maximise benefit impacts by ensuring benefit are focused on community needs.

8.9 Community ownership of renewables

While community investment and ownership are relatively rare in utility-scale development in Australia, this model provides a potential opportunity to build long-term benefits for regional communities from the renewable energy transition.

International examples including in Denmark, Scotland and Norway offer potential models for Australian communities to emulate. Denmark has a required 20% community ownership for all new renewable energy developments (IEA 2023).

Research shows that community ownership generally leads to more positive attitudes in the community towards renewable energy projects (Musall and Kuik 2011). This is particularly evident when community ownership models are co-designed with communities, rather than establishing the infrastructure than offering shares (Musall and Kuik 2011).

Shared and community ownership models of renewable energy infrastructure play an important role in building trust and community support for renewable energy projects more broadly (Gui and MacGill 2018). In Australia, the Hepburn community was originally opposed to a large-scale wind farm in their region. Through a collaborative process, a community ownership model was developed, resulting in the first community owned wind farm in Australia. Hepburn Energy now produces around 11,000 MW of electricity each year, with plans to expand into solar and battery storage (Clean Energy Regulator 2024).

Community ownership models generally see greater benefits directed towards the community, which can decrease opposition to the planned project. However, the motivations of individuals in the community to engage in development will influence the outcomes of the project, with levels of social capital in a community heavily influencing the success or failure of a project (Slee, 2020). Conflicts within communities can arise from varying visions for the project and approaches to benefit sharing. Other challenges to consider in designing community schemes include financial complexity, maintenance and upgrades, legal structure, benefits sharing and risk and liability.

8.9.1 Leading practice example – Hepburn Energy

Hepburn Energy, located at Leonards Hill in Victoria, is Australia's first community-owned wind farm and has been in successful operation since 2011. Owned and managed by the Hepburn Community Wind Park Co-operative, the 4.1 MW wind farm produces enough renewable electricity to power over 2,000 local homes—displacing approximately 12,200 tonnes of CO_2 annually.

Funded through a mix of community investment ($10 million from over 2,000 investors), state government grants and a bank loan from Bendigo Bank, Hepburn Wind has served as a pioneering model for community-owned renewable energy in Australia. The cooperative is now expanding its vision to include solar and battery storage.

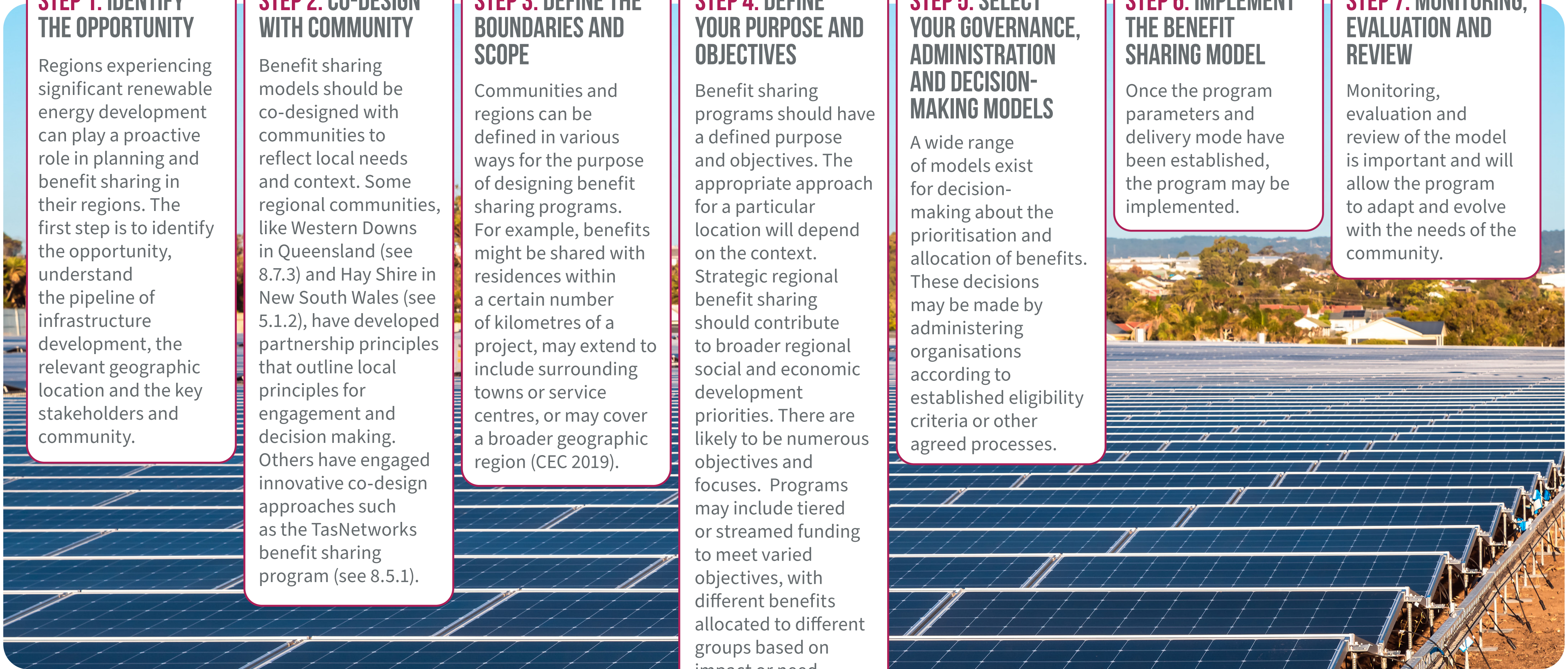
A key to Hepburn Energy's success has been its deep commitment to community engagement. Profits are reinvested locally through both investor dividends and the Hepburn Energy Impact Fund, which supports sustainability, climate resilience, and the Hepburn Shire's goal of achieving net zero emissions by 2030.

Since 2011, the co-op has contributed over $326,000 to 97 community projects, unlocking an estimated $6.18 million in total community value—an impact ratio of nearly 19:1. This innovative model demonstrates how renewable energy projects can foster long-term social, environmental, and economic value at the local level.

(Hepburn Energy 2025)

8.10 Benefit sharing – steps to success

This section provides an overview of the steps to consider in developing benefit sharing programs, drawing from the examples in the report and benefit sharing literature. Links to published benefit sharing guides and resources are at Appendix 3.



STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE OPPORTUNITY

Regions experiencing significant renewable energy development can play a proactive role in planning and benefit sharing in their regions. The first step is to identify the opportunity, understand the pipeline of infrastructure development, the relevant geographic location and the key stakeholders and community.

STEP 2: CO-DESIGN WITH COMMUNITY

Benefit sharing models should be co-designed with communities to reflect local needs and context. Some regional communities, like Western Downs in Queensland (see 8.7.3) and Hay Shire in New South Wales (see 5.1.2), have developed partnership principles that outline local principles for engagement and decision making. Others have engaged innovative co-design approaches such as the TasNetworks benefit sharing program (see 8.5.1).

STEP 3: DEFINE THE BOUNDARIES AND SCOPE

Communities and regions can be defined in various ways for the purpose of designing benefit sharing programs. For example, benefits might be shared with residences within a certain number of kilometres of a project, may extend to include surrounding towns or service centres, or may cover a broader geographic region (CEC 2019).

STEP 4: DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Benefit sharing programs should have a defined purpose and objectives. The appropriate approach for a particular location will depend on the context. Strategic regional benefit sharing should contribute to broader regional social and economic development priorities. There are likely to be numerous objectives and focuses. Programs may include tiered or streamed funding to meet varied objectives, with different benefits allocated to different groups based on impact or need.

STEP 5: SELECT YOUR GOVERNANCE, ADMINISTRATION AND DECISION-MAKING MODELS

A wide range of models exist for decision-making about the prioritisation and allocation of benefits. These decisions may be made by administering organisations according to established eligibility criteria or other agreed processes.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE BENEFIT SHARING MODEL

Once the program parameters and delivery mode have been established, the program may be implemented.

STEP 7: MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REVIEW

Monitoring, evaluation and review of the model is important and will allow the program to adapt and evolve with the needs of the community.

9.0 THE REAL DEAL – A NEW APPROACH FOR THE REGIONS

As the renewable energy transition progresses, the moment is ripe for emergence of a national approach to build a legacy in the regions. This chapter sets out the key elements of the RAI's proposed model, the Regional Energy and Legacy Deal (REAL Deal).

The RAI's Empowering Regions report, released in August 2024, introduced the concept of a Regional Prosperity Collective and Local Legacy Fund to fund long-term investment in regional communities. The REAL Deal model outlined in this report is an extension of these ideas. The proposed co-investment and regional decision-making framework would bring together government, industry and regions to align investment with appropriate place-based needs.

The model would be collaboratively designed with government, industry and communities and piloted in selected regions to inform development of a national framework.

9.1 Key elements of the real deal framework

KEY ELEMENT	OVERVIEW
National framework	The REAL Deal proposes a national approach to funding in regions hosting renewable energy projects. The model aligns industry contributions with state and federal government investment to deliver a lasting legacy in regional communities.
Regional plans	Regional plans, funded by the Australian and state governments, would identify local priorities and aspirations for REAL Deal investments. State and federal government funding is needed to enable regional communities to participate as equal partners in planning and negotiations.
Local legacy funds	Local Legacy Funds would pool mandatory developer contributions into a single fund. This will allow communities to make significant investments at scale and achieve long-term aspirations. Funding would be used for purposes that deliver social, economic or environmental value. This may include infrastructure, services, jobs and skills development, education, housing, environmental initiatives or financial investments.
Government contributions	Federal, state and local governments would make funding contributions to local investments. Funding could be allocated from existing government budgets such as infrastructure, health, housing or education pipelines.
Local decision-making	Local decision-making would determine funding allocation and prioritisation for REAL Deal investments. Governance and administration models in each region would be collaboratively determined with regional communities. Decision-making may be led by a purpose-built entity or an existing organisation such as a local council, joint organisation or Regional Development Australia committee. First Nations and community representatives must be an integral part of the process.

9.2 Next Steps

Stakeholder consultation is the next step to progress the REAL Deal framework in regional Australia. The RAI recommends that the Australian Government provide funding to develop and pilot this approach in selected regions.

CONCLUSION

This report has examined the key factors that contribute to social licence of large-scale renewable energy projects in regional Australia.

The report recommends that governments draw on the international principles of just transition when developing national, state and regional transition management plans, with an explicit focus on the concepts of procedural justice, distributive justice and recognition justice.

The report identifies key actions for government and industry to build positive social, economic and environmental outcomes for regional communities and highlights leading practice examples of policy and programs across the nation.

At the national level, a cohesive narrative is required that clearly explains the need for renewable energy infrastructure, provides evidence for the approaches taken, and articulates the benefits to regional communities.

At a local level, communities are calling for early engagement and transparent information about projects in their regions. Developers who engage early with communities and seek to address issues achieve better outcomes.

Beyond engagement, the renewable energy transition must bring meaningful, sustainable and equitable benefits to regional communities.

Regional communities are seeking an active role in identifying local priorities and decision-making to shape their own futures. Benefits from renewables projects need to be distributed equitably between and within communities. These benefits must extend beyond immediate financial incentives to building regional economies and long-term investments that improve liveability. Regional benefit sharing provides an opportunity to realise long-held ambitions of regional communities through an ambitious program of regional development projects, and RAI's proposed REAL Deal will develop a national framework to guide this process.

This report highlights the importance of building a cohesive national narrative, proactive planning and engagement, delivering equitable benefits, and coordinating regional investment to ensure the energy transition has a lasting positive impact for regional communities.

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APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

This research aims to contribute to understanding of the factors that impact social licence of large-scale renewable energy projects in regional Australia and provide examples of best practice approaches to create long-term positive impacts for regional communities from the energy transition.

Research objectives

1. Identify the location, scale, duration and value of large-scale renewable energy infrastructure projects in regional Australia to achieve the net zero transition, the regional economic and social impacts and the key issues for regional communities.
2. Identify the key elements of a 'just transition' for regional Australia, including consideration of First Nations Peoples and other key stakeholder groups.
3. Analyse the effectiveness of current policies, frameworks and actions to build and maintain social licence for net zero transition projects in regional Australia and develop recommendations for governments and industry to strengthen their approaches.
4. Identify best practice collaborative models, policies and programs that could be adopted by governments, industry and communities to optimise potential economic, social and environmental benefits from the net zero transition.

Research methods

This research project used a combination of desktop research, in-depth interviews and stakeholder consultation. The primary data collection was conducted in two stages. The first stage consisted of targeted consultations with approximately 60 key stakeholders including state and territory governments, industry representatives and national representative bodies including First Nations organisations, NGOS and academics. The second stage involved in-depth interviews with 32 key stakeholders involved in the energy transition. Stakeholders were identified through purposive identification through new or existing relationships, combined with snowball sampling to leverage the networks of participants. Data from consultations and interviews was transcribed and thematically analysed.

Table 10: Overview of research participants

Data collection method	Jurisdiction/Region	Sample Size	Stakeholders
Government Consultations	• Commonwealth • New South Wales • Victoria • Queensland • Western Australia • South Australia • Tasmania	56 participants • CTH – 15 • NSW – 22 • Vic – 3 • WA – 9 • SA – 10 • Tas - 3	• RAI Shared Inquiry partners • Government departments • Subject matter experts Queensland Government was in caretaker mode at the time of consultations and provided written input and feedback. Invitations were sent to all states and territories for consultation.
Sector consultations	National	8 consultations	• First Nations organisations • Energy organisations • Engagement specialists • Academics
In-depth Interviews	• National • States and territories • Western Downs, Qld • New England, NSW • Hay, NSW • Wimmera Southern Mallee, Vic	32 interviews	• Federal, state and local government representatives • Industry representatives • Regional Development Australia • Regional development organisations • Community organisations

APPENDIX 2: STATE BY STATE POLICY OVERVIEWS

New South Wales

Leading Practice Examples

- Comprehensive suite of policies to facilitate the net zero transition and development of renewable energy infrastructure.
- First to formally declare all planned Renewable Energy Zones (REZs).
- Standard developer contributions mandated through REZ Access Fees and benefit sharing contributions
- Regional benefit sharing for legacy-building through the *Community and Employment Benefit Program*.
- First state to produce specific guidelines for First Nations engagement in renewable energy development.

Policy Overview

Policy area	Governing legislation	Key documents	Summary
Net zero targets	*Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023* (NSW)	*Net Zero Plan Stage 1: 2020-2030*	Establishes the state's commitment to achieving net zero emissions by 2050, with interim targets of a 50% reduction by 2030 and 70% by 2035 compared to 2005 levels. The plan outlines strategies across various sectors to reduce emissions and transition to a low-carbon economy.
Energy infrastructure	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	*Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap*	A 20-year strategy to transform the state's electricity system into one that is affordable, clean, and reliable. It includes the development of REZs, support for new transmission infrastructure and mechanisms to encourage private investment in renewable energy projects.
Planning and impact assessment	*Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NSW)	*Renewable Energy Planning Framework*	The Framework provides a streamlined planning process for renewable energy projects, ensuring timely assessments while balancing environmental, social, and economic considerations. It aims to facilitate the efficient delivery of energy infrastructure necessary for the state's net zero goals.
Jobs and skills	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	*NSW 2030 Renewable Energy Workforce Plan*	Identifies workforce needs and strategies to develop skills and supply chains to support the renewable energy sector. The report emphasises training, apprenticeships and local industry development to meet the demands of the energy transition.
Community engagement	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	*Renewable Energy Planning Framework*	Outlines the NSW Government's approach to engaging with communities affected by energy infrastructure projects, ensuring transparency, participation and benefits sharing to build trust and support for the energy transition.
First Nations	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	*First Nations Guidelines*	Sets out the expectations for respectful engagement with local Aboriginal communities in the construction and operation of new electricity infrastructure projects.
Landholder payments	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	*NSW Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap – Benefits for Regional NSW*	Details the Strategic Benefit Payments Scheme, providing financial compensation to landholders hosting energy infrastructure, ensuring they share in the economic benefits of renewable energy developments.
Benefit sharing	*Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW)	*Renewable Energy Planning Framework – Benefit Sharing Guideline (Nov 2024)*	Sets amount for developer community benefits contribution $1,050 per MW per year for wind, and $850 per MW per year for solar. Separate and additional to benefits fund from REZ access fees.

Victoria

Leading Practice Examples

- Victoria has set ambitious emissions targets and mapped a pathway to a clean energy future.
- The Draft Renewable Energy Zone Community Benefits Plan announces the intention to establish a mandatory rate for developer contributions to REZ Community Energy Funds. This fund would focus on energy justice for regional Victorians.

Policy Overview			
Policy area	**Governing legislation**	**Key documents**	**Summary**
Jobs and skills	*Renewable Energy (Jobs and Investment) Act 2017* (Vic)	*Victorian Energy Jobs Plan*	Aims to support 59,000 new jobs in the clean energy transition. Focus areas include training for renewables, offshore wind, hydrogen, and grid workforces. Plan supports TAFEs and reskilling programs.
Community engagement	*National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid) Act 2024* (Vic)	*Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria (2021)*	Legislation strengthens VicGrid's role as the coordinating body for renewable energy zones (REZs) and transmission planning, and mandates that impacted communities are consulted in project planning. The guide outlines leading practice approaches to engagement and benefit sharing with communities.
First Nations	*National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid) Act 2024* (Vic)	*Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria (2021)*	Legislation mandates that Traditional Owners are consulted in project planning. The guide outlines leading practice approaches to engagement with Traditional Owners.
Landholder payments	*National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid) Act 2024* (Vic)	*Draft Renewable Energy Zone Community Benefits Plan*	Draft REZ Community Benefits Plan proposes fixed benefit payments to landholders for hosting infrastructure. Intended to create consistency and equity across REZs, while building local support for development. Final scheme expected in future legislation.
Benefit sharing	*National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid) Act 2024* (Vic)	*Draft Renewable Energy Zone Community Benefits Plan*	Draft REZ Community Benefits Plan announces the intention to establish a mandatory rate for developer contributions to REZ Community Energy Funds. This contribution would be separate from and additional to discretionary community benefit payments.

Queensland

Leading Practice Examples

- Following a change of government in October 2024, Queensland is reviewing its energy policy framework through the development of the Energy Roadmap, scheduled to be released by the end of 2025.
- A Code of Conduct for renewable energy proponents is being developed with industry to guide developer behaviour.
- In June 2025, legislation was passed by the Queensland Parliament to make social impact assessments and community benefits agreements mandatory in Queensland's renewable energy project planning approval processes.
- Queensland Government has repurposed the Queensland GasFields Commission to the independent statutory body, Coexistence Queensland, to support landholders, community and the energy industry working together.

Policy Overview

Policy area	Governing legislation	Key documents	Summary
Net zero targets	*Clean Economy Jobs Act 2024* (Qld)	Clean Economy Jobs Act 2024 (Qld)	Establishes legislative framework and targets for Queensland's net zero agenda. The Queensland Government has committed to reviewing the current interim emissions targets. The outcome of the review will be included in the Net Zero Roadmap, due for release in mid-2026.
Energy infrastructure	*Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Act 2024* (Qld)	Energy Roadmap (in development)	The Queensland Government is developing a five-year Energy Roadmap to be released by the end of 2025, identifying priorities for the energy sector to deliver an affordable, reliable and sustainable energy system for the state.
Planning and impact assessment	*Planning Act 2016* (Qld)	Queensland's planning framework for wind farms and large-scale solar farms	In accordance with the legislation, project proponents will be required to conduct social impact assessments and enter into community benefit agreements before applying for development approval, integrating social accountability into planning processes.
Jobs and skills	*Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Act 2024* (Qld)	Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Act 2024 (Qld)	The Queensland Renewable Energy Jobs Advocate was appointed to provide advice on opportunities and barriers for energy sector jobs growth in accordance with the legislation.
Community engagement	*Planning Act 2016* (Qld) *Electricity Act 1994* (Qld)	Queensland's planning framework for wind farms and large-scale solar farms Code of Conduct for renewable energy proponents (in development)	In accordance with the legislation, project proponents will be required to conduct social impact assessments and enter into community benefit agreements before applying for development approval, integrating social accountability into planning processes. Code of Conduct for renewable energy proponents, with a focus on legacy community benefit and addressing current community concerns.
First Nations	*Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003* (Qld) *Queensland Heritage Act 1992* (Qld)	What native title means for Queensland Powerlink's Protecting Cultural Heritage	First Nations engagement in Queensland is governed by native title and cultural heritage legislation.
Landholder payments	*Acquisition of Land Act 1967* (Qld)	Powerlink Landholder Payments Framework	Powerlink's landholder payment framework provides guidance on compensating landholders impacted by large-scale energy infrastructure. through fair, transparent and consistent compensation practices.
Benefit sharing	*Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Act 2024* (Qld) *Planning Act 2016* (Qld)	Queensland's planning framework for wind farms and large-scale solar farms	In accordance with the legislation, project proponents will be required to conduct social impact assessments and enter into community benefit agreements before applying for development approval, integrating social accountability into planning processes.

Western Australia

Leading Practice Examples

- Western Australia has committed over $1 billion for storage, wind, and transmission upgrades, making it one of the largest state-level clean energy investments in Australia.
- In a leading practice example of regional governance, the Pilbara region's transition is coordinated through the Pilbara Roundtable, bringing together Traditional Owners, industry, and government to ensure benefits are shared and infrastructure is delivered strategically.

Policy Overview

Policy area	Governing legislation	Key documents	Summary
Net zero targets	Climate Change Bill (2023)	*Powering the global energy transition*	Legislates net zero by 2050 with interim targets and annual progress reporting.
Energy infrastructure	*Electricity Industry Act 2004* (WA)	*Energy Transformation Strategy*	The Energy Transformation Strategy is the state's overarching plan to secure reliable, sustainable and affordable electricity as the state transitions to renewable energy.
Planning and impact assessment	*Planning and Development Act 2005* (WA)	*Position Statement: Renewable Energy Facilities*	Outlines requirements to support the consistent consideration and provision of renewable energy facilities within Western Australia.
Jobs and skills	N/A	*Energy Transformation Strategy*	The Energy Transformation Strategy provides the overarching policy direction for the state's transition to a low-carbon energy system, including workforce and skills development as a priority.
Community engagement	N/A	*Draft Renewable Energy Zone Community Benefits Plan*	Promotes early and inclusive community input in energy project planning.
First Nations	*Native Title Act 1993* (Cth)	*Pilbara Energy Transition Plan*	First Nations engagement in WA is governed by a combination of native title, Aboriginal Affairs and heritage legislation. Engagement guidance for specific regions and projects is contained in local plans such as the Pilbara Transition Plan.
Landholder payments	*Land and Public Works Legislation Amendment Act 2023* (WA)	*Land and Public Works Legislation Amendment Act 2023 (WA)*	WA landholder payments for renewables are governed by the Land Administration Act 1997 (WA), as amended by the Land and Public Works Legislation Amendment Act 2023 (WA), with further detail provided in government guidance for diversification leases. There is no legislated, uniform payment schedule.
Benefit sharing	N/A	*Draft Guideline on Community Benefits for Renewable Energy Projects – Consultation Paper*	Draft guideline released for consultation June 2025. The guideline provides support for the community and renewable energy developers to negotiate benefits.

South Australia

Leading Practice Examples

- South Australia is widely recognised as a global leader in the renewable energy transition, increasing its renewable energy generation from 1% to 74% since 2003.
- The state is on track to achieve 100% net renewable electricity generation by 2027.
- The *Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024 (SA)* is comprehensive, leading practice legislation that sets the pathway to net zero and creates a 'one door to government' approach to streamline development.
- Under the Act, proponents must comply with strict consultation requirements and transparent stakeholder engagement.
- Community sentiment towards renewable energy is notably stronger in South Australia than most other states.

Policy Overview

Policy area	Governing legislation	Key documents	Summary
Net zero targets	*Climate Change and Greenhouse Emissions Reduction Act 2007* (SA)	*Renewable Energy Policy*	South Australia has set ambitious long-term emissions reduction goals.
Energy infrastructure	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	*Renewable Energy Resource maps*	These maps provide investors and developers with suitable sites for renewable energy projects in South Australia, with a particular focus on the Gawler Ranges and Whyalla.
Planning and impact assessment	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Regulations 2024*	The HRE Act and its accompanying regulations govern the planning, approval, and impact assessment of large-scale renewable energy and hydrogen projects in South Australia.
Jobs and skills	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	*Hydrogen Workforce Plan* *South Australia State Prosperity Project*	Workforce strategies aim to link hydrogen investments with job creation. The Prosperity Project and Jobs Plan focus on long-term employment pathways and economic growth driven by renewable energy development.
Community engagement	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	*Community engagement charter*	The HRE Act embeds community engagement requirements. The charter sets expectations for meaningful dialogue with stakeholders, particularly in renewable energy regions, enhancing social license and local collaboration.
First Nations	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	N/A	The HRE Act embeds First Nations engagement requirements to support early, informed, and ongoing participation of Aboriginal people in the renewable sector.
Landholder payments	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	N/A	N/A
Benefit sharing	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024* (SA)	N/A	The HRE Act includes guidelines for benefit sharing in SA.

Tasmania

Leading Practice Examples

- Tasmania has legislated and achieved 100% renewable electricity generation by 2020 and has set a legally binding target to double this output to 200% of 2022 levels by 2040.
- The state government has published the Guideline for Community Engagement, Benefit Sharing, and Local Procurement, setting best-practice standards for involving local communities throughout the lifecycle of renewable projects
- Projects such as Project Marinus, Battery of the Nation and large-scale wind and hydrogen developments position Tasmania as a significant exporter of renewable energy.

Policy Overview

Policy area	Governing legislation	Key documents	Summary
Net zero targets	*Climate Change (State Action) Act 2008* (Tas)	*Tasmania's Climate Change Action Plan 2023-25*	Sets the framework for climate action and emissions reduction.
Energy infrastructure	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment (Renewable Energy Zones) Bill (2024)	*Tasmanian Renewable Energy Action Plan*	The Renewable Energy Action Plan outlines the actions to be taken by the state to transform Tasmania into a global renewable energy powerhouse, making energy work for the Tasmanian community, growing the economy and providing jobs.
Planning and impact assessment	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment (Renewable Energy Zones) Bill (2024)	*Renewable Energy Coordination Framework (RECF)* *Renewable Energy Approval Pathway (REAP)*	Planning frameworks are incorporated under RECF and REAP. These streamline approval pathways and seek to integrate social and environmental factors.
Jobs and skills	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment (Renewable Energy Zones) Bill (2024)	*Renewable Energy Approval Pathway*	Encourages local employment and workforce development within renewable energy projects. REAP is designed to enable job creation alongside efficient project approvals.
Community engagement	Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement	*Renewable Energy Development in Tasmania: A Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement (2024)*	Emphasises transparent, early and ongoing community involvement in renewable energy developments. Guidelines support benefit sharing, local procurement and socially responsible engagement practices.
First Nations	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment (Renewable Energy Zones) Bill (2024)	*Renewable Energy Development in Tasmania: A Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement (2024)*	The guideline outlines principles and practical steps for meaningful engagement throughout all project stages, aiming for equitable and impactful benefit sharing with Aboriginal communities.
Landholder payments	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment (Renewable Energy Zones) Bill (2024)	*Renewable Energy Development in Tasmania: A Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement (2024)*	No specific payment amount but landholders are encouraged to seek professional advice and ensure agreements are fair, flexible, and reflect project scale and technology changes
Benefit sharing	Energy Co-ordination and Planning Amendment (Renewable Energy Zones) Bill (2024)	*Renewable Energy Development in Tasmania: A Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement (2024)*	No mandatory amount. Best practice guidance recommends range of $800-$1,800 per MW per year for wind and $150-$800 per MW per year for solar.

APPENDIX 3: BENEFIT SHARING CONTRIBUTIONS OVERVIEW

Jurisdiction	Guideline	Overview
Commonwealth	*National Guidelines: Community engagement and benefits for electricity transmission projects*	Outlines principles and approaches to community benefit sharing.
New South Wales	*Renewable Energy Planning Framework - Benefit Sharing Guideline (Nov 2024)*	Sets amount for developer community benefits contribution $1,050 per MW per year for wind, and $850 per MW per year for solar. Separate and additional to benefits fund from REZ access fees.
Victoria	*Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria: A guide for renewable energy developers (July 2021)* *Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) Community Benefits Plan (Draft) (2024)*	The draft REZ Community Benefits Plan announces the intention to establish a mandatory rate for developer contributions to REZ Community Energy Funds. This contribution would be separate and additional to discretionary community benefit payments.
Queensland	*Planning Act 2016 (Qld)*	In accordance with the legislation, project proponents will be required to undertake a social impact assessment and enter a community benefit agreement with impacted local governments before submitting a development application.
Western Australia	*Draft Guideline on Community Benefits for Renewable Energy Projects: Consultation Paper*	Draft guideline released for consultation June 2025.
South Australia	*Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Act 2024 (SA)*	The Act requires developers to enter benefit sharing agreements directly with eligible local community groups, First Nations groups and other stakeholders
Tasmania	*Guideline for community engagement, benefit sharing and local procurement (May 2024)*	No mandatory amount. Best practice guidance recommends range of $800-$1,800 per MW per year for wind and $150-$800 per MW per year for solar.
NGO Guidelines	*Renewable Energy Alliance - Community Benefits Handbook (2021)*	No amount specified.
First Nations Guidelines	*First Nations Clean Energy Strategy (December 2024)*	The strategy has been released by DCCEEW. In addition, there are state and industry-based strategies to support Indigenous engagement and benefit sharing.

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