RMCG

VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Tuesday 17 February 2026, 5:30pm to 8:00 pm

Charlton Park Complex, Charlton

ATTENDEES 5:30PM TO 6:15PM CRG ONLY

CRG members

Attendees: Colin Coates, Max Fehring, Cr Justine Hide, Cr. Jenny Greenberger, Paul Haw, Stephen English, Colin Fenton, Claire Grant, Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Melissa Ludeman (Secretariat).

ATTENDEES 6:30PM TO 8:30PM CRG, TCV, GUESTS AND OBSERVERS

CRG members

Attendees: Colin Coates, Max Fehring, Cr Justine Hide, Cr. Jenny Greenberger, Paul Haw, Stephen English, Colin Fenton, Claire Grant, Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Melissa Ludeman (Secretariat).

VicGrid

Attendees: Mick Douge (VNI West Program Director), Mark Gledhill (VNI West Senior Project Manager), Amy Pepper (VNI West Lead, Communications, Engagement and Social Performance), Ali Driscoll (VNI West Senior Advisor Engagement).

Observers

Cr Alan Getley, Geoff Caine (Regional Director North West, VicGrid).

APOLOGIES RECEIVED

CRG member apologies: Bryan Pedersen, Jon Whykes, Cr. Dan Bolitho, Carly Noble

CRG members absent: Brett Hosking, Rachel Lloyd, Glenda Watts, Barry Batters

Certified B Corporation

1 Members only pre-meeting session

This session is only open to Community Reference Group (CRG) members, the Chair and Secretariat. The group focussed on understanding the upcoming agenda and preparing a list of items for general business in the full meeting, among other matters. The particulars of discussions during this session are confidential.

2 CRG meeting

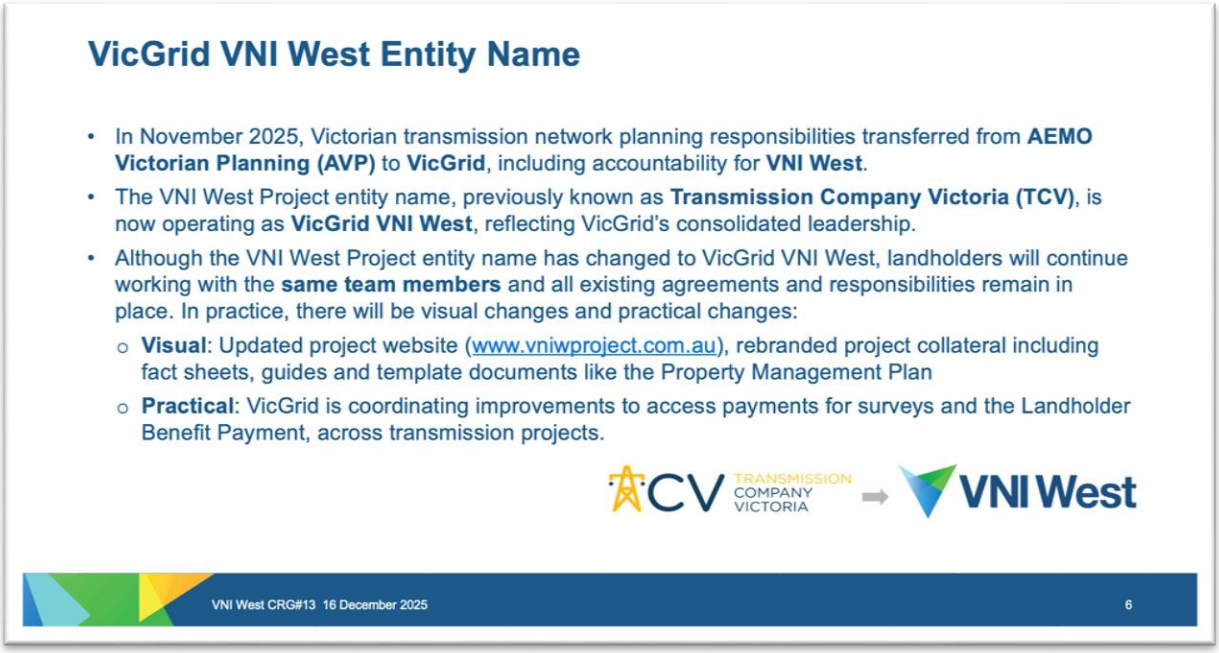
2.1 WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Cr Alan Getley opened the meeting, welcomed attendees and made an Acknowledgement of Country. Independent Chair Claire Flanagan-Smith provided an overview of the meeting agenda, listed apologies and provided an overview of the meeting agenda and questions from the pre-meeting.

The Independent Chair also called for any additional agenda items. An item to discuss the amount of funding set aside for mental health support was added to general business.

2.2 PROJECT UPDATE

A project update was provided by VNI West Program Director Mick Douge.

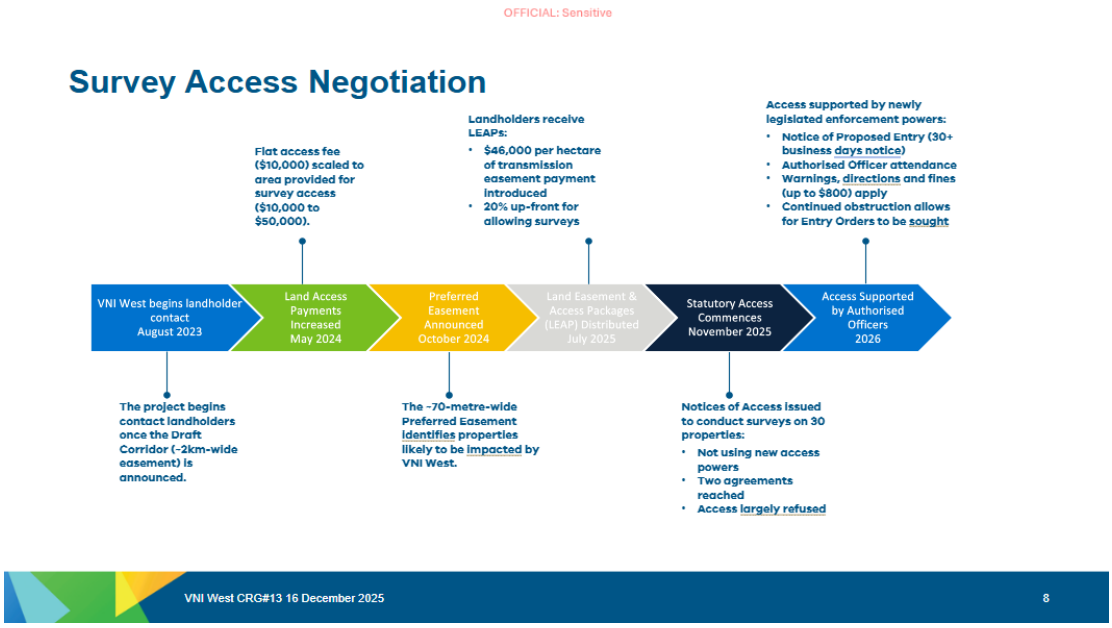


- The entity name associated with VNI West has officially transferred from Transmission Company Victoria (commonly known as TCV) to VicGrid VNI West (publicly VNI West) following the project's transition from AEMO to VicGrid. A letter was sent to landholders advising them of the change in entity name, noting that it does not change anything in terms of project progression (i.e. VicGrid still will not be the builder). Reaffirmation that VicGrid has taken on Iberdrola Australia Networks as the development partner for VNI West.
- Land Easement and Access Packages will be updated to reflect the entity name change and the project team is progressing finalisation of these updates ahead of delivery via digital methods. Digital access is

expected to make the information update easier for landholders, however hard copies can be made available upon request.



- At the end of 2025 VicGrid had 35 landholders who had appointed legal representatives to progress Land Easement and Access Package negotiations. There are now more than 80 landholders who are accessing external advice, noting a total of 226 landholders along the VNI West preferred easement.



- Survey activities on public and private land are ongoing to progress the VNI West Environment Effects Statement (EES) process.
- There were several landholders who impeded access for survey activities at the end of 2025. VicGrid will progress further survey work imminently, using expanded Section 93 land access powers under the *National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Act 2025* (NEVA Act). Notices of Proposed Entry will go out to landholders shortly, with a minimum 30 days required between the issue of a Notice and any access attempt being made.

- **CRG member question:** What does 'Authorised Officer' mean?
- **VicGrid representative response:** Authorised Officer is the correct legal term to describe a role authorised to provide notices and issue fines associated with prescribed matters.

  The role of an Authorised Officer in relation to land access is to confirm that notice requirements have been met, and ensure access is carried out lawfully.

  An Authorised Officer must carry official identification, follow a strict code of conduct, and cannot enter homes or residential buildings. Officers authorised under the Electricity Industry Act do not have authorisation to arrest individuals or to use force.

Action: VicGrid to provide CRG members with information on what the Authorised Officers will be carrying, wearing and their roles and responsibilities.

Discussion points

CRG member question: Stephen English reported that a senior member of the Barapa Barapa community had told him that they did not receive communication from VicGrid about the removal of the southern option, instead finding out about it second hand. He asked why this is happening.

VicGrid response: It is important to note that VicGrid considers Traditional Owners partners in the development of VNI West and takes every possible step to ensure they receive information accordingly. The Barapa Barapa community was advised in writing regarding the removal of the southern option through members of the group that we have been advised are representative of their community. All communication is done in advance and consistently in writing to maintain our relationship. We will investigate this matter to make sure we are advising the community properly.

Action: VicGrid to follow up with Barapa Barapa to make sure the community's communication preferences are being met

CRG member question: In regard to the Weekly Times article about compulsory land acquisition for batteries, what is the government policy?

CRG member clarification: A CRG member looked up the Weekly Times article and to clarify it is about a planning scheme amendment for the farming zone, not compulsory acquisition.

VicGrid response: Battery storage is generally considered to be private generation. However, some battery storage facilities may provide a service for the shared electricity network. If a battery provides a shared network service, then it can become a legitimate reason for compulsory land acquisition. Otherwise, it is considered private generation and not an eligible reason for compulsory land acquisition.

CRG member question: Will you be developing an extreme weather plan for the management of infrastructure?

VicGrid Response: Emergency Management Victoria is responsible for the State Emergency Management Plan, which outlines how Government responds to emergencies. Under the Statewide Emergency Management Plan there are several sub-plans and one of those is the established SEMP Energy Sub Plan. Energy Safe Victoria has a role in that for energy and transmission. Once projects reach maturity, an emergency response planning process is initiated, and it feeds back into the State-wide control centre. The project partner will also have to demonstrate that it can manage emergencies effectively to the Essential Services Commission.

CRG member question: If the Government sets the rules [for emergencies], where do the penalties come in if they are not met?

VicGrid response: Emergency response is heavily regulated by the Essential Services Commission, which will apply penalties where appropriate. The CFA has advised that it will be rolling out more training to smaller brigades on safety around energy infrastructure. There are also discussions occurring on possible fire detection technology uses, noting it has been deployed elsewhere in high fire likelihood situations in Canada.

CRG member question: When are the powerline shuts down for a fire [i.e. what is the trigger]? And how are you supposed to know if it is safe if you are on a truck?

VicGrid response: We [those present] are not sure what the exact triggers are but there will be Standard Operating Procedures.

CRG member response: It will still be uncomfortable for fire fighters to take someone's word for it.

2.3 PLANNING FOR THE CRG 2026

The second part of the meeting was a group discussion focussed on planning CRG meetings for 2026. Key questions for the group were:

- What are the opportunities?
- What are the challenges?
- What is the best way for the CRG to deliver on its scope for 2026?

CRG member suggestions

Opportunities:

- Capitalising on the project: Identifying how we can get the most out of this project for our communities and for those in the city [policy makers] that are looking to us for guidance
- VicGrid communications: Plain English explanations and communications to build community awareness about the impact of the project. Communities have the right to understand the impacts and potential benefits of the project, and it is CRG Members responsibility to share that widely
- CRG members as conduits to specific groups in communities
- Project milestone matching: Getting CRG input at critical times with factual and up to date information is important for the project

  VicGrid comment: Development partner (Iberdrola Australia) can provide firsthand and detailed answers to questions about the planning and construction process. The CRG may want to consider whether they would like regular involvement from Iberdrola in the CRG meetings and what that may look like.

Challenges:

- Direct connection to the Ministers

  This was noted as out of scope as the CRG is an avenue for two-way discussion between the community and the project. However, it may be possible to invite VicGrid Leadership Team members to the meetings. The Independent Chair noted that the Minister's office regularly receives minutes from this CRG
- Compensation challenges

  Noting there could be a discussion led by the Australian Property Institute (API)
- Cumulative energy infrastructure impacts on communities
- Impact of the project on social cohesion
- Mental health impacts.

Suggestions sessions to support the CRG to deliver on its scope in 2026:

- Community resilience and impacts

  Members discussed the value of hosting a session focused on what is meant by "community" in the context of major energy infrastructure projects. It was noted that discussions to date have often centred on impacts to individual farmers, and there may be merit in distinguishing between individual landholder impacts and broader community impacts.

  VicGrid referred to a Federation University research project led by Dr Cathy Tischler examining how proposed energy and mining developments are affecting farmers. The research considers impacts on mental health, sense of control, and community connection amid land use change. It was acknowledged that projects of this scale can fracture existing community networks (for example CFA and school networks) by creating division, and that no party seeks long-term negative social impacts. The research was seen as potentially helpful in broadening the discussion of community benefits and social impacts. Dr Tischler has indicated she would be willing to workshop these themes with the CRG.

  The Independent Chair also referred to a previous question regarding the status of the Social Values and Community Benefit Strategy. VicGrid confirmed that the group remains operational. The draft strategy was released for consultation and feedback has been received. Work is underway to align the strategy with VicGrid's expectations following the transition to VicGrid.

- Iberdrola involvement in CRG meetings

  The CRG discussed Iberdrola's participation in CRG meetings. The group agreed that an introductory session with the development partner could be held to provide information and clarify its role, after which the group could determine the appropriate level of ongoing involvement.

  VicGrid noted that there are opportunities for CRG members to participate in other elements of the VNI West project processes, referencing that some CRG members had been involved in the tender process relating to Iberdrola's appointment.

- Risk, fire, liability and property values

  The group discussed the possibility of hosting a session to consolidate and clarify any outstanding matters relating to insurance, fire, risk and liability, property values, and tax implications.

  The Independent Chair noted that for most of these matters, the CRG has received responses from VicGrid to the extent that is possible, and that VicGrid can only provide generalised answers or refer to other organisations because some of these issues are the responsibility of others. For example, firefighting is the responsibility of CFA, and property values are addressed through compensation processes. The Independent Chair suggested that for the group to progress these long-standing issues, it would be useful to identify clearly what questions remain unanswered.

  VicGrid responded as follows:

  - Firefighting: CFA has Standard Operating Procedures in place.
  - Property values: These are addressed through the compensation process, based on specific landholder impacts. VicGrid recommend that landholders seek independent advice on how it directly affects them.
  - Risk and liabilities: These are outlined in the LEAP package and were covered in a previous CRG meeting in detail. They can be re-shared if needed.
    VicGrid can speak to the legislative framework but cannot advise on how risk and liability provisions will apply to individual circumstances, as these differ between landholders. Independent legal advice is recommended and can be paid for by VicGrid.
  - Tax implications: A Commonwealth-led ministerial forum is considering this issue. A study was commissioned in 2025 and considered by jurisdictions. Decisions regarding potential federal or state responses are pending. Landholders will need to seek independent tax advice based on their individual circumstance. VicGrid are willing to negotiate payment timing with landholders.

The CRG may once again invite an insurance professional to explain how risk and liability arrangements translate into practical, on-ground outcomes.

- Victorian Transmission Plan and cumulative impacts

  The CRG discussed the cumulative impacts of multiple energy developments. The Independent Chair suggested that the CRG may benefit from a session examining the broader policy environment, including the Victorian transmission Plan 2027. The Independent Chair observed that energy is not currently treated as a finite resource in the same way as water, and that there may be lessons to draw from the water sector, given the long-standing experience of some CRG members. The discussion extended beyond the current project to consider regional and cumulative impacts.

- Environment Effects Statement (EES)

  VicGrid suggested some focus on the EES process in 2026. The EES is expected to conclude around mid-year, followed by review, a public submissions period, hearings, and ultimately Ministerial sign-off in 2027. VicGrid is considering how to assist communities to understand the EES findings, particularly in relation to identified impacts, avoidance measures, and mitigation strategies.

  VicGrid also indicated it can support Councillors in communicating key information through other forums.

  The Northern Grampians CRG members advised that they rely on the CRG to remain informed about the project, particularly regarding cumulative impacts. They also highlighted that councils are under-staffed and under-resourced, with competing project demands, and do not have capacity to focus exclusively on large infrastructure projects.

The CRG discussed the timing and number of meetings and agreed to aim to meet every second month.

Action: CRG Independent Chair to develop a plan for CRG meetings for 2026 based on suggestions

2.4 GENERAL BUSINESS

Minutes from last meeting

CRG members accepted that the minutes from the last meeting are true and correct.

VicGrid noted that the deadline for the Renewable Energy Zones submissions was extended until 15 March.

Other general business items

CRG member comment: After speaking to landholders in the community land values and the impact on lending, a CRG member expressed concern that landholders may not be able to continue their farming operations because they no longer have enough equity.

The Independent Chair noted that this matter was discussed in the December CRG meeting, recorded in the minutes and actions are still in progress (*Refer to CRG action 57 due April 2026.)*. No further action requested.

CRG member question: What is the amount of funding available for mental health? For context, the ESC indicated that there were payments available for mental health. Where is the money and how do you get to it? What about funding for awareness material like brochures etc.?

VicGrid response: VicGrid understands there is a barrier to access and has funded a pilot program which was referred to in the last meeting, as discussed in the December CRG meeting.

CRG member comment: A letter was provided to Northern Grampians Shire Council 7-10 days ago stating the funding for the pilot program has been approved. The program is not live yet, because we need to work

out the logistics for implementation. The pilot will be rolled out soon and cost recovery for patients will be a part of this. CWA could be another avenue for directing landholders in need to mental health services.

VicGrid comment: VicGrid can facilitate printing of any mental health awareness material with Council. VicGrid cannot force people to access mental health support. Cost recovery for seeing a specialist outside of this program requires a separate conversation.

2.5 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is planned for the week starting 20 April. Specific date to be confirmed.

The draft CRG meeting plan for 2026 will be confirmed in March 2026.

3 Action register

Table 3-1: Action register

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS
CRG 42	14/05/2025	TCV to investigate the need for neighbouring agreements to ensure clear liability and insurance protocol for damage to property that may influence adjacent landholders.	VicGrid	Aug-25	In progress
CRG 52	19/08/2025	VNI West Team to investigate options for supporting landholders to commission independent experts (e.g. ecologists) for site-specific input to the EES.	VNI West Team	Dec-25	In Progress
CRG 53	19/08/2025	VNI West Team to reach out to landholders mid 2026 to establish a working group or feedback mechanism for CRG members to provide input into the operational requirements of the permit system.	VNI West Team	Jun-26	In progress
CRG 57	16/12/2025	Review the advice provided to landholders to make the implication for loans if land is de-valued due to the project is clear.	VNI West Team	April-26	In progress
CRG 59	17/02/2026	Provide CRG members with information on what the Authorised Officers will be carrying, wearing and their roles and responsibilities.	VNI West Team	April-26	New
CRG 60	17/02/2026	VicGrid to follow up with Barapa Barapa to make sure the community's communication preferences are being met	VNI West Team	April-26	New
CRG 61	17/02/2026	CRG Independent Chair to propose a plan for CRG meetings for 2026.	CRG Chair	April-26	New

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Document review and authorisation

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Doc Version	Final/ Draft	Date	Author	PD Review	BST Review	Release approved by	Issued to
1.0	Draft	26/02/2025	M. Ludeman	C. Flanagan-Smith	B. Gravenor	C. Flanagan-Smith	VicGrid
2.0	Draft	11/03/2026	C. Flanagan-Smith	C. Flanagan-Smith	N/A	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG

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