RMCG

VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Tuesday 18 August 2026, 5:30pm–8:00pm

Charlton Park Complex, Charlton

ATTENDEES 5:30PM–6:15PM CRG ONLY

Cr Jenny Greenberger, Cr Justine Hide, Carly Noble, Colin Coates, Barry Batters, Jon Whykes, Colin Fenton, Max Fehring, Rachel Lloyd, Cr Dan Bolitho, Paul Haw, Bryan Pedderson, Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Joanne Thom (Secretariat).

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

CRG members

Cr Jenny Greenberger, Cr Justine Hide, Carly Noble, Colin Coates, Barry Batters, Jon Whykes, Colin Fenton, Max Fehring, Rachel Lloyd, Cr Dan Bolitho, Paul Haw, Bryan Pederson, Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Joanne Thom (Secretariat).

VicGrid

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) and Bonnie Bryson (Social Performance Manger).

Observers

Cr Alan Getley, Pauline Murtagh (VicGrid, Acting for Regional Director NorthWest) and Wendy Conway-Lamb (University), Doug Galbraith (Iberdrola Australia).

ABSENT

Absent: Claire Grant, Jacquie Kelly, Stephen English

1 Members only pre-meeting session

This session was only open to Community Reference Group (CRG) members, the Chair (Claire Flanagan-Smith) and the Secretariat (Joanne Thom). The group focussed on understanding the content of the upcoming agenda and preparing a list of items and questions to raise for general business in the full meeting. 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, acknowledged Country and welcomed everyone to Charlton.

The Chair welcomed attendees and provided an overview of the agenda for Meeting #17. The Chair also noted that in response to the protest at the attempted June meeting, and as recommended by the CRG members during a subsequent debrief meeting, heightened measures were in place to ensure the safety of all participants to contribute to the meeting.

2.2 ACTION REGISTER REVIEW

In response to an agreed change in the agenda, the action register (refer to Table 3.1) was brought to the beginning of the agenda to be reviewed. The status and progress of actions were noted in the register and are updated in these minutes to reflect progress and information shared in the meeting. A summary of actions discussed is listed below.

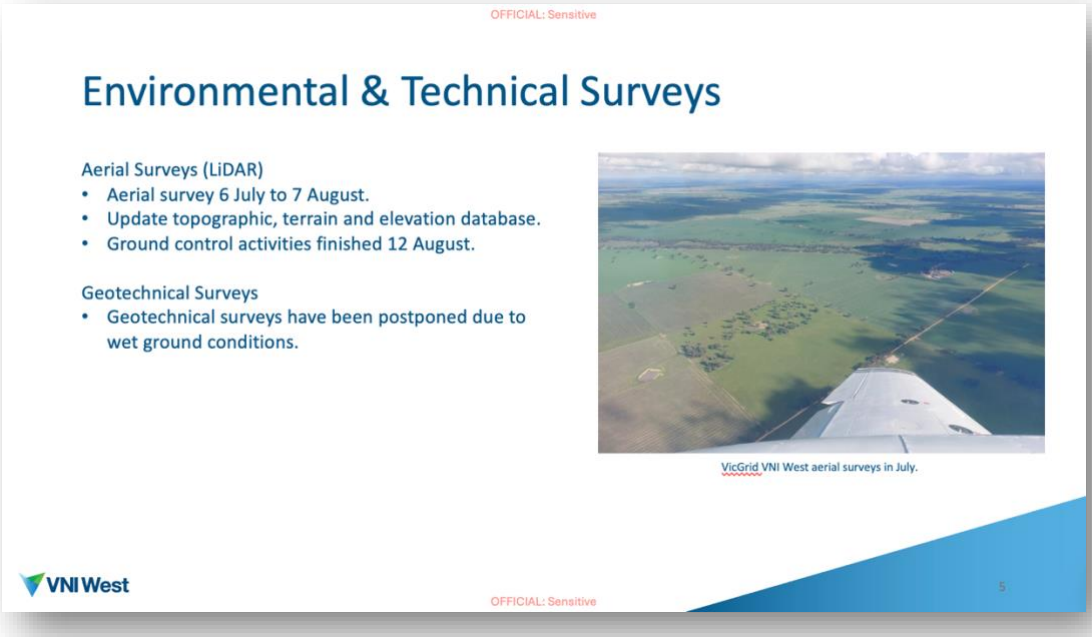
Review of action register, refer to action table for further information:

- CRG 53 – This action has been extended until December 2026 and remains in progress.
- CRG 62 – Figures were provided – refer to action register and this action closed.
- CRG 64 – Figures were provided – refer to action register. Discussion focussed on percentage of arable land affected, or number of farm businesses affected, with a request for further mapping analysis of farmland, public land and forested land to be shown to the CRG. This action remains in progress.
- CRG 64 – Figures were provided and additional publicly available resources suggested to be shared by the next meeting. This action remains in progress.
- CRG 65 – Information was relayed by VicGrid as advice from the Insurance Council of Australia, and this action closed.

The Chair noted that the agreed change to the agenda had led to the meeting running more than 20 minutes behind time. The approach to discuss the action register at the beginning of the meeting will be retained for the next meeting and reviewed if similar delays to future agendas persist.

2.3 PROJECT UPDATE

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



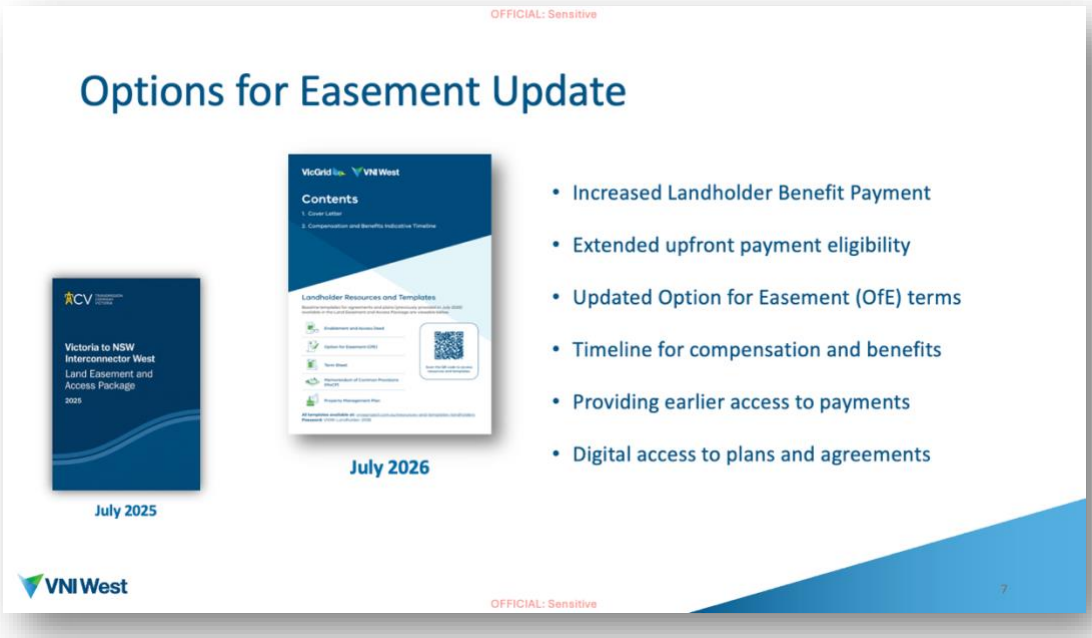
Environmental and Technical Surveys

- Aerial LiDAR surveys were recently undertaken, to support a range of project development activities and planning for engagement during the project's Environment Effects Statement public exhibition period
- Geotechnical investigations were placed on hold due to wet weather.



Stawell Project Office

- A second regional VNI West project office will open in the coming weeks at 179 Main Street, Stawell
- The project's Stawell and Kerang offices will open on alternate Tuesday and Wednesdays, and by appointment.



Options for Easement Update

- The increased VNI West Landholder Benefit Payment of $56,000 per hectare is now available to landowners, with up front percentages of the payment available. This now aligns with other transmission projects across the state.
- The tender process to appoint a Design and Construct (D&C) contractor is progressing, with submissions due to move from the current Invitation to Tender stage to the Request for Proposal stage in the coming months. This process will see VicGrid's VNI West development partner Iberdrola Australia Networks to select a D&C contractor for the project, in consultation with VicGrid.

Questions

CRG member question: Did Iberdrola quote for their own D&C tender?

VicGrid response: No, Iberdrola did not. Iberdrola does not have the capability to deliver this work – it will be contracted by Iberdrola, to a suitable design and construction contractor(s) with local capability.

CRG member questions: The scope of the CRG should be looked at. The projects that will use the line will have impact as well. Can the CRG scope be broadened to take on generation in the region as well? And can we invite the new Minister to attend a CRG meeting?

VicGrid response: The VNI West CRG is a project forum. If the scope was expanded to include generation projects, the purpose of the CRG would change, and may require additional representative members. We would like to hear more on the proposed scope for a new forum, and can take a proposal back to VicGrid. Pauline Murtagh can do this in her role as Acting Regional Director North West Stakeholder Engagement.

Action: Chair to meet with a small group of CRG members to clarify what the proposed change to the scope of the CRG and membership might look like. Colin Fenton, Barry Batters and Justine Hide have volunteered to participate.

Action: VicGrid to take the request for the Minister to meet with the CRG back to VicGrid.

CRG member question: Where does the rationale for VNI West Project sit with regards to de-carbonisation?

VicGrid response: Across Victoria and New South Wales, there is often excess in one grid but not in another. Snowy 2.0 access may not be possible without VNI West. The rationale for VNI West is based on connecting renewable energy generation across states and giving access to Snowy 2.0 storage and generation. The VNI West Project harnesses and transmits clean electricity from Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) in northern/western Victoria and southern New South Wales. It allows Victoria to access energy storage and generation from NSW during high-demand periods (like hot summer days) and lets Victorian renewable generators export excess power to NSW.

2.4 NORTHERN GRAMPIANS MENTAL HEALTH PILOT PROGRAM UPDATE

The Chair invited Northern Grampians Shire Council Councillor Jenny Greenberger to lead the session. Before proceeding Jenny acknowledged the sensitivity of mental health as a discussion, and that there may be people in the room with a lived experience of mental health challenges. Jenny also highlighted the spectrum across which severity of mental health can be categorised, acknowledging that the significant differences between mild and more serious mental health disorders. Cr Greenberger also acknowledged CRG member Colin Coates for his role in lobbying this important topic to Northern Grampians Shire Council for programming support.

Cr Greenberger provided a summary of the pilot program:

- Following community advice, Northern Grampians Shire Council initiated a round table based in St Arnaud to look at ways to provide mental health support to the community.
- The roundtable met for several months and put forward a range of initiatives. Promotional materials such as postcards, fridge magnets and stickers were provided to the community to raise awareness of available support services such as Lifeline.
- The significant regional barriers to mental health support were acknowledged – specifically distance, time and expense. Northern Grampians Shire Council acknowledged the importance of felt that it was important to do something in this space to respond to the pressure being felt by the community with the influx of project development.
- Northern Grampians Shire Council approached State Government and VicGrid for improved services.
- The VNI West project has provided funding for the pilot program.
- The Northern Grampians Shire has now signed a memorandum of understanding with Grampians Community Health to roll out the program titled ‘Farmgate Conversations’.
- Grampians Community Health will employ person for 0.8 FTE (4 days per week) in a clinical support role. The role will provide individual counselling, outreach support and follow up with direct referrals. The position is currently advertised and due to start in October 2026.
- The program is open to anyone in the community who has some connection to farming.
- With employment and management going through Grampians Community Health, the person will be entirely separate from VicGrid and Council.
- This is not being branded as a VicGrid service, but everyone is upfront about the funding source.
- There are other services available that people can be connected with if they don’t want to connect with this initiative.

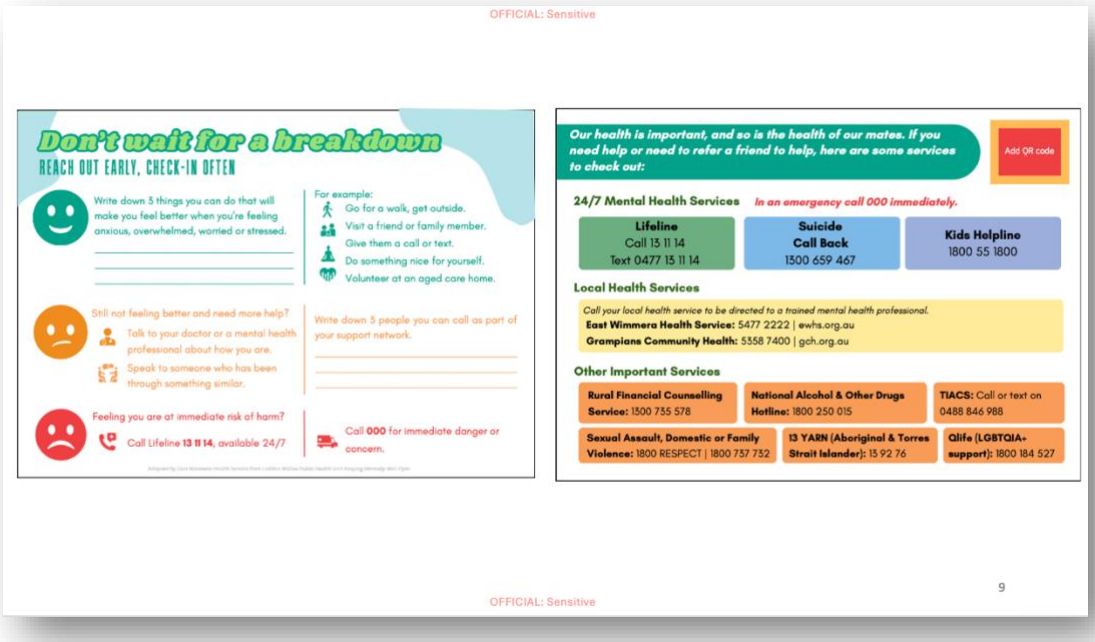


Figure 2-1: Example of material prepared by the roundtable

CRG member question: What is the length of funding?

VNI West team response: Initial one-year pilot, with an option to extend for a further two years. More broadly, we see this model as something that can be expanded to extend across the full life of the VNI West project.

CRG member question: How flexible are they in servicing people in the community who are not farmers, but are impacted?

Northern Grampians Shire response: To access services, the only criteria someone needs is a connection with the farming community. This can include a friend, townsperson, a business involved in farming or any other connection.

CRG member comment: Congratulations on this initiative. Kindness is the oil that takes the friction out of life. The biggest challenge is how we get the information out to people.

Cr Dan Bolitho: Is this something that could be spread to other local government areas? We're keen in our area, and wondering what the trigger would be to get this elsewhere?

VNI West Team response: We are keen to continue discussions to look at piloting the program with other LGAs including Gannawarra Shire Council. The project team will reach out so this discussion can continue.

Northern Grampians Shire response: This program has been designed so that it could be re-produced in other regions and take advantage of our learnings.

VNI West team response: At the moment this is within the Northern Grampians Shire but if someone outside the municipality connects, the intent is that they won't be turned away. VicGrid is keen to talk to other councils to explore how the model could be used in other Council areas.

CRG member question: Are you aware if there is a measure of mental health impacts in VicGrid?

VicGrid response: While anecdotal feedback about mental health experiences is sometimes shared by VicGrid staff, there is no formal measure or monitoring of community mental health status in VicGrid.

CRG member suggestions: Suggest there could be access to other resources. For example, work undertaken at Headspace in Mildura to support teenagers and connect them to resources. There were also resources prepared during COVID that could be adapted.

Northern Grampians Shire response: This is a pilot and we would like to document the lessons learned. The project will look at the handout and resources to determine if the content is valuable. There would probably be further iterations of the resources based on recommendations.

A CRG member reiterated his perspective on why the initial roundtable was set up: following mental health concerns being raised at an Essential Services Commission meeting in Ballarat. Member is frustrated that the approach is only a pilot.

CRG member question: Why hasn't beyond Northern Grampians Shire been looked at? You can't expect people outside our Shire to go to town and seek help. What happens to them?

Northern Grampians Shire response: Reiterated earlier points that this issue is very well recognised. Place based services are recognised as being very expensive. And the current pilot is expected to continue and can expand to other areas.

CRG member comment: My advice for anyone going to take this on: It has taken 12 months to get our heads around the bureaucracy. We want more and need more. It is a start, that needs to be ramped up, and we cannot wait another three years.

CRG member comment: Better than a sausage sizzle, and it's better to provide the funding into services that support people who are not in a good way.

Chair: Is there anything else the community is expecting in relation to mental health?

CRG member comment: If it going to be rolled out, it needs to not be attributed to VicGrid.

Northern Grampians Shire response: This will not be branded with VicGrid, but we have to be open about the funding source.

CRG member comment: We have neighbours who are no longer engaging in the community, they are triggered somehow and won't self-nominate to come for help.

Northern Grampians Shire response: If someone is unwell, try to get them to engage with a GP. This is the starting point. The Northern Grampians Shire work is broader. But all the advice is, is to start with visiting the GP. Rural Financial Counselling Services would also be one to consider.

CRG member comment: Recommend doing a full-page ad in Stock and Land or other local publications. A full page was published recently with counselling services (online mental health support, bulk billed) and was very helpful.

CRG member comment: Great to find a way to open-up and have conversations.

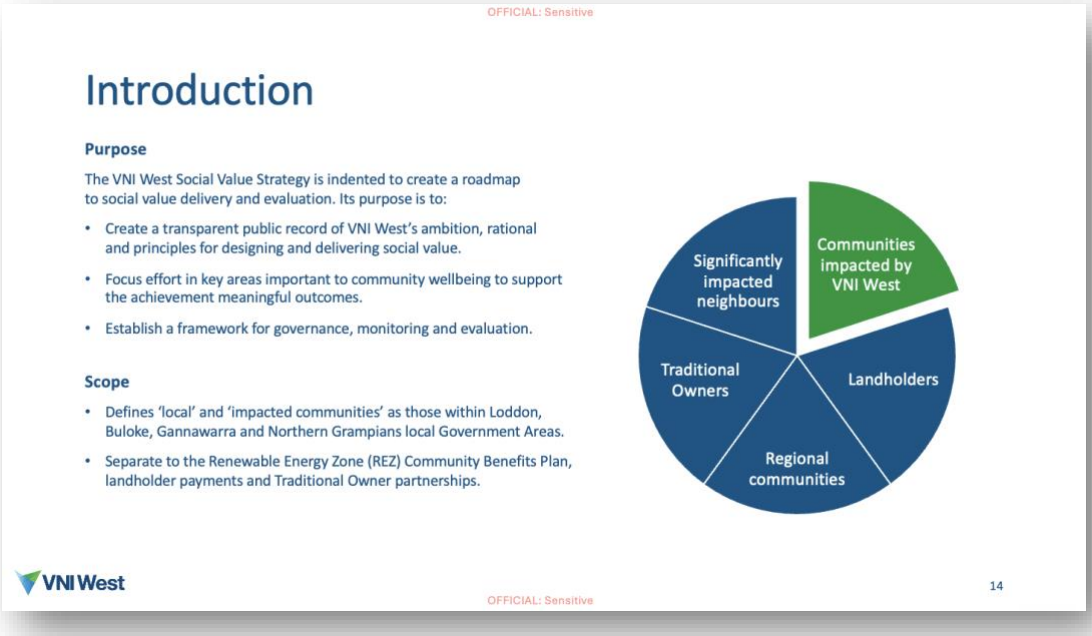
2.5 SOCIAL VALUE REFERENCE GROUP

VNI West Communications, Engagement and Social Performance Lead Amy Pepper provided a refresher on the co-design of the draft Social Value Strategy for VNI West, following previous presentations to the CRG.

- There is a social value (community benefits) budget specific to VNI West that can be spent with a goal of delivering net positive social, economic and environmental outcomes for communities affected by the project.

- Amy has previously presented the development of the Social Value Strategy to the CRG and acknowledged there were some previous CRG members who actively participated.
- Amy put out a call for anyone interested to contribute to the reference group to register their interest either tonight or after the meeting. Carly Noble expressed interest in being part of the reference group.

VNI West Social Performance Manager Bonnie Bryson provided an overview of the scope of what the social value work had focussed on.



- The majority of the work that had been completed was with the Social Value Reference Group
- The work has now moved to phase of presenting and testing more broadly with different stakeholder groups to show what has been considered
- Tonight's session is part of a broader engagement program that will include an online survey and focus groups.



Workshop

Bonnie facilitated an interactive workshop activity with CRG members, asking:

- What are the key priorities for the community?
- Has anything been missed in the priority areas identified by the Social Value Reference Group?

CRG Members reviewed the initiatives and voted on the initiatives they believe are most important to the community.

The top three themes appeared to be new build housing, re-purposing and donating construction worker accommodation infrastructure, and apprenticeships. These priorities are strongly aligned with the Social Value Reference Group's preferred priorities.

CRG member question: Who will deliver the initiatives?

VicGrid response: VNI West is intended to act as a starting point – with the goal of sharing the resulting opportunities and initiatives more broadly. Where possible, these initiatives will be delivered in partnership with others, not just through the VNI West project. If an initiative begins as part of the VNI West project, we will actively look for ways to extend those opportunities.

CRG member comment: There are two issues with this: It could create division in the community. And there is concern that if the project puts money into these things, there will be less money put into these initiatives by Government.

VicGrid response: Where the project has an impact, then it is the role of the project to contribute to the issues with funding.

CRG member question: What will happen to apprentices when the project moves on?

VicGrid response: There could be levies or projects could provide funding to support the training of apprentices and to ensure that they are rotated into other projects. There are partnership opportunities with local Group Training providers such as Skill Invest or other similar organisations. There would need to be commitment that no one is left with their apprenticeship unfinished. There is a need for providers to make sure there is a pathway beyond the project. Without options there are no opportunities.

CRG member comment: In the past there have been oil, gas, and transport infrastructure booms and now it is an energy boom. We need to capitalise on the potential benefits from these real opportunities.

2.6 GENERAL BUSINESS

Minutes from the last meeting

Jon Whykes moved the approval the approval of the minutes of the July meeting, Cr Jenny Greenberger seconded. No objections. Minutes approved.

The July minutes from Meeting 16 will be put onto the website.

Other general business items

CRG member question: The fines [infringement notices issued for obstructing land access attempts led by Authorised Officers for survey work related to VNI West] are not making people's lives better, when there are people who are probably experiencing mental health issues. What can be done about the way in which these fines are being issued where there have been legitimate reasons provided to deny access?

Chair: To summarise the discussion, there is a concern that landholders who have refused access due to genuine issues – such as lambing, cropping, biosecurity – are not having their reasons taken seriously. They are concerned that DEECA officers may not have the correct agricultural knowledge to assess whether the reasons are legitimate.

VicGrid response: DEECA, not VicGrid, is fully responsible for, and managing the deployment of authorised officers and the fines process. The process is a legislative process. Any issues related to this have to be directed to DEECA.

CRG member question: If it is DEECA who are responsible, can we make a motion to get them to a CRG meeting?

VicGrid response: This was also raised at a recent Northern Grampians Transmission Forum meeting, and we agreed that it could be looked into.

CRG member questions: Why don't we just write to the Minister and ask her to remove the fines?

Action: VNI West team to request that a representative from DEECA come to the next meeting to discuss the fines.

Action: Chair to write a letter on behalf of some CRG members requesting that the Minister retracts the fines.

The Chair noted that in the CRG member only meeting, there had been questions relating to the need for the project given changes in generation, demand and batteries.

Action: VNI West team to invite someone from the VicGrid team who has been involved in developing the 2027 Victorian Transmission Plan to come to a future meeting.

2.7 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is planned for Tuesday 13 October 2026, in person at Charlton. Date be confirmed closer to October.

3 Action register

Table 3-1: Action register

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS	NOTES
CRG 53	19/08/2025	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	Dec-26	In progress	Referred to development partner for a response at a later date. This has been pushed out to December 2026 and will be revisited at another meeting.
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	Complete	Response from VNI West team: Who are Authorised Officers and what do they actually do? The Authorised Officers who will be deployed in relation to land access for VNI West are employed by the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA); they are not VicGrid employees, and not contractors. The role of an Authorised Officer in relation to land access is to: ▪ Confirm that notice requirements have been met ▪ 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.
CRG 62	21/04/2026	Provide updated number of affected landholders along the alignment and number who have agreed to access.	VNI West Team	June-26	Complete	Figures provided by VicGrid: ▪ 221 properties are within the entire VNI West easement ▪ 170 properties in the project region are in the preferred easement ▪ Approximately 40% have agreed to access. The 6 proposed REZs cover approximately 1.8 million hectares, which equates to 7.9% of Victoria's total land area of 22.8 million hectares.

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS	NOTES
CRG 63	21/04/2026	Come back to the CRG about whether they will proceed with a Community Cohesion Plan.	VNI West Team	August-26	In progress	August 2026 update: A Community Cohesion Plan is still being considered and in discussion with Ibredola. Updates are to be provided as it progresses. Action will be kept live for now.
CRG 64	21/04/2026	Clarify the impact (% of agricultural production and agricultural land affected) of renewable energy projects on agriculture.	VNI West Team	October-26	In progress	Information provided by VicGrid: *The 6 areas across the state most suitable to host new renewable energy generation, such as wind turbines and solar farms. Together, they cover about 1.8 million hectares, which is about 7.9% of Victoria's total land area of 22.8 million hectares.* *Not all of this land will be needed for development. It is estimated that only a very small fraction of the area will be needed to host physical infrastructure such as wind turbines, solar panels and access roads. The zones will have significant areas that will be unaffected.* *On average statewide, we need about 9.1% of the land area of REZs to host wind and solar projects to meet the expected renewable energy capacity modelled for scenario 1 in 2040. Refer to the VicGrid website* *ArcGis Mapper link provided after the meeting:* *https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/d56187332fe34d3282cdb952684bfcdf/*
CRG 65	8/07/2026	Provide a response to the question about whether farm accidents or fires will be treated as negligence, whether there will be a higher premium for hosting the projects, and the lifespan of the agreement.	VNI West Team	Aug-26	Complete	The Insurance Council of Australia's advice regarding higher premiums is that they are not aware of premiums going up in response to accidents where projects are hosted. Negligence – this is not an issue VicGrid can talk to, and individuals should get some legal advice. CRG members felt that the Insurance Council's response may not adequately reflect the position of individual insurance companies. Suggestion by the CRG – some members could tally all the negligent issues that could occur on a farm, and then present it to the CRG for consideration of potential liabilities. A counter question to this suggestion was, how would this information change the project's liability position? Response by VicGrid representative: VicGrid cannot give this legal advice. Seeking appropriate legal advice would be covered as part of reimbursement for a landholder in the agreement if they sign on to the project. For hosting the project, there is no liability for anything other than negligence or wilful damage. This action is complete. Please refer to the previous meeting's presentation for the specific information provided.

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS	NOTES
CRG 66	8/07/2026	Provide a response to the question about whether there are differences in the expectations government holds for generators versus the VNI West line operators.	VNI West Team	Aug-26	Complete	Response provided by VNI West Team: *VNI West and other energy developers will be held to the same expectations under the guidelines; from the time the guidelines were released in July 2026. The CSEV guidelines apply to:* ▪ *Generation, storage and hybrid projects seeking to access the grid* ▪ *Transmission developers partnering with VicGrid to deliver projects forming Part of the declared shared network or network services.* *The guidelines outline the Victorian Government's minimum expectations for how renewable energy, storage and transmission developers should engage with and create social and economic benefits for communities, Traditional Owners, landholders and neighbours.*
CRG 67	8/07/2026	Provide a response on the 3.5 km limit concern	VicGrid	Aug-26	In Progress	VicGrid is still seeking clarity. The guidelines don't overrule the law.
CRG 68	18/08/2026	Clarify what the proposed change to the scope of the CRG and membership might look like. Colin Fenton, Barry Batters and Justine Hide have volunteered to participate.	Chair and CRG Members	Oct-26	New	
CRG 69	18/08/2026	Take the request for the Minister to meet the CRG.	VicGrid	Oct-26	New	
CRG 70	18/08/2026	To better understand the role that DEECA play in issuing fines and their biosecurity capacity/skills in assessing legitimate farmer concerns, request that a representative from DEECA come to the next meeting to discuss the fines.	VNI West Team	Oct-26	New	

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS	NOTES
CRG 71	18/08/2026	Write a letter on behalf of some CRG members requesting that the Minister retracts the fines.	Chair	Oct-26	New	
CRG 72	18/08/2026	Invite someone from the VicGrid team who has been involved in developing the 2027 Victorian Transmission Plan to future meeting.	VNI West Team	Oct-26	New	

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Document review and authorisation

Project Number: #3117

Doc Version	Draft	Date	Author	PD Review	BST Review	Release approved by	Issued to
1.0	Draft	21/08/2026	J. Thom	C. Flanagan-Smith	-	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG
2.0	Final	26/10/2026	-	C. Flanagan-Smith	L. McKenzie	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG