

**“There’s hope
when people
come together”:
Giving Victorians a voice
on climate change**




About VCOSS


The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.


VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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The Equitable Responses to Climate Change Project is supported by the Victorian Government.

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country and pays respects to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. We conduct our business on sovereign, unceded Aboriginal land. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.





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For a fair transition to a clean energy future and a safe climate, we must listen to the voices of those who will be most impacted.

Introduction

In 2024, we know a lot about climate change.

We have the scientific evidence of its devastating impacts, we have copious academic dialogues about what the right response should be, we have political debates and technical understanding.

What we don't tend to hear much of – still, in 2024 – is the voice of ordinary people.

Through Community Climate Conversations, VCOSS set out to hear from those who don't often get a say on decisions around climate change. We wanted to know: what do 'everyday' Victorians think about it? What are their primary areas of concern? What do they want to see done?

For a fair transition to a clean energy future and a safe climate, we must listen to the voices of those who will be most impacted. This includes people living in rural and regional areas. It includes recent migrants and culturally and linguistically diverse people, people living in social housing, young people, women, and people experiencing various forms of disadvantage.

Hearing from these groups about how climate change is affecting them – and incorporating their needs and desires into decision-making around climate change – will ensure that all Victorians can benefit from the transition we have to make.

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This report offers an important contribution to our understanding of climate change: an understanding from the lived experiences of those who might otherwise go unheard and be left behind.

The conversations we held were wide ranging and the participants were diverse. This report distils the recurring themes that came up during the conversations. Issues brought up by participants – what we heard – are paired with the solutions – what we can do – that participants want to see.

For further details about the sessions, see the Appendix.

Who we spoke to

Locations

Each session took place in a different location across Victoria, bringing new cohorts and experiences to the conversation. The themes in each session were place-based.



Warrnambool

Participants in Warrnambool were highly engaged and knowledgeable about climate change, with many having campaigned on the issue for decades. Participants felt responsible for their contribution to climate change and what they saw as lack of action on the issue.



Broadmeadows

We heard primarily from public housing residents and young people. Sessions focused on the experiences of people in these cohorts, particularly in relation to heat and health.



Swan Hill

Swan Hill's economy is dominated by the agriculture industry. We heard a lot about agriculture, food and water at these sessions. Participants spoke of being in the minority in their area in terms of their concern about human-induced climate change.



Whittlesea

This session comprised the greatest number of people who hadn't necessarily previously thought much about climate change in their everyday lives. They expressed great concern around waste and the impacts of climate change to individuals.



Morwell

Unlike other sessions, to which participants actively signed up, in Morwell we spoke to people accessing food relief. Significantly, amidst the challenges of daily life most of these participants lacked capacity to fully engage with climate change issues. The conversations focused primarily on the power and forestry industries in the area.



Victorian Student Representative Council

Participants from the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) perceived their school education about climate change as inadequate. They discussed young people's lack of agency to contribute to climate action.



People

109

**Number
of people
we spoke to**

5

**Physical
locations
we visited**

We spoke to people from a wide range of ages and backgrounds. These groups are some of those who will be most impacted by climate change, and were well represented through the conversations:

Women

The overwhelming majority of participants – 81% – were women. Hearing from women about their lived experience of climate change is critical to developing responses to climate change that are suitable for all genders.

Young people

Intergenerational justice is one of the major issues in relation to climate change – the generations who will experience the brunt of climate change are not the ones responsible for causing it. We felt it was critical to incorporate the views of young people as much as possible through this process, to acknowledge that the cohorts most impacted by climate change must have a say in decision-making. Just over 20% of participants were young people.

First Nations

In nearly every session, people spoke about the need to utilise First Nations knowledge and leadership. The participants who raised this were not always First Nations-identifying. A significant proportion of First Nations individuals attended the sessions, at 6% of participants.

A climate-safe Victoria



**Powered by
renewable energy**



No gas



**Resilient, electrified
households**



**Free, zero-emissions
public
transportation**



**Active transport and
better cycling
infrastructure**



**More trees and
green spaces**



**Local food
networks and local
food production**



**Clean energy
jobs**



**Healthy
people**

**“We have enough knowledge.
We have the technology.
We know what we need to do.
It just needs investment.”**

Insights from the conversations

What we heard

People experiencing multiple life stressors are concerned about climate change...

We spoke to a wide range of people, many of whom experience multiple life stressors. Despite varying levels of knowledge about climate change, everyone has experienced its impacts in some way.

People spoke with us because they're concerned and they want their voices heard. They told us that they're not used to people coming from Melbourne to hear from them.

They feel that not enough is being done to address climate change, and they feel frustrated with the people and institutions they see as responsible for causing climate change, and who should be responsible for working to solve it.

People are particularly worried about the future for young people, and the lack of power young people have to engage in climate change response. Young people themselves feel concerned about their lack of agency to respond to climate change.

"I'm worried about my grandchildren. I'm anxious about their futures. Will their lives be inhibited? Will they have a lesser life than what we had?"
Community member, Whittlesea

"I used to be a climate denier... but repeated catastrophic events in recent years... things are not what they were."
Community member, Swan Hill



What we can do

... so we should involve a greater range of voices in decision-making

Involving people who aren't normally involved in decision-making helps them feel empowered and ensures solutions work for them. This includes, but is not limited to, people living in rural and regional areas, people living in social housing, and people from migrant or refugee backgrounds.

Participants were keen to see greater involvement of First Nations people in decision-making around climate change solutions, acknowledging that they have a cultural connection to thousands of years of experience managing the land.

Participants across sessions also agreed that young people need to be involved in creating the solutions they'd like to see for their future. We must listen to young people more and equip them with adequate education focused on science and climate change.

"Indigenous Australians have been doing this for thousands for years – they know what they're doing."

Community member, Swan Hill

"We need to listen to young people and ask what they want. They'll face the brunt of climate change. We need to ask their perspectives and concerns."

Community member, Swan Hill



Case Study

Victorian Student Representative Council

One student spoke about his participation in the Future Problem Solving competition. Participation in the competition helped open his eyes to the major problems linked to climate change, but also the innovative solutions.

Climate change incorporation in most coursework was viewed as tokenistic, however this competition enabled the student to learn about climate change solutions in a realistic and engaging way. Engaging programs like this can help both students and adults learn about climate change in a solution-oriented way that inspires hope.

What we heard

Climate change is a social justice issue...

Many of the people we spoke to have limited capacity to respond to climate change themselves. The costs associated with clean technologies often mean that any desire to take individual action can't be realised. Renters and social housing residents experience particular disadvantages in this respect.

The inability to participate in climate solutions leaves people feeling disempowered and ultimately disengaged.

In places like Morwell, where people have experienced direct impacts on their livelihoods from the transition to renewables, this can be particularly difficult.

People across the state who have been impacted by natural disasters – or witnessed others seeking help after disasters – are critically aware of climate change as a social justice issue.

"Wealthy people will be fine with climate change. It's a social justice issue. Poorer people will be the greatest sufferers."

Community member, Swan Hill

"The focus for most of us here in Morwell is on reducing your electricity bill rather than reducing your impact on the planet."

Community member, Morwell



Case Study

Morwell

Many of the people we spoke to in Morwell are nervous about the closure of the power and forestry industries and resulting loss of livelihoods. They've been here before: after the closure of the original State Electricity Commission in the 1990s, participants experienced and/or witnessed job loss and extreme mental distress.

Closing industries and job loss has been the main experience of climate change for some of these people. They believe they receive insufficient support, despite the important role they've played in supporting the state.

What we can do

... so we must make participation in the transition accessible to everyone, and enable everyone to reap the benefits

Climate change solutions must be made more financially accessible to all.

People want to be able to purchase solar panels and electric vehicles, which are currently too expensive for many. They also want better access to public transportation and active transport options.

In Morwell, people want to maintain their livelihoods. This would be possible through new, green jobs.

Improving access to renewables, sustainable transportation options and green jobs would enable people to meaningfully contribute towards climate change solutions. This would not only help Victoria reach its climate commitments faster, but would also make people feel empowered to take action in other areas.

Participants spoke less about being able to afford adaptation strategies, which can be difficult to see. The difficulty with affording rising insurance costs after multiple disasters was raised at one session.

All Victorians should be able to afford and benefit from climate adaptation – particularly for climate impacts that are locked in – in addition to mitigation. However, reducing emissions as much as possible now will reduce the risk of future disasters.

“Wealthy people will be fine with climate change. They’ll go on holiday to avoid bad weather. Retrofit their home. Poorer people can’t adapt. They’ll suffer. People in our community will be left behind. No EVs. No solar panels. No double glazing.”

Community member, Swan Hill

“More disaster risk? Up go premiums. We’re a low income area and people can’t afford insurance anymore.”

Community member, Swan Hill



What we heard

Physical health impacts are being widely felt...

Physical health impacts of climate change are being widely felt, particularly from heat during hotter summers.

Heat impacts many people's quality of life. It makes breathing and sleeping more difficult; it makes people lethargic and irritable. Kids can't play outside in the heat, and older people often struggle to physically cope.

People are also experiencing other health impacts, including thunderstorm asthma, and asthma from bushfire smoke and heat. Some older people are experiencing this for the first time in their lives.

Health impacts and disasters – and the anticipation of more to come – also increase stress and anxiety for many people. This sometimes has physical manifestations, including lack of sleep.

"I know people who have been rushed to hospital on hot days. They have asthma and it gets so much worse in the heat."

Community member, Broadmeadows

"As I get older, I get more heat stress. I can't hack it."

Community member, Swan Hill



Case Study

Broadmeadows

As Broadmeadows is a highly urbanised area, many of the participants in these sessions are already acutely feeling the impacts of increased heat on their physical and mental health. Heatwaves have caused asthma, mental distress, and inability to sleep for participants.

Heatwaves have further impacts on children in the area, who can't play outside when it's too hot. For some people, heat is affecting their physical health for the first time, despite being able to cope with it previously. Home doesn't always provide a safe, cool refuge.

What we can do

... so we must proactively plan and adapt to climate change

We need to get ahead of climate change impacts before people's health gets worse.

People acknowledge that recovering from disasters is more expensive than proactively preparing for the inevitable impacts of climate change. They want investment in prevention and adaptation so the worst impacts of climate change are avoided, and communities are prepared for the impacts they do face.

A wellbeing index for Victoria was mentioned by one participant as a way to capture the benefits of prevention, rather than only capturing the economic benefits of recovery through gross state product (GSP).

People also want to see more investment in nature-based solutions like increasing tree cover and green space.

These solutions are important for people to avoid feeling the physical health impacts of climate change in the first place.

"All the money is spent on fixing things instead of preventing it. Nobody congratulates you for preventing something that never happens. Money's spent on repairing towns ravaged by disasters but not on preventing the devastation in the first place. There's no money for preparing for the upcoming fire season but there'll be billions if fires do happen."

Community member, Warrnambool

"We need to learn how to adapt. Both big and small. Whether that's shifting a town or moving a plant in the garden."

Community member, Warrnambool



What we heard

Mental health impacts are worsening...

When asked for the first word that comes to mind in relation to climate change, participants shared words including 'anxiety', 'devastation', 'destruction', 'uncertainty', 'stuffed', 'terrified', 'hopeless', 'trauma', 'dread', and 'anger'.

Anxiety and stress often result from anticipating health impacts and disasters, as well as the feeling that not enough is being done to address climate change.

Those who have experienced disasters firsthand carry trauma, with feelings of loss and disbelief. They also experience increased anxiety in anticipation of future disasters.

Some people raised concerns around new diseases and the general unpredictability of climate-related health impacts.

Some have observed climate anxiety in children and young people. Many people talked about their frustration with the lack of urgent action, which leads to feelings of guilt, hopelessness and disheartenment.

"Climate change makes me feel depressed. I can't be bothered doing anything."

Community member, Warrnambool

"I used to live in Warrandyte. It's really beautiful but scary. I'd look around and think when's the bushfire going to happen? Now when I see bushfires on TV, or smell smoke, or if it's hot and windy, I get a tight feeling in my chest."

Community member, Broadmeadows

What we can do

... but we can combat this with hopeful messaging and social connection

To keep people engaged and working towards climate solutions, messaging that demonstrates the urgency of action while acknowledging that we can still avoid the worst of climate change is needed.

People should also be reminded that we have collectively made a great deal of progress towards combating climate change. While much remains to be done and it's important to acknowledge the scale of the task, communicating progress can help people feel cautiously optimistic.

Collective responsibility and the power of collective action were often talked about by participants. Reminding people of this collective power through public messaging would reassure people that no one is working alone in the fight against climate change, making people feel more empowered than they often do now.

Collectivism can also improve social connections within communities, which help communities spread the mental load of climate anxiety and build resilience to climate impacts.

"Climate action is slow. It has to be. But I see a lot being done."

Community member, Broadmeadows

"The opportunity is there to mobilise and achieve anything we want to. If we can survive COVID, we can survive anything."

Community member, Warrnambool





What we heard

Available information is confusing...

At various sessions, people spoke about being confused by available information around climate change.

Guidelines around recycling were cited several times as a specific example: recycling requirements vary across city councils, and information can be hard to find.

The main sources of information people have access to – including the news – also tend to be negative, leading people to disengage.

Most people get their information about climate change from TV (including *Landline* and *War on Waste*), internet searches and Wikipedia, social media, documentaries, news channels, and word of mouth. A minority of participants get information directly from environmental and climate NGOs, government agencies, and academic research.

Participants agreed that finding trustworthy information around climate change is a challenge, and feel the need to be cautious about where their information comes from.

"Info that's out there is hard for people to understand if they don't know a lot about the environment."

Community member, Swan Hill

"You need to check multiple sources to make an informed decision. You can't guarantee that one'll be correct."

Community member, Whittlesea



What we can do

... so we need to provide improved access to easy-to-understand information and education

Across sessions, people expressed the desire for accessible, clear information around climate change and solutions.

People would prefer to get their information from sources they deem trustworthy, including state and local governments.

They are interested in information around recycling and waste disposal guidelines, and suitability of clean technologies. Public advertisements around these topics and how individuals can contribute to climate solutions would be welcome.

People respond well to interactive learning that goes beyond facts on a page. For example, some Neighbourhood Houses offer projects like repair cafes, or act as a collection point for the container deposit scheme. Public education is offered as a side-product of these well-received activities.

“Local projects and programs are an important way to educate communities indirectly. When they’re not branded as environmental or climate change, you can involve people indirectly in the cause without badging it as such and build their awareness.”

Community member, Warrnambool

“If government is serious, they need to put money into public education.”

Community member, Swan Hill

What we heard

People feel divided...

Another manifestation of the anxiety and hopelessness people feel is division and polarisation. We heard in the climate conversations that many people blamed other groups for the causes of, and lack of action on, climate change.

Some people blamed other individuals for not doing their part, or for not taking climate change seriously.

Some expressed the belief that individuals have little impact, and rather that slow climate action is the fault of governments, political leaders and corporations.

Some cited the negative power of social media as narrowing people's views.

Some older people blamed climate change on young people, who they perceive as using too much energy and resources.

A minority said climate change is not an issue on their radar as no one around them talks about it, or they believe it doesn't impact them directly.

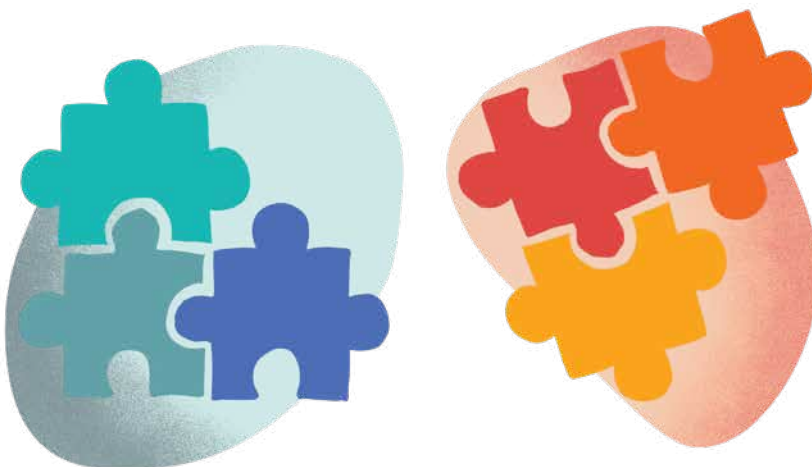
Many people said they avoid talking with others about climate change as it's too divisive and uncomfortable.

"When you say climate change, everyone rolls their eyes at you."

Community member, Swan Hill

"It's hard to be tolerant of people who don't care about climate change. It makes you feel separate because it's such a divisive topic in my family and community. There's animosity towards you if you bring it up, and I find that so tough."

Community member, Swan Hill



What we can do

...but connection and conversations help

The primary purpose of the Community Climate Conversations was to hear from people who tend to be left out of conversations around climate change, gaining insights directly from these heavily affected communities.

However, these conversations were also an end in themselves: they were educational for most people, and they connected people and helped empower them to engage on climate change solutions.

The conversations also helped people realise that they're not alone in their feelings about climate change or in their actions, and that collective action is possible and impactful.

At a time when people feel divided on many social and political issues, more of these hopeful conversations are needed to bring people together and facilitate connection. People also need to feel they have the opportunity to have their concerns listened to.

"There's hope if we get together and connect."

Community member, Warrnambool

"Small things matter when a lot of us do it."

Community member, Warrnambool



Case Study

Warrnambool

Participants in Warrnambool were the most passionate about climate change issues even before the conversations. However, most participants felt frustrated by, and guilty for, the slow pace of climate action.

After one of the Warrnambool conversations, participants felt sufficiently connected and empowered that they banded together to create a local climate action network. Before the session, they hadn't known how many people shared their passionate beliefs about climate change and felt quite alone. The Community Climate Conversations brought them together and helped facilitate action.

What we heard

People feel locked into waste creation...

During every session, people raised concerns about the amount of resources consumed and waste created.

People are worried about the amount of packaging they go through, particularly when they feel they don’t have a choice. Plastic wrapping on cucumbers and bananas in grocery stores was cited as an example of excess, unnecessary waste.

People are confused about what can and can’t be recycled, particularly as requirements vary between city councils.

Concerns were also raised about the amount of ‘stuff’ people buy, as well as the built-in obsolescence cycles of many consumer items.

“The problem with rubbish is that we use too much stuff.”

Community member, Whittlesea

“People don’t know where to recycle things.”

Community member, Whittlesea



Case Study

Whittlesea

During the conversation about waste and recycling at Whittlesea, the crashing of bottles and cans could be heard just outside the room. Containers were being collected and sorted by volunteers as part of Victoria’s container deposit scheme (CDS).

This is just one example of the community sector’s involvement in the circular economy, contributing to a more sustainable society. The community house’s participation in the CDS helps educate the community about solutions to climate change, and engages volunteers on climate action in a meaningful way.

What we can do

... so we must make fewer things and improve resource recovery

A very practical climate change solution people would like to see is to reduce waste, and with it reduce the energy required to produce and dispose of consumer items.

People want less plastic packaging used for food and other items. They think we should buy fewer new things, and instead buy second-hand as much as possible.

Although participants didn't use terms like 'circular economy', this was the import behind the desire they expressed for a less wasteful and more sustainable society, including greater investment in recycling. People want companies to be answerable for responsibly disposing of the products they make, once these products are at their end of life. They want planned obsolescence to be banned.

People also want better information on waste and recycling, including what can be recycled and where to take items for disposal.

"If you're a business and you make something, then you accept the waste back."

Community member, Whittlesea



What we heard

Current agriculture and food systems are unsustainable...

The connection between agriculture and climate change was raised in several sessions, but particularly in Swan Hill.

In this area, the close link between agriculture and the local economy was acknowledged, with people noting that when farmers suffer, this is felt by the entire community.

Simultaneously, participants acknowledged that agriculture in the area contributes to climate change.

Some participants talked about the excessive 'food miles' associated with much of the produce for sale in the area, which is sometimes grown locally but shipped out for processing and then brought back for sale.

Participants are also concerned that climate change will impact upon food security, with more extreme weather impacting food availability.

"The weather is everything to farmers. Food production is dependent on the climate."

Community member, Swan Hill

"I worked at McDonalds when I was 15 but my shifts stopped during the Millenium Drought. Farmers had no money to spend on things like McDonalds."

Community member, Swan Hill



What we can do

... but we can improve access to affordable, locally-produced food

People want to be able to access local, organic and affordable food that contributes less to climate change.

Ideas to promote this included creating local food networks, banning imports of locally in-season produce, and greater local food production. These ideas could have an added benefit of improving food security.

Participants also expressed a need to move towards more sustainable farming practices, including a greater number of smaller local farms, and farming more plants than animals.

"I've seen young farmers who are changing the way they think about how their parents farmed."

Community member, Swan Hill



Case Study

Swan Hill

Climate change will require adaptations in all areas to enable life to continue despite the presence of new impacts like extreme heat. Ideally, adaptations will improve conditions for people, rather than just maintain the status quo.

Farmers in Swan Hill are already feeling the effects of climate change, and are being forced to change their practices. One farmer in the area has set up lights across their fields so zucchinis can be harvested at night to protect workers from the blazing sun.

Appendix

Methodology

Five community centres across Victoria were engaged to host nine in-person Community Climate Conversation (CCC) sessions in November 2023. Community centres were selected as they are sites where people already gather. The five were chosen based on location, with the aim of speaking to a wide geographic spread of Victorians.

The participating community centres were Banksia Gardens Community Services (two sessions), Morwell Neighbourhood House, Swan Hill Neighbourhood House (two sessions), West Warrnambool Neighbourhood House (two sessions) and Whittlesea Community House. The Victorian Student Representative Council was engaged to recruit young people for an online session to round out the number of young people involved.

Sessions were held at various times throughout the day and evening to suit the schedules of people in the area and capture the greatest number of people. Discussions were held in groups ranging from 8 to 20 participants.

The hosting community organisations were responsible for recruiting participants for CCC sessions. With the exception of the session at Morwell Neighbourhood House, all sessions were publicised as opportunities to discuss climate change, and participants signed up in advance. This created a limitation in the research, in that those who signed up were more likely to be people already interested in and engaged with climate change. At Morwell Neighbourhood House, people accessing food relief services were asked to participate in conversations on the day, but did not sign up in advance.

Participants in all sessions received a small voucher in exchange for their time.

During the sessions, participants were asked the following open-ended questions:

1. What’s the first word or thing that comes to mind when you think of climate change?
2. What has your experience of climate change been so far?
3. How does the state of climate change affect your wellbeing, and the wellbeing of those around you?
4. Where do you get information about climate change?
5. What do you think should be done about climate change now?
6. What’s one local and one global change you’d like to see to solve climate change?
7. What’s something you heard someone else say today that was new?



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