

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Macedon – Tuesday 3 December 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

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John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Welch

WITNESS

Shamir Varma, Ordinary Director, Bendigo Sustainability Group.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the hearings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience here in Victoria. I welcome Mr Varma from the Bendigo Sustainability Group. I will just read out a short introductory statement.

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All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Those transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask the committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi. I am David Ettershank, from Western Metropolitan Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Hello.

Shamir VARMA: Hello.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for the Northern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And online –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region, coming to you from Warrnambool today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Varma, I might ask firstly that you state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the Hansard record, so that we can get it officially recorded, and then I invite you to make a short opening statement.

Shamir VARMA: Well, let me first say I feel totally out of depth. I did not realise it was going to be set up like this. I feel like I am being interrogated –

The CHAIR: It is alright. We do not bite.

Shamir VARMA: – but I will get used to that. My name is Shamir Varma. I am a volunteer for the Bendigo Sustainability Group. Our focus at this stage has been mainly on sustainability issues and not so much on climate change and global warming. We are a very small organisation with maybe six people and a membership of just over 200, and our resources are mainly devoted towards providing solar panels on low-income homes at the moment. We have a lot of, let us say, thinking to do about where and how we are going to move forward given that things are changing so rapidly. Now, I am not sure what else I can say. I am here to attend on behalf of the sustainability group, but I cannot make any commitments on their behalf. So if that is acceptable, then –

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Shamir VARMA: Okay.

The CHAIR: Basically the way these hearings work is we will just ask you a series of questions. We are interested in your perspective, particularly as it relates to helping households deal with what is happening in the changing climate around them and obviously the work that you are doing to make our lived environment and our living environment more sustainable and livable. I might just start by asking if you could outline a bit of the work that the Bendigo Sustainability Group does in terms of households and livability and energy efficiency and what you are seeing as being the main trends in what is required to make the homes we live in more livable with hotter days and colder nights.

Shamir VARMA: Okay. There are basically two initiatives that we have that we roll along every year. The big one is solar panels on low-income homes. That is funded through crowdfunding, and we also get funds from different organisations. I cannot exactly tell you who gives it to us because I did not come prepared for that. Last year we provided solar panels on between 30 and 40 homes, which were totally subsidised. The crowdfunding filled the gap between the assistance given by the government for solar panel set-up, so the cash outflow for any individual household was zero. They were selected very carefully, not by the sustainability group but by I forget the name of the organisation who verified that they were low-income households. We have some checks and balances in place to make sure that it really goes to the targeted people.

In addition to that, we have an education program where we expose people to sustainable housing. We call it the 'passive house' not rollout, but let us just call it exposure, and it is held twice a year. On each occasion we select four homes, and we invite people to come and visit these homes at specified times. They are all homes that are, let us say, specifically built keeping climate change in mind, so they are not just ordinary homes. They are insulated. Some of them are very expensive homes and some of them are small homes that are affordable, so it is a wide range depending on who is willing to allow us to let people walk through their homes. How useful that is, I do not know. For me, the jury is still out there, but it is an eye-opener that there are a wide range of things that can be done to help people understand that things are within their reach as the climate begins to change.

We are contemplating, let us say, an education program to expose people not just to sustainability, which is what our main focus has been so far and still is, but we acknowledge that sustainability is not going to solve the problem. We have to really move into a different area in terms of how to address global warming, and adaptation and resilience is what we are trying to address over here and is perhaps the direction we will move in. But we have limited resources, limited talent and very little funding. We will see how it goes. The commitment is there and the passion is there, but we do not have the resources to do anything on a big scale.

The CHAIR: Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you for coming along today. It is great to see another NGO doing on-the-ground work at the front end. If there was funding available, what would be your priority in terms of seeking to expand the activities of the group?

Shamir VARMA: My personal view – and whether the sustainability group agrees with it or not is something that I will discuss with them when we meet the next time –

David ETTERS HANK: If you turn up, you get to speak.

Shamir VARMA: Okay. Do not hold me to it. I am concerned about global warming. In one of the submissions that has been made by someone – I forget the name of the person – she said sustainability is no longer the focus to deal with the issues that we are going to face. It is necessary, but it is no longer the main focus. We have to think about adaptation and resilience. If you ask me, I say in the short-to-medium term cities like Bendigo have to think about adaptation and resilience. What can we do when things get really uncomfortable for the population, keeping in mind there are different levels of socio-economic profile in the population of Bendigo? What that means I do not know.

We will have to perhaps concentrate on educating people, perhaps working with the council – who have the resources, we hope – and tagging along on some of the initiatives that they roll out. Yes, we will continue with

solar panels and solar energy on homes that cannot afford to do it themselves. Perhaps the government will roll out more initiatives to make households totally electric, and we could tap into that. Other than that, I think it is education.

My personal feeling is that people sense something is happening but cannot articulate what the consequences are and how it is going to impact on them. As somebody said in an article I read some time ago, climate change is a reality when it hits you, otherwise it is out there somewhere. How do you simulate how it is going to impact on you, when you have never experienced climate change?

I have never experienced an adverse event in Bendigo or even in Melbourne. I am one of the lucky ones, I think, but we read about it every day. So how are we going to get people prepared for that? How ingrained is climate anxiety? Are people really concerned about it in terms of it affecting their daily lives? We do not know that; at least I do not know that. I do not see that amongst my cohort of friends and associates, but it is an issue. Every submission that I read says that climate anxiety is a major issue, it has to be tackled and we need to prepare for that and resources have to be devoted to that. These are some of the things we are struggling with.

How we will arrive at a focus, I do not know. I do not think anybody knows – with due respect to everybody who is more knowledgeable than I am – one solution that fits everybody. I think the people who listen to the scientists, the people who have more exposure, will decide that our resources are limited, no matter who we are – even the government of Australia – but we have to focus on areas where the bulk of the population will benefit. And are we going to be able to do it before it really becomes a crisis?

David ETTERSHANK: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Sorry, I have passed.

The CHAIR: Okay, no worries. Thanks. Mr Berger, do you have any questions?

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Well done on what you are doing. I know as a volunteer it would be very hard to get out there and do what you do and try and identify people that have got these problems with sustainability in their own households.

Shamir VARMA: I think I should just add that I was also a member of the committee of the board of the sustainability group, so I have some idea what the thinking is at that level. But I am not a committee member at the moment. Going forward it is just my connection with the committee – I will brief them on what happened today, then they will take it from there.

John BERGER: In terms of solar panels, I know the next step is to go into batteries. Once you get the solar panels up and once you can generate power to then go into the batteries, it will make things more sustainable. Is there any thought within your group to explore that area?

Shamir VARMA: Sorry, could you repeat that? I have a hearing impairment, and I could not hear the last bit.

John BERGER: Do not worry, I have got one as well. I am more aligned to what your thinking might be in terms of battery storage.

Shamir VARMA: Okay, I will give you my example. I am just putting solar panels on my house, and I asked the people who are going to put it up there about a battery – and also Colin Lambie, who was the founder of the sustainability group, who is very much into climate change and the electrification of Australia et cetera – and I was told that it is only necessary for you to have a battery if your power consumption during periods where the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing is substantial and is going to impact your daily life. For me, that is not an issue. At night I do not need power except to run the refrigerator et cetera. So we are not concentrating on batteries at this point in time. Down the track when it is clearer that everybody should have a battery, perhaps then we will.

There is too much noise around solar energy right now. I mean, yesterday I read in the papers that they want new legislation to turn off solar power under certain circumstances. What does that mean to a person like me

who wants to put up solar panels but then I read this? Is it going to be a game changer? It is understandable. These people are not fools. They are doing it for a purpose, but for a common person like me, it makes no sense. It is like a hurdle that is in the way.

Battery is not something that we are considering right now. We are purely considering solar panels, not only on low-income households but we are trying to entice businesses and the council to put solar panels on their roofs. We have had some success – not very much, but hopefully that will change.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for being here today. I have got a big voice, so you will hear me. Bendigo Sustainability Group, through the Revolving Energy Fund – 30 to 40 homes have got fully subsidised solar panels.

Shamir VARMA: That is right.

Melina BATH: Do you know, and these might be questions you need to take on notice – I am very interested in the follow-up on this: were any of them rental, or were they privately owned?

Shamir VARMA: Good question.

Melina BATH: That is okay. I will put my questions, and the things that you can answer, do, and if you cannot, take them on notice.

I am really interested to understand, for those people with low income, if solar panels need to be maintained, how does that work? Is there any subsidy for the maintenance or an upgrade or if something goes wrong? Is there any sort of science or study around the maintenance cost if need be?

The savings – it is meant to be savings for those people and for the environment. Has the Bendigo Sustainability Group ever thought of doing a longitudinal study on those to see the outcomes, interviewing those 30 to 40 homes to see what their cost savings are? A measure of success is that they are saving money and saving the environment. Is that something that your group has done? I just want to understand a little bit about that.

Shamir VARMA: We do not have the resources for any substantive follow-up, okay. The feeling within the group is that at this stage the maintenance on solar panels on roofs of homes is minimal. It is not a high-maintenance issue. But if you have a hailstorm and the panels get destroyed, what are you going to do then? We do not know. We did not sell the product really on a cost-benefit analysis to households because it is no cost to them. What we have said is, 'You don't have to pay any money up-front. We will put this up. If you want us to work out a cost-benefit for you, how much you have saved, you have to come to us.' We do not have a program in place, again because of a lack of resources, to say, 'This is how you're tracking.' I am putting solar panels on my home. I am not interested in the cost savings that I am going to incur; I just feel it is something that is necessary for me to do. And I am a pensioner; I am very comfortable, let us put it that way.

Melina BATH: That is fine. I was just interested to see whether there was any ability – and often, as you have said, it may be financially not able to happen through the Bendigo Sustainability Group. Just moving on to a different question, in relation to your local council being supportive – and we had Bendigo in just now: what are the impediments from working with your group and the higher-ups in government, say, in the councils or in state government?

Shamir VARMA: It depends who you talk to. Personally, I think there are a core group of people at the Bendigo council who are very receptive to anything to do with climate change. They have forums, they have plans, but they are slow in rolling out initiatives. I do not get the feeling that there is a sense of urgency.

Melina BATH: They might be being constrained by finances themselves.

Shamir VARMA: I do not know whether it is only finances or if it is the councillors themselves; I cannot answer that question. We just got a new lot that have come in. We have a process where we try and evaluate

people who want to stand for council, and one of the issues that we wanted to bring out was their understanding of climate change. We will see what happens. The sustainability group works at the periphery with the council. We do not influence them, but we encourage ourselves to get involved with –

Melina BATH: Open dialogue, open communication. Great.

Shamir VARMA: Yes. That is where we are right now.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. I am interested in understanding whether Geelong Sustainability Group works with other local organisations or the council and what that relationship looks like.

Shamir VARMA: We do not work directly with other groups, but we get involved with other groups and they with us. For example, what is happening in Traralgon is we are aware of what they are doing. In Geelong we are aware of what they are doing, and they are much better funded than our group is. We get ideas from them. We figure out how they were able to get the funding, because funding is the main thing that is holding us back. But we do not have a partnership that works directly with other groups. They all seem to work within their community and they do not leach out into other communities, but they are very happy to share ideas and very open about the initiatives that they are undergoing.

Sarah MANSFIELD: In terms of the funding for Bendigo, where do you get your funding from, and how might that be different to other sustainability groups?

Shamir VARMA: We get some funding from the council. Crowdfunding does attract limited resources. When I say 'limited', we could put up 30 to 40 homes every year and each home would cost us about \$2500 – let us say an average of \$2000. So \$40,000 to \$50,000 is what we are able to generate using our own, let us say, initiatives. There are a couple of big donors who are very keen that we should electrify, and they give us – somebody might give us – \$5000 or \$10,000, but most of it is small amounts of money from the community. The rest of the funding comes to us because two or three key people within the group are very well known in the community, and they have a reputation with organisations that have got the funding. So the fact they are with us gives us more money, right? That is a tenuous situation, because they are not going to be there forever, and we are aware of that.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. And in terms of some of the work of your organisation, do you play any role in the local community in terms of things like education around climate and climate resilience?

Shamir VARMA: Not really. We would really like to see that happen in the group. I think it is necessary, because the community I think is reaching out for more knowledge, and people like the sustainability group I think do have that kind of resource. We have knowledgeable people within the group who could provide the right messages to people who really do not know what it is all about.

Sarah MANSFIELD: One of the things we have heard is that one part of building climate resilience is the community education connection between community members. Is that something that groups like yours, do you think, if you were resourced to do it, could play a role in?

Shamir VARMA: Yes. I am sure we can play a role. A few years ago I did volunteer for another climate change organisation, and we would have conversations with people. I found it was very difficult to attract a group of people. There was a lot of apathy within the community. I, for instance, sent out 40 or 60 flyers in my neighbourhood saying, 'We want you to respond. We want you to show some interest, and I'll organise a get-together so people can talk about what their issues are on climate change.' I did not get a single response – not one. In the few conversations I had, people would only talk about sustainability issues, not about climate change, mainly because the knowledge is not out there and they do not know what questions to ask. And we were struggling with how we should introduce a topic to them, because it is pretty daunting once you start talking about it, and we do not know how to talk about it.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. I guess I am just interested – there are a lot of older homes in the Bendigo region. What do you prioritise when you are working with people to improve their homes?

Shamir VARMA: I am not sure how to interpret your question, but the only priority we have is that they should be low-income homes. We do not go beyond that. Once they have qualified as a low-income home – and that is certified by another organisation, a government organisation linked to Centrelink, I think – we then simply roll it out on a first-come, first-served basis. That is what we do. And they have to be within the geography of Greater Bendigo. That is about it right now. You know, we do not say, ‘Okay, if it’s a handicapped person, should they get priority?’ We do not get any feedback from the council, or rather, we have not approached the council to say, ‘Okay, what are your priorities? Can we latch onto the vulnerable people and help them out?’ Maybe that is the next thing we will do. But right now it is first come, first served if you are interested. And believe me, it is difficult to get people to come forward and say, ‘We want solar panels on our roof,’ even though they know it will not cost them anything.

Gaelle BROAD: So it is mainly solar panels? You are not looking at other elements like insulation or anything like that?

Shamir VARMA: No, we cannot.

Gaelle BROAD: Just the solar?

Shamir VARMA: Not even heat pumps.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. Just with solar panels, because you are working with them so much, we heard from Deakin University the lifespan is about 20 years for solar panels. Concerns have been raised about the lack of being able to recycle some of the components of solar panels. What are your thoughts with so many solar panels being put up? What is being done to recycle them, and how long do they last?

Shamir VARMA: We have not encountered that yet. We have been at this for about maybe 10 years, and we have got solar panels on the Bendigo Library. We have got solar panels on one or two businesses out there. The only issue we have faced is that some inverters have failed, but we have had no issues with the panels themselves. If an inverter fails, your whole system comes to a standstill, and we do not know how we are going to tackle that when a low-income household’s inverter fails. It is going to happen at some stage. We have not thought about how we are going to recycle solar panels. These are all open-ended issues for us that I think whether we like it or not, we are going to have to face in the near future.

Gaelle BROAD: So are you aware of anyone in the industry that is looking into that more broadly?

Shamir VARMA: No, I am not aware.

Gaelle BROAD: That is fine. Can you tell us a bit about the sustain Bendigo fund? You are wanting to establish that and maintain it; can you give us a bit of an explanation?

Shamir VARMA: I really cannot answer that question. It is a limited fund. It does not have much money in it, maybe at best a couple of hundred thousand dollars, sometimes less. Whatever funding we get, a small portion of that is useful, let us say, for administering an initiative, and that money would perhaps go into the fund and from that would be rolled out, say, if you need to advertise to attract some interest or if you have to employ somebody to run a program like we did for the saving-power program. We had to have somebody there to coordinate the full range of activities to get solar panels onto somebody’s roof. So we had to have a person dedicated for that for a limited period of time. This is the kind of stuff that we would pull out of the sustainability fund. That is all I can say at the moment.

Gaelle BROAD: That is fine. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. You talked about inverters failing and the whole system then going down, so is there a backup if that happens? If my power goes off at my house, I get a text from Powercor to say ‘It’s off.

We know you're off. We'll have it back on by 2 pm or 3 pm' or something like that. If the inverter goes down, what does it cost to replace it, how long does it take to replace it and is there any backup power coming to those homes in that time?

Shamir VARMA: We have not had a situation as yet because it is a new initiative and these things do have between a five- and 10-year warranty. We are going to rely on the warranty to take care of any failures.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. So there has not been a cost so far, but what is the time that the power is off to the home?

Shamir VARMA: We will have to work with the household. They will have to tell us, and then we will have to work with the supplier of the panels or whatever it is to say, 'Have you done this job?', because most households will not do that. They will throw up their hands if you do not know what to do. We will tackle that issue. We talk about it, but we have never really had a situation.

Wendy LOVELL: But is the home without power while the inverter is down at all? Is the home still powered or is it –

Shamir VARMA: No, it is still powered.

Wendy LOVELL: Still powered – I thought you said before that if it went down, the whole system failed.

Shamir VARMA: No, no, no. The whole system will not go. I mean, this just fills in a gap. There is always power in the house.

Wendy LOVELL: Right, okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Lovell.

Mr Varma, thank you so much for your time coming in today and for answering the questions of the committee. We have really appreciated the evidence about what you are doing in Bendigo. Shortly you will be provided with a copy of the transcript from today for you to review and provide any comments on.

With that we will conclude this session, and the committee is going to take a short break.

Witness withdrew.