

From consultation to stewardship: community trust, continuity and change in long-term mine closure

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Abstract

Mine closure is not an end point but a generational transition, particularly in regions where mining has shaped landscapes, livelihoods and identity for decades. In these contexts, communities are not simply stakeholders in closure planning; they are long-term, deeply invested stewards of what comes next.

Drawing on engagement practice in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia, this paper reflects on how provisional forms of trust and confidence have gradually emerged in a highly fatigued region experiencing multiple overlapping mine rehabilitation and closure processes. It examines the conditions that supported effective engagement, including clarity of the institutional role, continuity of relationships, transparency about uncertainty and deliberate pacing to respect community capacity.

The paper also considers the challenges that arise when institutional arrangements change during long-term transitions. For communities already navigating uncertainty, organisational restructuring can be experienced as an additional disruption; raising concerns about continuity, accountability and the preservation of hard-won trust. Rather than focusing on organisational permanence, this paper explores how trust is produced through practice and how it can be destabilised, or sustained, as governance structures evolve.

The paper argues that while institutions may change, the social conditions required for meaningful engagement remain consistent. It concludes by offering practical insights for regulators, operators and practitioners seeking to move beyond transactional consultation towards shared stewardship and highlights the importance of recognising trust as a long-term asset in mine closure planning globally.

Keywords: social impact, community engagement, community consultation, Latrobe Valley, open cut mines, rehabilitation planning

1 Introduction: mine closure as a generational transition

Mine closure is often framed as a technical or regulatory milestone marking the end of extraction and the commencement of rehabilitation. In regions shaped by long-lived mining operations, however, closure is more accurately understood as a generational transition; one that unfolds across decades and profoundly affects landscapes, livelihoods, institutional relationships and community identity.

Australia's Latrobe Valley in Gippsland, Victoria, has been subjected to extensive community engagement processes, contributing to significant documented consultation fatigue and broader mistrust of government and industry actors (Reeves et al. 2022). Located approximately 150 kilometres east of Melbourne, the Latrobe Valley has hosted three of the Southern Hemisphere's largest open cut brown coal mines, which collectively powered Victoria's electricity system for more than a century. Mining has shaped not only the physical environment of the valley, but also its social fabric, employment patterns and sense of place.

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Under the *Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990* (Victoria), a declared mine is defined as a mine with geotechnical, hydrogeological, water quality or hydrological characteristics that may pose a significant risk of harm to the community, environment or infrastructure. The minister for Resources may declare a mine at any time where these criteria are met. Victoria has 3 declared mines, all located within the Latrobe Valley: Hazelwood, which ceased operations in 2017; Yallourn, scheduled to close in 2028; and Loy Yang, scheduled to close in 2035.

These mines are large and geographically proximate. Collectively, the 3 open cut voids span more than 50 square kilometres, with surrounding land areas of approximately 130 square kilometres. Combined, the voids could contain an estimated 2,350 gigalitres of water. The mines sit close to established townships. Latrobe City, encompassing Morwell, Moe, Traralgon and surrounding communities (Figure 1), has a population of approximately 77,000 and experienced growth of 5.5 per cent between 2016 and 2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022.)

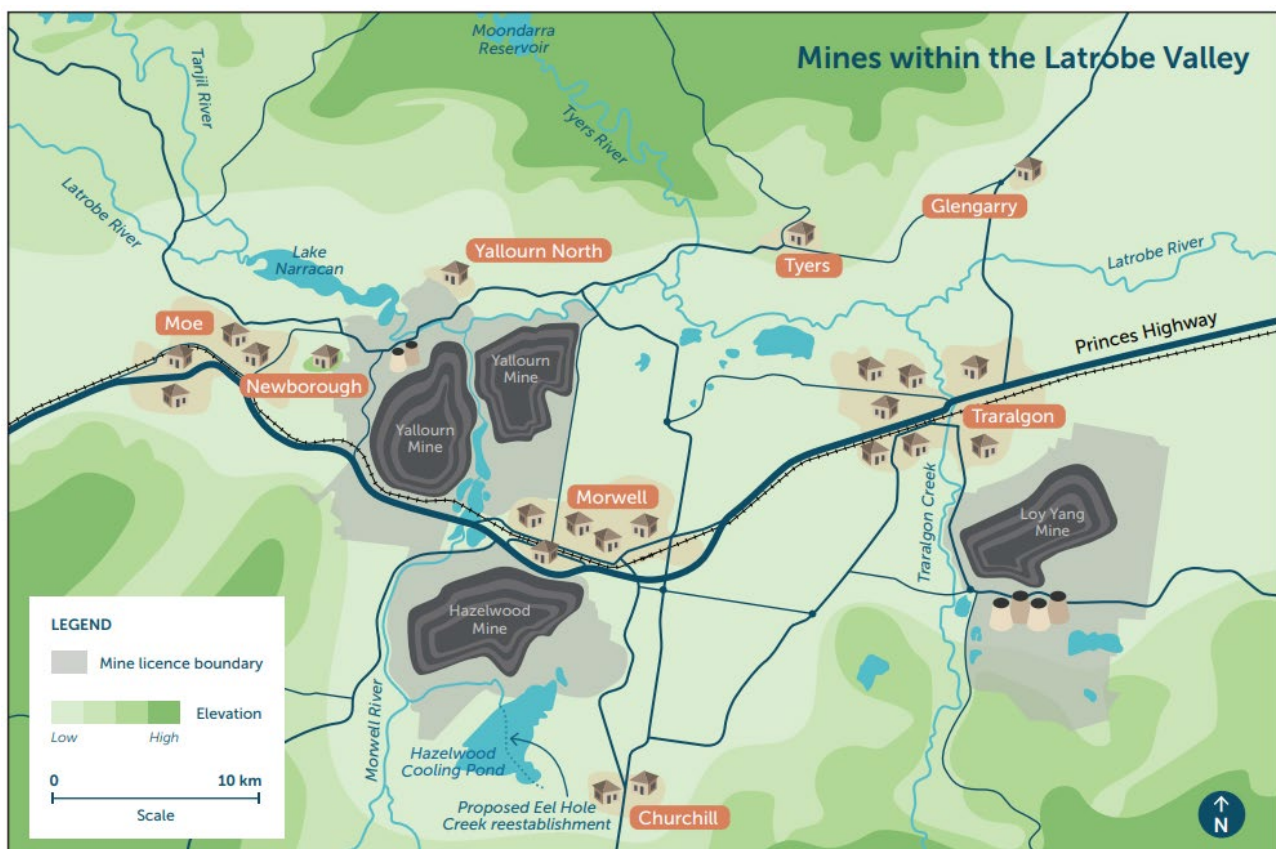


Figure 1 Mines within the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia

Over recent decades the Latrobe Valley has experienced repeated economic, environmental and institutional transitions. These include privatisation of energy assets, the decline of timber and coal industries, and broader climate and energy policy shifts. As a result, the community has engaged in extensive consultation processes across economic development, environmental protection, energy transition, health and land use planning. While consultation has been frequent, trust in institutions has often been fragile; shaped by uneven outcomes and perceptions of limited influence. In this paper, ‘institutions’ refers collectively to the public and private organisations involved in mine rehabilitation and post-closure planning, including government agencies (regulators and policymakers), statutory authorities, and mining and other industry actors.

The Latrobe Valley and Gippsland Transition Plan (Latrobe Valley Authority 2023) identified a strong community appetite for well-coordinated, transparent and meaningful involvement in complex processes such as mine rehabilitation. The plan positioned mine rehabilitation not only as a risk to be managed but as

an opportunity to add long-term value to the region, provided communities and traditional owners are meaningfully involved.

In Victoria, projects with the potential for significant environmental effects are assessed through the Environmental Effects Statement process under the *Environment Effects Act 1978* (Vic). Although titled an Environmental Effects Statement (EES), the guidelines define the environment broadly to include physical, biological, cultural, social, health, safety and economic dimensions. Engagement with affected communities is an explicit requirement of the process. At the time of writing, an EES is underway for the proposed rehabilitation and future landform of the Hazelwood mine, representing one of the most complex post-closure assessment processes in Victoria.

As institutional responsibilities shift and resources are increasingly constrained, the challenge for mine closure planning is less about institutional permanence and more about maintaining the social conditions that enable confidence, accountability and participation over time.

This paper reflects on engagement practice undertaken in this context, focusing not on consultation techniques in isolation, but on the deeper social conditions that support, or erode, trust over time. It argues that in long-term mine closure contexts, communities are not merely consultees or stakeholders, but long-term stewards of environmental and social futures. The paper examines what it takes to move from transactional consultation towards shared stewardship, particularly in contexts where institutional arrangements change mid-transition while the social conditions required for meaningful engagement remain constant.

This paper draws on engagement practice undertaken while the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority (MLRA), a Victorian Government statutory authority, functioned as an independent authority between 2020 and 2026. The MLRA was established to oversee and facilitate the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared coal mines in the Latrobe Valley, working across government, industry and community to support rehabilitation planning, risk management and long-term land use outcomes (Reeves et al. 2022). Central to its role was the coordination and delivery of community and stakeholder engagement to inform decision-making processes associated with mine rehabilitation. The insights presented in this paper are derived from the authors' direct professional involvement in the design and delivery of these engagement activities during the period in which the MLRA operated. Although institutional arrangements have since changed and the lead author's role now sits within Resources Victoria, the statutory responsibilities relevant to this work under the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990 – including sustained engagement and education in support of Latrobe Valley coal mine rehabilitation and stewardship of the Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy – have continued, providing continuity in function and practice (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action 2023).

2 Beyond 'over-consultation': fatigue, legitimacy and confidence

The concept of consultation fatigue is frequently invoked in regions with repeated engagement processes. In the Latrobe Valley, fatigue is not simply the result of volume; it reflects the accumulated experience of consultation that has not consistently translated into visible outcomes or influence.

Community members often demonstrate high levels of technical understanding and historical knowledge of mining and rehabilitation issues. However, repeated exposure to changing plans, evolving institutional actors and incremental decision-making has contributed to cynicism and disengagement among some cohorts. The challenge is not that communities are unwilling to engage, but that they require credible assurance that engagement is purposeful, bounded and connected to decision-making.

Legitimacy in this context is relational rather than purely procedural. Formal compliance with consultation requirements does not in itself produce trust. Trust emerges when institutions demonstrate competence, transparency and continuity over time, and when communities can locate their participation within a clear narrative of change.

Crucially, fatigue often masks uncertainty rather than opposition. Where people cannot see how decisions are made, who is accountable or what trade-offs are being managed, disengagement becomes a rational

response. Addressing fatigue therefore requires clarity and honesty about uncertainty, rather than attempts to reassure prematurely.

3 From stakeholders to stewards

Traditional stakeholder models often position communities as external to decision-making systems; groups to be consulted at key milestones rather than recognition as enduring participants in long-term change. In mine closure contexts, this framing is inadequate.

Communities near major mining operations will live with closure outcomes for generations. They will interact with altered landscapes, water systems, land uses and institutional arrangements long after regulatory approvals are granted and operators exit. This reality positions communities as de facto stewards, regardless of formal governance arrangements.

Stewardship implies shared responsibility, a long-term perspective and mutual accountability. While institutions, governance arrangements and regulatory roles may evolve over time, stewardship requires consistent social conditions, clarity, continuity and transparency that allow communities to remain meaningfully engaged across change. International research increasingly recognises that meaningful participation in complex policy contexts relies on sustained relationships and shared understanding rather than one-off institutional mechanisms (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020).

In the Latrobe Valley, engagement approaches that acknowledged this stewardship role by investing in long-term relationships, supporting community capability and articulating how decisions would evolve over time were more likely to build confidence than one-off consultation events.

4 Conditions supporting effective engagement in long-term closure

Drawing on practice in the Latrobe Valley, 4 interrelated conditions are critical in supporting provisional trust and participation.

In the Latrobe Valley, engagement approaches that supported trust were characterised by early exposure to uncertainty rather than delayed disclosure of complexity. Webinars and targeted discussions focusing on climate scenarios, water availability and contingency rehabilitation options provided structured opportunities for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of constraint, risk and trade-off before decisions were formed. This approach worked with the goal of shifting engagement from validation towards collective sense, reducing scepticism in a region already experiencing consultation fatigue (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action 2023).

4.1 Clarity of the institutional role

Communities navigate multiple actors during mine closure: regulators, operators, local councils, transition authorities, advisory bodies and consultants (International Council on Mining and Metals 2019.) Confusion about roles and authority can quickly erode trust.

Effective engagement required institutions to be explicit about:

- their statutory role and limitations
- where decisions sat and who made them
- what influence engagement could realistically have (International Association for Public Participation [IAP2] 2018).

Rather than diminishing trust, clear boundary-setting often strengthened credibility by reducing false expectations.

4.2 Continuity of relationships

Trust is cumulative. High staff turnover, short-term contracts and frequent organisational changes disrupt the social fabric of engagement. Continuity, where possible, supported relationship building and preserved institutional memory.

Where continuity of personnel could not be maintained, deliberate handover, documentation and transparency about change helped mitigate disruption.

4.3 Transparency about uncertainty

Mine closure and rehabilitation involve deep uncertainty: geotechnical behaviour, long-term water balance, climate variability and evolving policy settings. Attempts to oversimplify or prematurely resolve uncertainty were counterproductive.

Communities responded more positively when uncertainty was acknowledged openly, and accompanied by an explanation of how uncertainty would be managed over time through monitoring, adaptive management and staged decision-making.

4.4 Deliberate pacing and respect for capacity

Effective engagement respected the tempo of communities already experiencing transition. Deliberate pacing – spacing engagement activities, aligning processes and avoiding consultation saturation – enabled more meaningful participation.

Increasingly, institutions involved in long-term mine closure are operating within constrained resourcing environments shaped by competing priorities, finite expertise and shifting delivery models. In such contexts, meaningful engagement is not a function of volume but of discipline. Clear articulation of roles, purpose and decision boundaries becomes more critical, not less, as it enables institutions to focus limited capacity where it adds the greatest value and provides communities with realistic expectations about participation and influence.

This approach recognised engagement as an ongoing relationship rather than a series of events.

5 Institutional change as an engagement risk

Long-term mine closure frequently outlasts political cycles, organisational structures and governance models. In the Latrobe Valley, institutional change was experienced alongside technical and environmental uncertainty.

For communities, organisational restructuring can appear as an additional form of disruption, raising concerns about:

- loss of institutional knowledge
- shifting priorities
- weakened accountability
- erosion of hard-won trust.

Importantly, trust does not rest solely on the permanence of institutions but on the visibility of good practice. Where engagement principles, decision transparency and relational continuity are maintained, trust can prove more resilient even as governance arrangements evolve.

Conversely, abrupt changes without explanation or signalling can amplify suspicion and disengagement.

Advisory structures established during strategy development provided an important bridge as institutional responsibilities evolved. While organisational arrangements shifted over time, continuity of engagement practice, documentation and relational connections helped preserve confidence among stakeholders and

committees, while working groups played a key role in engagement and acted as conduits for broader stakeholder engagement during key processes (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action 2023). This suggests that resilience in engagement is less dependent on organisational permanence than on a visible continuity of approach.

6 Trust as practice, not personality or structure

A central insight from engagement practice is that trust is produced through repeated, observable actions rather than through organisational branding or individual personalities alone.

Trust was strengthened when institutions demonstrated:

- consistency between words and actions
- willingness to listen and adjust
- respect for community knowledge
- accountability for past commitments.

Conversely, trust was destabilised when engagement appeared performative or disconnected from decision-making.

This understanding reframes trust as an asset that accumulates, or erodes, through practice. It also means trust can be transferred, inherited or undermined, depending on how transitions are managed (IAP2 2018).

Engagement with traditional owners illustrated the importance of recognising enduring custodianship rather than time-bounded consultation. Involving the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) in system-level water planning and recognising cultural objectives for the Latrobe River was an opportunity to reframe engagement from input-seeking to shared responsibility. This approach aligns mine closure with broader regional transitions and reinforces trust as a long-term relational commitment rather than a project deliverable (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action 2023).

7 Implications for regulators, operators and practitioners

7.1 Stewardship through institutional change

Across long-term mine closure processes, governance structures, institutional arrangements and delivery models are likely to evolve. In the Latrobe Valley, multiple organisational changes have occurred while rehabilitation planning and implementation continue. However, experience suggests that while institutions may change, the social conditions required for meaningful engagement remain remarkably consistent. These conditions – clarity, continuity, transparency and respect for community capacity – provide a stable foundation through which participation and trust can be sustained, even as formal structures shift.

Against this backdrop, the following 3 practical implications emerge for regulators, operators and practitioners involved in long-term mine closure.

7.2 Move beyond transactional consultation

Compliance-driven consultation is insufficient. Engagement must be designed as an enabling system that supports understanding, confidence and long-term participation.

7.3 Design for continuity, not permanence

Institutions will change. Engagement systems should therefore prioritise transparency, documentation and handover to preserve trust across transitions.

7.4 Recognise trust as a strategic asset

Trust enables adaptive management, reduces conflict and sustains participation. It should be treated as a core consideration in closure planning, not as a downstream benefit.

8 Conclusion: stewardship in an uncertain future

Mine closure is not a moment but a process that unfolds across generations. In regions like the Latrobe Valley, where mining has deeply shaped community identity and landscape, engagement is not an adjunct to rehabilitation; it is foundational to legitimacy and long-term success.

This paper has argued for a shift from transactional consultation toward shared stewardship, grounded in clarity, continuity, transparency and respect for community capacity. While institutions may change, the social conditions required for meaningful engagement remain constant.

Recognising trust as a long-term asset and stewarding it with care offers regulators, operators and communities a more resilient pathway through the uncertainty inherent in mine closure.

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