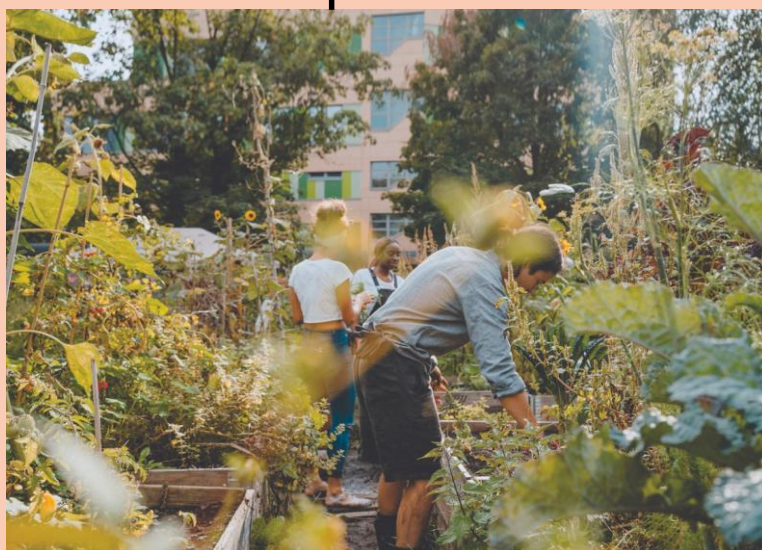


MAV Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy



September 2025



The voice for
local government

No one understands the challenges and opportunities facing Victoria in the 21st century better than local councils. From rapidly evolving technology to social changes, shifting economies to environmental pressures, our local communities and the governments that represent them—are at the forefront of multiple transformations happening simultaneously.

As the peak body for the Victorian local government sector, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) offers councils a one-stop shop of services and support to help them serve their communities.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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1 Executive Summary

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy.

The MAV is the peak body for Victoria's 79 councils with the purpose to mobilise action that supports Victorian councils to create cities, regions, and towns that are thriving, resilient and inclusive communities.

The MAV vision is to be a nation-leading thought leader, partner and resource hub for the Victorian local government sector in strategic foresight, policy and research, leadership and governance, service design and advocacy impact.

Climate misinformation and disinformation seeks to undermine public confidence in and progress towards climate action and sustainability solutions. It has a range of locally experienced impacts including the erosion of social license, threats to scientific evidence-based policy making and manipulated community sentiment.

As the closest and most deeply embedded level of government in communities, local government is uniquely positioned to provide accessible, evidence-based information to their communities on climate change and the energy transition.

This submission sets out four key recommendations to ensure that local government can effectively respond to climate and energy misinformation and disinformation.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen local government capacity to address mis and disinformation	Invest in training and capability building programs for council staff, councillors and mayors to enhance their ability to identify, respond to and mitigate the impacts of misinformation and disinformation relating to climate change and energy.
2. Invest in local government as hubs for climate disinformation response	Local government offers significant value to climate disinformation response models that offer the unique combination of being both locally embedded and contextualised.
3. Improve information access and knowledge translation across levels of government	Establish clear, consistent and timely channels of communication for local and national governments to share accurate, evidence-based information on energy and climate policy and related disinformation.
4. Support local government as a strategic partner	Recognise and invest in the role of local government as a genuine partner in Australia's energy transition, climate mitigation and adaptation, and addressing associated mis- and disinformation.

2 What is climate disinformation?

Mis- and disinformation have become pervasive elements of our social and political contexts. So much so that this has been named the top global risk of the immediate term (World Economic Forum Global Risk Report, 2025), for its capacity to erode institutional trust, promote social and political polarisation, manipulate systems including economic, political and essential services, incite violence and conflict, and hamper critical progress in areas like ethical use of artificial intelligence and technology and climate action.

Climate disinformation seeks to undermine public confidence in, and progress towards, climate action and other sustainability solutions. It ranges from outright denial of climate change to a rejection of proposed solutions. Globally, climate disinformation is undermining meaningful action to mitigate and prevent climate related harms.

According to the EU DisinfoLab, some of the key strategies used in climate disinformation include:

- framing narratives of “alarmism vs. realism”
- characterising advocates of climate action as promoters of panic
- acting as “climate delayers” to encourage inaction
- spreading broader disinformation narratives about technological control aimed at imposing “an apocalyptic new world”¹.

¹ [EU DisinfoLab \(2023\) Don't stop me now: the growing disinformation threat against climate change](#)

3 What does this look like – locally and globally

3.1 Climate change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has found that human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850-1900 in 2011-2020². The IPCC outlines with high confidence that global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals³.

Despite this, there is still global warming and climate change scepticism and denial throughout Australia from the community level⁴ to Australian MPs⁵, industry⁶ and the media⁷. It has been reported that some influential climate deniers have changed tactics to anti-renewable energy⁸, highlighting the climate denial is becoming broadly untenable.

In Victoria, the Solar Savers program, delivered by the Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action, was recently the subject of disinformation tactics. The program supports residents and businesses in 20 Victorian councils to install energy upgrades through a panel for vetted suppliers. Solar Savers undertakes a process to ensure suppliers have the relevant experience, meet quality and sustainability standards and are competitively priced. There are currently eight vetted suppliers listed on the Solar Savers website⁹. Erroneous claims regarding the Solar Savers program supplier panel were spread online¹⁰ resulting in council officer resources being diverted to countering the claims.

Council staff are also managing misinformation around electric vehicle fire risks. Several Victorian councils are working together under the Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action to transition council fleet to zero emission vehicles via funding from the Australian Renewable Energy Agency's Driving the Nation Program. The project's second lessons learnt report notes council staff concerns about EV fire risk were "often amplified by misinformation" leading to hesitancy from operational teams, reduced uptake and financial caution from managers¹¹. The report recommended engaging independent technical experts to address safety concerns in the early

² [IPCC \(2023\) Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report](#)

³ [IPCC \(2023\) Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report](#)

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jun/24/climate-change-survey-human-caused-poll-australia>

⁵ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/regional-australians-pay-the-price-for-climate-denial-20250522-p5m1ag.html>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/apr/26/why-australias-most-prominent-climate-deniers-have-stopped-talking-about-the-climate-ntwnfb>

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/these-3-climate-misinformation-campaigns-are-operating-during-the-election-run-up-heres-how-to-spot-them-253441>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/apr/26/why-australias-most-prominent-climate-deniers-have-stopped-talking-about-the-climate-ntwnfb>

⁹ [Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action Solar Savers program](#)

¹⁰ [Council Watch Victoria Inc, 14 May 2025, Facebook post SOLAR SAVERS...](#)

¹¹ [Wyndham City Council \(2025\) Lessons Learnt Report No. 2, Local Council EV Integration Project](#)

phases of the transition “when misinformation and disinformation are most likely to influence perceptions and hinder support”¹².

Further afield, researchers have noted the impacts of disinformation on sustainable urban planning. The “15-minute-cities” framework has been targeted by disrupters claiming it is being used to enable government control and surveillance¹³. The types of conspiracy theories circulating around the 15-minute-cities initiative have contributed to the abandonment of sustainable transport policies.

3.2 Energy

Across Australia we have seen examples of misinformation and disinformation, alongside the absence of meaningful consultation, contributing to local opposition to renewable energy developments.

Victorian councils are also grappling with misreporting around renewable energy transmission planning. In April 2025, Buloke Shire Council released a clarification regarding media reports that council had entered into a deal with VicGrid on the VNI West transmission project¹⁴. The statement noted “Buloke Shire Council has NOT entered into any deal with VicGrid, AEMO, or any other entity... Additionally, comments attributed to Buloke Mayor Cr Alan Getley in recent media coverage were taken out of context.”¹⁵

Some Victorian councils have recently reported misinformation being spread via social media about the safety of wind turbines. For example, the Wimmera Mallee Environmental and Agricultural Protection Association released information on Facebook claiming radiation from wind turbines could pose health risks to people and livestock¹⁶. These types of claims can fuel local opposition to future renewable energy developments and could hinder the rollout of the Victorian Transmission Plan. More broadly, misinformation about wind energy, particularly claims about whale deaths, health risks and poor financial decisions, have been spread by political and media networks, with US narratives and conspiracy theories influencing Australian debates¹⁷. In the NSW region of Illawarra, wind energy misinformation has impacted public consultation processes, amplified division and tried to erode trust in scientific expertise and policy debate¹⁸. As said by Zali Steggall “spreading misinformation about the impacts of offshore wind takes advantage of, and feeds into, legitimate community concerns and apprehensions”²⁰.

Interestingly, Essential Research polling commissioned by the Climate Council has found that more than half (56%) of Australians underestimate how long renewable energy has been part of Australia’s history, with solar and wind farms dating back to

¹² [Wyndham City Council \(2025\) Lessons Learnt Report No. 2, Local Council EV Integration Project](#)

¹³ [Disinformation in the City \(2025\) Brief 2 - Thematic areas and impact](#)

¹⁴ [Media Reports on VNI West and Buloke Shire Council - Buloke Shire Council](#)

¹⁵ [Media Reports on VNI West and Buloke Shire Council - Buloke Shire Council](#)

¹⁶ [Potential Health Impacts Of Wind Turbines - Presentation from Barrister Mr Raymond Broomhall](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-30/illawarra-offshore-wind-farm-misinformation-in-federal-election/105097852>

¹⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-30/illawarra-offshore-wind-farm-misinformation-in-federal-election/105097852>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/12/how-a-false-claim-about-wind-turbines-killing-whales-is-spinning-out-of-control-in-coastal-australia>

²⁰ <https://www.afr.com/policy/energy-and-climate/time-to-take-politics-out-of-the-energy-debate-20250306-p5lhk6>

the 1980s²¹. Rooftop solar is three times more common than a backyard pool and with gridscale wind and advanced storage, renewables provide around 40% of the electricity in our main grid²².

The MAV has observed some of the following drivers contributing to renewable energy misinformation and disinformation:

- Information is not always readily available: Information can be provided in a piecemeal way making it difficult for councils to support their communities and plan strategically.
- Limited access to technical expertise: Making assessments on renewable energy developments and related benefit sharing arrangements requires technical knowledge – many councils do not have access to in-house support nor the resources to engage consultants.
- Piecemeal consultation approaches: A lack of standardisation in community benefit sharing arrangements is contributing to confusion, consultation fatigue and tension within and between communities, risking loss of social license for projects²³.

3.3 Climate change adaptation and disaster resilience

In the context of climate change, extreme weather and natural hazard events will increase in their number, severity and complexity.

Recent devastating fires in Los Angeles and Spain, floods in Texas and across parts of Australia all underscore the increasing volatility of extreme weather events. Misinformation and disinformation surrounding the causes and responses to these disasters, including from elected officials²⁴, have posed challenges to public trust, making transparent, timely communication and coordinated emergency planning more critical than ever²⁵.

In these complex environments, conspiracy theories have flourished. In the United States and Spain there have been claims that:

- the government was using weather technology to [deliberately create the hurricane](#) to target Republican voters
- the government was [withholding aid from victims in Republican areas](#)
- and that the government was [seizing land from people who vacated](#)²⁶

The 2019/20 bushfire season saw the emergency of the hashtag #arsonemergency which linked to bots and trolls, diverting attention away from resources that linked the fires with climate change²⁷. False narratives were spread about the source of the fires, arson and lack of fuel reduction burning²⁸. At the same time there are also

²¹ <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/electric-shock-australias-lightbulb-moment/>

²² <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/electric-shock-australias-lightbulb-moment/>

²³ [MAV \(2025\) Community benefit arrangements and the energy transition](#)

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/audio/2025/jul/21/why-the-texas-floods-are-fuelling-far-right-conspiracy-theories-full-story-podcast>

²⁵ [MAV \(2025\) The Future is Local - Exploring the past\(s\), present\(s\) and future\(s\) of local government in Victoria](#)

²⁶ <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/australia-isnt-immune-to-disaster-disinformation>

²⁷ [Bots and trolls spread false arson claims in Australian fires 'disinformation campaign' | Bushfires | The Guardian](#)

²⁸ [AIDR \(2024\) Australia's Riskscape Report](#)

campaigns promoting the stopping of planned burns for environmental reasons²⁹. Local community social media provide unmoderated spaces for discussion to thrive³⁰. It has been suggested to use TikTok and 'trusted influencers' during emergency events as a means of combatting misinformation that can dominate those platforms³¹. In time of emergency and disaster, local government resources are already stretched, adding the monitoring of social media for warnings and public information is untenable.

In June 2025, Warrnambool City Council councillors considered the South Warrnambool and Dennington Flood Investigation project outputs. The study found there is a significant amount of residential zoned land at risk of large storm tide and riverine flood events.

The study area does not currently have up-to-date flood-related planning controls³². The study sought to update planning controls to consider worsening flood risks due to the compounding effects of climate change. It recommended modification of existing planning controls via a planning scheme amendment so that new development considers the present and future flood and climate risk profiles³³.

Council planning staff and the nation-leading flood modelling consultant team undertook extensive engagement and information sharing with councillors, impacted landowners and the wider community. The study investigation and consultation process took over two years to complete. It was also reviewed by council engineers and local catchment management authority staff.

Community debate ensued and significant political pressure was placed upon the council and councillors to abandon the process. Councillors openly questioned the science underpinning the investigation with some claiming they could not believe the "supposed science"³⁴. Despite knowledge-sharing efforts, and significant cost, councillors voted 6-1 to not proceed with the implementing the study into the Warrnambool planning scheme.

The MAV understands the catchment management authority is using the flood study as the latest available evidence of flood risk in the area to inform decision making. The MAV also understands that insurers are also likely to take the flood study into consideration in their insurance policies for Warrnambool.

The MAV acknowledges that this situation of town-by-town, council-by-council flood study investigation and planning implementation is far from ideal and prone to local political failure. The intensity of heavy rainfall events, a key driver of flood risk and major natural hazard facing Australia, is increasing as the climate warms³⁵. The MAV Sector Submission on Reforming Victoria's Planning system recommended that the State Government leads the application of science-based flood- and erosion-related land management overlays on a regional and catchment basis³⁶. Additionally, there needs to be an increase in efforts of communicating science and risk to communities.

²⁹ https://www.victorianforestalliance.org.au/stop_planned_burns

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/maryboroughgroup/posts/2603989399793584/>

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/aug/24/queensland-urged-to-use-tiktok-and-trusted-influencers-to-combat-misinformation-during-natural-disasters>

³² [Warrnambool City Council, Minutes - Scheduled Council Meeting 2 June 2025](#)

³³ [Warrnambool City Council, Minutes - Scheduled Council Meeting 2 June 2025](#)

³⁴ [Warrnambool council abandons peer-reviewed flood study, citing 'supposed science' - ABC News](#)

³⁵ <http://www.bom.gov.au/state-of-the-climate/australias-changing-climate.shtml>

³⁶ [MAV Sector Submission: Reforming Victoria's Planning System](#), April 2025

4 How does this impact local government

Victorian councils play a number of roles and responsibilities in relation to climate change and energy policy:

- Councils are required to promote the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks under the Local Government Act 2020³⁷
- Councils are required to prepare a four-year municipal health and wellbeing plan under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*³⁸ which lists tackling climate change and its impact on health as a priority
- Council planners must take into account climate change impacts, agriculture, energy and resource efficiency and integrated water management³⁹
- Councils may make voluntary council pledges regarding greenhouse gas emissions reduction activities under the *Climate Action Act 2017*⁴⁰

The MAV acknowledges that with the right resources councils can enhance and accelerate climate adaptation and mitigation actions:

- Transition to net zero through actively supporting programs that develop neighbourhood and regional based renewable energy generation at scale.
- A just and equitable transition to renewable energy for the whole community.
- The mode shift to public and active transport alongside the uptake of electric vehicles.
- The economic and social resilience of communities to manage the effects of climate change.
- Building community knowledge and support for rapid climate action⁴¹.

Misinformation and disinformation erode the social license for local government to perform their legislative duties. The absence of support for local government's role as an independent source of information can leave local government policies and planning initiatives vulnerable to opposition. Working in an already constrained fiscal environment local government must be able to communicate the value in investing in climate change and energy.

In their roles, councillors rely on evidence-based data and information to make decisions. This can be provided via consultants, independent experts or council officers. When data and information relating to climate and energy policy is subject to misinformation and disinformation, this can pose a threat to scientific evidence-based policy making.

In Canada, an AI-powered disinformation campaign was rolled out by Kicking International Council out of Local Environmental Initiatives aimed at dismantling local climate action plans⁴². The campaign involved an AI chatbot which used tailored communications to target municipalities including reports containing climate misinformation. Several municipalities weakened or abandoned their climate commitments after being targeted by the campaign.

³⁷ https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/20-009aa%20authorised_0.pdf

³⁸ [Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008](#)

³⁹ [Local government roles and responsibilities summary](#)

⁴⁰ [Climate Change Act 2017](#)

⁴¹ [MAV \(2024\) Climate Position Statement](#)

⁴² [Weaponized AI Chatbot Disseminates Climate Misinformation to City Councils | DISA](#)

A 2024 qualitative survey of cities in North America, Europe and Australasia found 10 out of 14 local governments identified that climate misinformation threatened staff safety and perception of safety⁴³. In that same survey, 12 of the 14 cities reported that they were impacted by climate disinformation, with nine of these rating the severity of impact between moderate and severe⁴⁴. Local manifestations and impacts of climate disinformation reportedly included:

- targeted media coverage or campaigns (10/14)
- protests (7/14); political lobbying (7/14)
- online messaging about specific groups (5/14)
- threats of harassment of elected representatives (5/14).⁴⁵

Such climate disinformation campaigns were reportedly most frequently prompted by local policy debate of adoption (12/14), followed by policy debate or adoption at other levels of government (10/14). This shows that climate policymaking appears to be a significant catalyst for disinformation campaigns impacting local government, with a range of locally-experienced impacts.

Climate misinformation can also lead to manipulated community sentiment. In 2023, the City of Onkaparinga met to discuss council's position on declaring a climate emergency declaration⁴⁶. The meeting was met with public disruption, including reports of aggressive behaviour from members of the public, with councillors and staff being moved for safety⁴⁷.

Fostering community safety, social cohesion and resilience is becoming more complex and urgent as councils face growing community expectations around public places, anti-social behaviour and online safety. In May, State Council passed a resolution calling on the MAV to support councils in condemning the personal abuse directed at individuals, and misinformation about councils, employees and councillors⁴⁸. The MAV is aware that climate and energy misinformation and disinformation is contributing to the erosion of social license and increased division in local communities.

⁴³ <https://democracy.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/65/2025/03/CSDI-Municipal-Matters-Report.pdf>

⁴⁴ [Disinformation in the City Response Playbook](#)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ [Climate change plan leads to chaos at City of Onkaparinga council meeting, police called - ABC News](#)

⁴⁷ [Climate change plan leads to chaos at City of Onkaparinga council meeting, police called - ABC News](#)

⁴⁸ [MAV \(2025\) May State Council Resolutions](#)

5 What local government response capabilities do – and could – look like

As the closest and most deeply embedded level of government in communities, local government is uniquely positioned to provide accessible, evidence-based information to their communities on climate change and the energy transition.

The MAV was involved in co-creating the Disinformation in the City Response Playbook⁴⁹, led by The University of Melbourne and German Marshall Fund of the United States in 2024. This playbook was the collective output of over 40 experts from local governments, city networks, media, tech, civil society and academia.

The playbook outlines that local government is already responding to disinformation in many ways, including:

- formal response on social media
- community engagement and capacity building
- engagement with disinformers
- training for elected representatives and/or staff
- adoption of new policy or procedures
- modifying physical spaces (e.g. Council chambers)
- removal of graffiti; postponement of initiatives or decisions
- modifying council meetings or processes.

Such responses are borne of necessity, as local government is increasingly impacted. Yet local governments are doing so without the benefit of specialised intelligence and systemic capabilities accessible to other levels of government, and without the benefit of targeted or translated research findings to suit the local context and capabilities.

This playbook forms the basis of MAV's model for recognising and building disinformation response capabilities across local government. Two key elements are key to effective local government response, as outlined below.

First the anticipatory phase. The continuum of response must be elongated from focusing on pre-and de-bunking, to invest in the anticipatory phase of climate disinformation. This includes understanding and building networked trust and trustworthiness of institutions, information, people and places, within communities. This anticipatory phase can then be used for early-detection and embedded response to climate disinformation, then if necessary to prevent or contain the spread of inaccuracies, and pre-bunking and de-bunking. Importantly for local contexts, disinformation response must include recovery and resilience-building, to enable communities to make sense of divisive campaigns, their impacts, and build resilience to future disinformation events. Local government is uniquely well placed for such locally contextualised resilience building.

Second, local government needs to have access to collaboration structures. These serve many purposes, including information sharing, providing collective impact, and strategic alignment for enhanced effectiveness.

⁴⁹ [Disinformation in the City Response Playbook](#)

Necessary collaborations at the local level take three forms:

1. Multi-sector collaboration. Drawing on local government's existing convening power and legitimacy to bring other sectors together at the local level to address this issue which directly and indirectly impacts well beyond government. These already exist under many aspects of local governance, a key example of which in the Victorian context being the multi-sector nature of Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.
2. Multi-city collaboration. Drawing on and extending from the many existing networks of local government. In the domestic realm, this includes targeted networks such as Greenhouse Alliance Networks, and important overarching peak bodies like MAV that provide a key role in convening, connecting, advocacy and capacity-building. Internationally, city networks have increasing influence globally and have become a mainstay of city climate diplomacy. Climate disinformation response is a current area of focus for city networks including C40⁵⁰ and ICLEI⁵¹.
3. Multi-level collaboration. Local government cannot effectively address disinformation at the local level without effective collaboration mechanisms with other levels of government. Health, education and policing are just three of the key state/territory level systems that need to work in alignment with local government for effective response. Likewise, with the intelligence apparatus at the national level along with strong national efforts to strengthen democracy across the nation, local governments must be able to work effectively with national level specialist counterparts. As levels of government not always familiar with working together, this will require the building of mutual contextual understanding, as well as addressing some structural barriers such as a lack of mechanisms for local government delegates to access security clearances on par their state and national counterparts to facilitate rapid information sharing as needed.

In 2024, MAV partnered with The Hunt Lab for Security and Intelligence at The University of Melbourne to co-design what we believe to be the world's first accredited academic credential for councillors and local government professionals to develop deeper understanding of how disinformation impacts organisations as well as the best practice skills needed to assess, counter, and build resilience to it⁵². Councils are ready to partner with State and Commonwealth Government, academia and industry to implement local approaches to reducing misinformation and strengthening information provision.

⁵⁰ [Disinformation - C40 Cities](#)

⁵¹ [Responding to Climate Misinformation | ICLEI Canada](#)

⁵² <https://www.mav.asn.au/what-we-do/governance-legislation/micro-credential-recognising-and-managing-disinformation>

6 Recommendations

To ensure local government can effectively respond to climate and energy misinformation and disinformation, the MAV recommends:

1. **Strengthen local government capacity to address mis and disinformation.** Invest in training and capability building programs for council staff, councillors and mayors to enhance their ability to identify, respond to and mitigate the impacts of misinformation and disinformation relating to climate change and energy. This is supported by the international network of mayors C40.
2. **Invest in local government as hubs for climate disinformation response.** Local government offers significant value to climate disinformation response models that offer the unique combination of being both locally embedded and contextualised – enhancing efficacy – yet within a sufficiently common structure of local governance that they are able to be replicated and recontextualised to localities across the country.
3. **Improve information access and knowledge translation across levels of government.** Establish clear, consistent and timely channels of communication for local and national governments to share accurate, evidence-based information on energy and climate policy and related disinformation. Co-design with local government the translation of information and initiatives related to climate disinformation from the national and supranational level – where most are focused – to the local level.
4. **Support local government as a strategic partner.** Recognise and invest in the role of local government as a genuine partner in Australia's energy transition, climate mitigation and adaptation, and addressing associated mis- and disinformation. This includes addressing structural barriers to collaboration and supporting genuinely multi-level policy and practice. Support local government to extend on its existing multi-sector convening legitimacy and unique position as trusted connectors between government and communities.

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