

Meeting minutes

Meeting details

Meeting	Little River BESS Community Reference Group (CRG) Meeting #1
Project	Little River BESS
Date and time	9 October 2025 – 9am-11am
Location	Little River Mechanics Institute and Free Library
Attendees	<p>ACEnergy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Claire Baertels (Chair)— Ahmed Adel <p>CRG members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Amy Cockroft— Greg Archer— Les Sanderson— Luke Skewes— Michelle Searle— Warde Macintosh <p>Guest participant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Catriona Rowntree
Apologies	Anne Smith

Discussion points

Item and comments

Acknowledgement of Country

Introductions

- ACEnergy team introduced themselves and outlined their roles in the project.
- CRG members provided introductions and an overview of their roles in the community groups they represent.
- Catriona Rowntree introduced herself as a near neighbour to the project.

Little River BESS – Project overview

- About ACenergy – A brief overview of ACenergy’s core business and its renewable energy project pipeline.
- Little River BESS project: Summary of the project’s purpose, including the role of the Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), key technical details, project location, and indicative timeline. Notably, the project was recently successful under the Federal Government’s Capacity Investment Scheme.

Creating shared value – Little River BESS benefit sharing strategy

- Aims and objectives of the project’s overarching benefit sharing strategy.
- Pillars of the strategy: Neighbour benefits, First Nations benefit sharing, and the Community Benefit Fund.
- Purpose of the Community Benefit Fund and the CRG
 - Community Benefit Fund: To deliver social and economic benefits for the local community.
 - Community Reference Group (CRG): To provide a local perspective to inform the early development of the Fund, as well as its ongoing implementation and refinement. The CRG will also undertake the assessment of grant applications in line with the Fund’s selection criteria.
- Process (subject to project timelines)
 - Early Fund development and CRG establishment (mid-2025)
 - Development of the Fund Guidelines (late 2025)
 - Fund launch & promotion (early-mid 2026)
 - Application evaluation (mid-late 2026)
 - Award of funds & process review (mid-late 2026).

CRG comments:

- The proposed process and timeline seem appropriate and achievable.

Community survey – What we heard

- Overview of the Community survey: Purpose, timeframes and advertisement, demographics, and key findings
- Key survey findings
 - Interest in the project: *Environmental impacts, and general project updates*
 - Top priority areas for the Fund: *Protection of the natural environment; Climate Change mitigation and natural disaster preparation; education, scholarships and local jobs & skills*
 - Most supported example initiatives: *Initiatives to protect or enhance the natural environment; collaborate with Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC); investment in community infrastructure and services*

- Initiatives with the most responses for “strong support”: *Initiatives to protect or enhance the natural environment; investment in local community infrastructure and services*

CRG comments:

- The Community survey should have been distributed in Balliang. ACEnergy noted that the survey was promoted through the community drop-in sessions, the *Star Weekly*, hard copies of flyers distributed to local businesses and community facilities, ACEnergy’s website, and via email to key stakeholders.

Discussion – Draft Community Benefit Fund Guidelines

CRG comments:

Budget

- Discussion around the size of grants to be offered – specifically, larger versus smaller grants. It was agreed that both options would be made available, with up to two larger grants of up to \$20,000 each awarded each year. The remaining funds will be allocated through smaller grants of up to \$5,000 each.

Target community

- It was suggested that Balliang should be included in the target community. Claire clarified that while the draft Guidelines don’t currently exclude Balliang, the wording of this section could be reviewed.

Eligibility

- The priority areas should be updated to include minority groups
- The reference to *community infrastructure* could be clarified to distinguish between building new infrastructure and enhancing or retrofitting existing infrastructure
- *What cannot be funded:*
 - *Salaries and wages* – This should refer only to ongoing employment costs. One-off payments for roles such as facilitators or performers should not be automatically excluded.
 - *Administrative expenses* – This should refer only to ongoing operational costs. Administrative expenses directly tied to a specific initiative should remain eligible for funding.

Selection criteria

- Some CRG members found the initially proposed weighting of the selection criteria helpful, while others raised concerns about its distribution. After discussion, the CRG agreed to re-categorised the first 11 initiative-related criteria into four equally-weighted categories:
 - *Natural environment*
 - *Community infrastructure, services & programs*
 - *Community wellbeing & capacity building*
 - *Inclusive communities & cultural respect*

The fifth category, *Viability of initiative*, was also increased to 20%.

Reporting

- The CRG recommended that funded initiatives be required to submit progress reports at two key stages:
 - Midpoint report at six months or halfway through the initiative
 - Final report on completion of the funding period and/or the initiative.

Assessment process

- A query was raised about how conflicts of interest will be managed. Claire outlined the proposed approach: CRG members will declare any conflicts when applications are shared for assessment and will abstain from evaluating the relevant application. This will not impact the applicant's eligibility or chances of success, but will simply reduce the number of CRG evaluations for that application.

Advertisement and application process

- The CRG recommended advertising the opening of each round in the *Geelong Advertiser*.
- The proposed application timeframe of 6-8 weeks was considered appropriate, allowing sufficient time for community members and organisations to prepare submissions.
- It was suggested that applicants be given the option to submit hard copy applications, in additions to online submissions, to ensure accessibility.
- The CRG also recommended the development of a live Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document to accompany the Guidelines. This document should be updated regularly to include new questions received during each application round.

Other feedback

- Collaborative initiatives: the Guidelines should clearly outline the eligibility and implications for initiatives co-delivered by two or more organisations, including how joint applications will be assessed.
- Repeat applications: Successful applicants from one funding year should be eligible to apply again in subsequent years.
- Selection criteria transparency: It was recommended that the Guidelines include the scoring scale used to assess applications. This would help applicants better understand how their proposals will be evaluated and how to structure their submissions effectively.
- Grant payments
 - The Guidelines should specify when successful applicants can expect to receive payment, as this may affect the feasibility and timing of their initiatives.
 - ACenergy to confirm whether grant payments will be made inclusive of GST, or if GST must be separately accounted for by applicants.
 - ACenergy to clarify whether payments will be made upfront, in stages, or vary depending on the grant size.

Next steps

- Guidelines review: ACEnergy will revise the draft Guidelines to incorporate the CRG's feedback and share the updated document with the group before the end of the year. This will allow the CRG to provide further input in early 2026, once project and Fund timelines are confirmed.
- Finalisation and launch: In early 2026, ACEnergy will work with the CRG to finalise the Fund, publish the Guidelines, and promote the Fund's launch. ACEnergy will reconnect with the CRG closer to the time to confirm the preferred method of collaboration (in person, via email, or via Teams).