DIVISION IN BENDIGO

Mainstream public opinion and responses to public protest in Bendigo, 2014-2016

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May 2018
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The concept for this research project was developed by Natalie Jacobson, then Coordinator Inclusive Communities of the Greater Bendigo City Council, Kate McInnes, then Manager, Education and Community Services of the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services, and Andrew Markus of Monash University.

The project was undertaken in partnership between the Greater Bendigo City Council, Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services and Monash University. A Steering Group based in Bendigo had oversight of the project.

Interviews and focus group discussions that formed the core resource for this report were organised by staff of the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS). Kate McInnes facilitated two focus groups conducted with female members of the Bendigo Muslim community. Susan Gardiner, a La Trobe University social work student on placement at LCMS, conducted 18 interviews. Three additional interviews were conducted by associates of LCMS.

Workshops held in Bendigo to discuss preliminary findings were organised by Natalie Jacobson and hosted on Council premises.

Greater Bendigo City Council provided access to public realm information utilised in the preparation of this report.

La Trobe University researcher Dr Julie Rudner, who was engaged on a parallel project (‘Social Cohesion in Bendigo’ for the Victorian Multicultural Commission) provided generous advice and assistance throughout the period of research and generously provided access to a range of research materials concerning Bendigo protest activities.

This research was granted funds through the Victorian Government’s Round 1 Social Cohesion Research Grants Program administered through the Community Resilience Unit of the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

This report was authored by Andrew Markus. While several people generously commented on earlier drafts of the report, the interpretation is solely the responsibility of the author. The report does not constitute Victorian Government policy. The content of this publication is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Victorian Government nor of the project partners.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project objectives

In the two years after November 2013, when a planning application for the construction of a mosque was submitted for approval to the City of Greater Bendigo Council, Bendigo witnessed increased levels of community division, hostility and racism, directed both towards Muslim residents and other visible immigrants, and within the local community. The Bendigo protests have been characterised as ‘possibly the ugliest racist outbreak in Australia since the Cronulla riots.’ This project has undertaken research to further understanding of mainstream opinion in Bendigo and of the experiences of residents of the Islamic faith. It presents an evaluation of the response strategies, with particular reference to the role of the Bendigo Council.

The phases of protest

Following public awareness of the submission of an application to build a mosque in Bendigo, protest activities were maintained for over two years from January 2014 and there remains the potential for its revival at a significant level. The first part of this report considers five phases of protest:

1. Initial mobilisation.
2. The first flashpoint: events leading to and including Bendigo Council approval of the mosque town planning application.
3. The appeal against Bendigo Council decision before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.
4. The second flashpoint: a phase of civil disobedience.
5. Exhaustion of the remaining courses of appeal, before the Victorian Court of Appeal and the High Court of Australia.

In the initial phase of mobilisation, a Stop The Mosque group was established and through its social media presence it established contact with far-right groups across Australia, enabling it to receive advice, propaganda material for distribution, funding and encouragement. The group’s Facebook campaign focused on the Islamic threat to the Bendigo community and in a wider perspective to the Australian way of life. Negative depictions of Islam were regularly featured.

The campaign fuelled displays of intolerance within segments of the Bendigo population and Bendigo City Council staff were subject to unrelenting harassment by email and other sources over an extended period of time. For many of the opponents there were no arguments to be made, nothing to discuss. Support for the building of a mosque was seen as a criminal act, a betrayal of the Bendigo community and of the nation. Following approval of the town planning application, the Stop The Mosque Facebook site featured photographs of the seven Councillors...
who voted to approve, with the caption: ‘These are the people that just sold out Bendigo’s future. Remember their legacy.’

Anti-mosque activists realised that the planning permit was likely to be approved by Council, so they had planned an appeal to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), an appeal process that is common in the context of contested planning approvals.

The anti-mosque activists were convinced that the assessment process was flawed. In their understanding, the ‘social impact’ on a community was a major consideration for determining a planning permit, had been ignored by the Council in face of legitimate and widely held community concerns.

The appeal was drawn out for almost one year, with a number of contested issues. The VCAT ruling on the appeal was handed down on 6 August 2015, upholding the planning permit granted. In his ruling, Justice Garde found that a mosque with capacity of 150, and 375 at Eid and other festivals, was appropriate for a city of Bendigo’s size.

There had been an expectation by Council staff that protests would die down with time, as had happened in the past in the context of controversial planning issues. There was a failure to grasp that the mosque issue was different because feelings were so passionately held that they would not simply abate. The opponents felt that they were fighting to defend their way of life and the future of their children.

By chance, the rejection of the VCAT appeal coincided with the emergence in Melbourne of a far-right group seeking a cause to justify their existence and provide them with public profile. The United Patriots Front (UPF) was a splinter organisation that had broken away from Reclaim Australia. UPF involvement escalated the phase of civil disobedience, which was marked by the take-over of a Bendigo Council meeting, two major public demonstrations, and the staging of a mock beheading outside the City of Greater Bendigo Council offices.

The appeal process through the Victorian Court of Appeal and subsequently the High Court of Australia entailed substantial financial cost but did not succeed: both Courts held that there was no basis to appeal. With avenues closed, and costs awarded against the appellants, protest was no longer maintained, but with expectation of revival when the building began.

**The Muslim community of Bendigo**

Australia’s Muslim population is growing rapidly, at many times the rate of growth of the total population.

Australian population growth over the last ten years has been in the range of 1.4%-1.9% per annum. Between 2006 and 2011, the Muslim population growth averaged an annual rate of 8%, and between 2011 and 2016, an annual rate of 5.4%.
Within Victoria, 94.7% of the Muslim population live in Melbourne. Outside of Melbourne, the largest Muslim populations are in the Shepparton area, numbering 3,522 in 2016, and Greater Geelong, numbering 2,529. The only other regional centre with a Muslim population more than 500 is Mildura, with 944 residents. The major regional centres of Bendigo and Ballarat have Muslim populations close to 450.

In Bendigo, the Muslim population more than doubled between 2011 and 2016, the fastest rate of increase in regional Victoria. Of the total Bendigo Muslim population, 168 (or 37%) arrived in Australia between 2011 and 2016. In 2016, Muslims comprise 0.4% of the total Bendigo population.

The age profile of the Bendigo Muslim population is different to the total Bendigo population. A relatively high proportion are under the age of 15 (31.6% of the Muslim population, 19.2% total Bendigo population), with very few over the age of 54 (5.3%, 29.7% of the total).

Bendigo’s Muslim population is diverse in terms of country of birth, ancestry, language, and stream of Islam.

The largest proportion, one-quarter of the Bendigo Muslim population, is born in Australia. Of the overseas birthplace groups, 72 (16%) are born in Afghanistan, 51 (11%) in Pakistan, 48 (11%) in Bangladesh, and 30 (7%) Iran.

The diversity of the Muslim population is also evident in its occupational structure, with representation in a broad range of occupations, including high and low skill. Thus 67 are employed as professionals, 35 as labourers. Of the professionals, the largest number (44 of the 67) are in the health field, with a number of medical practitioners.

Among the Muslim participants in the four focus groups conducted for this project, life in Bendigo was discussed in largely positive terms. Participants commented on their friendly interactions with locals. There were, however, some negatives noted. For some Muslim residents, their local community was too small and the opportunities for participation in the richer Muslim life of Melbourne is limited by distance, which precludes regular contact.

Having no mosque, Muslims in Bendigo have accessed a prayer room at the La Trobe University campus. With the increase in the Muslim population, this arrangement was no longer viable even for weekly prayers, and there was need for a larger facility for festivals and social events such as birthdays and weddings.

Planning for a mosque had been underway for some years, although not all local Muslims were involved in the discussions. While some focus group participants noted friendships and unity within the Muslim population, others spoke also of divisions – a reality that is not evident to outsiders who have a false understanding of ‘Islam’ as a monolithic entity. These divisions include social class, ethnicity, and language.
For those involved in the planning, a mosque was of importance not only for prayer and festivals, but also for the education of children, ‘where all can be together; where children can be involved, where they can learn the faith, learn appropriate way to conduct themselves.’

There was no expectation of trouble when the planning permit was lodged. Indeed some members of the community had hoped that the mosque would be welcomed as a valuable addition to the diversity of the town, as had been seen in the positive reception of the Buddhist Great Stupa of Universal Compassion that was being built near Bendigo.

There was surprise at the changed mood in the town as opposition to the mosque was mobilised. One participant commented that she had lived in Bendigo for seven years and had only had friendly interactions, then ‘suddenly everything changed, … I felt the ground shook underneath me when we started to have the protest.’

A range of experiences were discussed: verbal abuse; being stared at in shops and when walking in a shopping centre; threatening behaviour; being pushed; a physical attack. Abuse shouted from cars seemed to be a frequent type of incident. Particularly at risk were those who were visibly identified as Muslim: women with coverings and heavily bearded men.

The impact of the experience of discrimination and public protests varied with individuals. Some lacked the confidence or desire to continue living in Bendigo and moved away, others thought about moving but stayed. Some were left with a sense of insecurity. They felt isolated from the Anglo-Australian community, and less confident in their interactions. Those with families had heightened concerns. One person commented with regard to abusive comments, that when ‘we were young [we] … just ignored it, but being alone with a family, we take these things quite seriously.’ Experience of the period of demonstration and hostility is ‘going to stay with me for a very long period of time.’ But for some others who came to Australia as asylum seekers from war zones, in which a human life counted for very little, the main impression was one of heightened respect for the working of Australia democracy and for the actions of police in both protecting Muslim residents and upholding the rule of law.

A typology of attitudes

Forty in-depth interviews were conducted for this project. The criteria for selection of interview subjects was that the persons were from the mainstream of the community, not activists involved in support or opposition to the mosque, although two people actively opposed to the mosque presented for interview and were included.

The interviews provided a non-judgemental environment for participants to discuss their views on the building of the mosque, including the planning process and the handling of the issue by the Bendigo Council. The interviews also provided the opportunity for participants to discuss their views of Australian politics, Australia’s immigration policy, multiculturalism, ethnic and religious diversity, and Islam.
Interviews were professionally transcribed for the researchers and analysed using NVivo software. The analysis of the transcripts indicated a complex range of attitudes, that there classified within ten categories. While separated for analytical clarity, attitudes are not necessarily clearly demarcated and there may be varying degrees of overlap across the categories. It is, however, important to distinguish attitudes at an analytical level if the objective is to optimise strategies and messaging to counter threats to community harmony.

Of the ten categories, three are negative in their view of Muslims based on a view of the character of the Islamic faith, three are negative based on contingent grounds, such as the current employment situation in Australia, three are accepting or favourable toward religious freedom and diversity, and one indicates disinterest in the issue.

The broad thematic categories are:

1. Hidden conspiracies: politics of the paranoid style;
2. Muslim association with terrorism and community discord;
3. The negative impact of Muslims in Australia;
4. The impact of immigration on employment opportunities and the Australian way of life;
5. Misinformation, rumour and myth;
6. The flawed approval process and the failure to consult;
7. Disinterest;
8. A critical perspective and dismissal of rumour;
9. Freedom on religion and life in Australia;
10. The positives of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.

Public opinion, a quantitative analysis

There is no consensus among Bendigo residents interviewed for this project – nor indeed within the wider public – in their assessment of the balance of public opinion on the building of a mosque in their city. A journalist has commented that ‘no one has commissioned a credible poll in Bendigo to see what the community thinks about the mosque, so each side of the debate claims to have public opinion on its side.’

A review of quantitative evidence in large part resolves the uncertainty.

Federal and state election results indicate that whatever the level of unease about the building of a mosque and the presence of an increasing number of Muslims in Bendigo, it is not of sufficient strength to translate into even 3% of the vote for a single issue anti-Islam party or prominent local anti-mosque campaigner.
In local government elections, however, there is greater potential for anti-mosque campaigners to gain support. In the 2016 Bendigo Council election, those identified as anti-mosque campaigners did relatively well. The Councillor who led opposition to the mosque on the Council, Elise Chapman, lost her seat after allocation of preferences, but won a substantial vote (2,753), the second highest vote of the twelve candidates in her ward and the seventh highest vote of the 32 candidates who stood for election across the three wards. Her vote was only 100 votes less than that of the previous mayor, Peter Cox, who was defeated at the election after obtaining less than half the vote he had obtained in 2012. Julie Hoskin, who led the legal challenge to the mosque through the appeal courts, gained election to the Council.

Additional insight is provided by surveys of public opinion. The 2015 VicHealth General Indicators of Wellbeing ranks Bendigo at a similar or marginally higher positive level than the Victorian average; it does not indicate a community in which levels of wellbeing, life satisfaction, and trust in fellow residents are at a relatively low level.

But there are several surveys that find a relatively high level of dissatisfaction with the performance of the Bendigo Council.

The Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey, conducted annually since 2011, found a negative shift in 2015 in assessment of the Bendigo Council. Thus positive assessment of ‘overall Council direction,’ fell from 58% in 2014 to 44% in 2016, a level that is considerably below the average (51%) for regional centres.

The Greater Bendigo Wellbeing Survey 2015 found that when asked ‘As a citizen of Greater Bendigo, how would you describe your ability to influence local government decision making?’, just 11% of respondents indicated that they had a ‘great’ or ‘moderate’ influence, 24% ‘a little influence’, and a clear majority, 56%, ‘no influence’.

When asked for their views on immigration, multiculturalism, and cultural diversity, a majority of Bendigo residents indicate a positive attitude, although a substantial minority – close to one-in-four, or 25% of respondents – are negative. With regard to attitude to multiculturalism, this minority at 20% is almost double the level (11%) obtained in the 2015 Scanlon Foundation national survey.

The Australia@2015 survey provides insight into attitudes within the segment of the population, close 10% of the total, who support independent or minor party candidates and are more likely to be opposed to the mosque than supporters of the major parties. The distinctive characteristic of such voters is a heightened negative view of their life circumstances, a stronger sense that their local area is getting worse, and a much stronger negative view of immigration, multiculturalism and ethnic diversity.

When consideration is narrowed to attitudes to Muslims, Scanlon Foundation and other national surveys find that while 15% are ‘strongly’ negative, a substantial proportion of the
middle ground – in the range 30%-45% - tend toward negative, with a total in the range 40%-50% (or higher) with varying levels of concern. For example, an October 2016 Essential Report asked:

‘Are you concerned about the number of Muslim people in Australia?’; 53% indicated that they were concerned, 42% were not concerned. On the basis of survey evidence it is likely that among Bendigo residents, close to half the population have negative views or concerns over the prospect of an increase in the Muslim population. Survey findings support a key argument presented in the final section of this report relating to the failure to recognise the extent of concern and that limited adoption of an effective communication strategy.

**The handling of the mosque issue, an evaluation**

There were positives in Bendigo community responses to the anti-mosque campaign, including the affirmation of multiculturalism and freedom of worship – and condemnation of racism and bigotry. Leaders in government and the business community were unambiguous in their support of the Muslim community. Seven of the nine Council members were determined to uphold the requirements of planning regulations and not give in to threats. Further, they continued their advocacy and support of Bendigo as an inclusive multi-ethnic and multi-faith community. Councillors and community leaders upheld the law and chose to make a moral stand, for which they deserve respect and honour in the nation’s history.

But the argument presented in this report is that the handling of the application process, including consultation with community members and explanation of the issues involved in assessing applications, was not optimally handled by the Bendigo Council and staff, and by state and federal political leaders and their instrumentalities.

This is not to say that it was an easy matter to develop a more effective response – rather, the analysis merely highlights that there were deficiencies. A more effective communication and consultative strategy was not beyond the realm of possibility given the length of time – more than eighteen months – between the stirring of protest and the first major public demonstration.

Local councils and other organisations in regional Australia with historic and currently low levels of cultural diversity have little experience or expertise in the handling of controversial issues within multicultural contexts – and in dealing with ongoing campaigns involving harassment and vilification of staff. Further, the contribution of the state government and its agencies, and local political representatives, did not contribute to the calming local tensions.

As a result, it was difficult to assess risk and determine best practice solutions. In assessing risk, council looked to mosque planning processes in other Victorian regional centres, and to contested planning issues that had occurred in recent years in Bendigo. They failed readily to identify some very different circumstances that were developing in Bendigo in the context of anti-mosque protest.
Public statements by those in leadership positions indicate that the level of public concern over the growing presence and impact of Muslims in Australia was neither acknowledged nor understood.

The messaging of political leaders affirmed Bendigo as a community which welcomed immigrants and embraced cultural diversity. It celebrated the seven Bendigo Councillors who had stared down attempted intimidation. Intolerance and prejudice were rejected.

There was, however, a failure to acknowledge local concerns; rather, those opposed to the mosque were depicted as a small minority, with an emphasis placed on the role of outside agitators in fomenting trouble and opposition. The risk with such messaging is that it further alienates those with concern and reinforces the sense that they are not being listened to, that as far as those in government are concerned their views do not matter.

A second failure related to consultation. Some Council staff who participated in a workshop organised for this project presented the view that there was no point in holding further public meetings when it became clear that the only outcome would be a shouting match; there was no opportunity for reasoned discussion. But the range of possible consultative approaches seem not to have been considered. There was, for example, the potential to organise small group consultations, to which carefully selected members of the community would be invited. Those invited to such meetings would be people known for their personal networks, their positions of influence within service organisations, school communities, and churches.

Consultation also involves consideration of who should lead the consultation, for example, who are the local residents most likely to be trusted by those with concerns and in the middle ground of public opinion. In the current political environment, those in the middle are less likely to trust politicians, the mayor and prominent business leaders than in earlier times.

A third failure was the delay in dealing with misconceptions and rumours being spread by those opposed to the mosque. In August 2015 Council staff noted that the Rights for Bendigo Residents group was circulating photocopied sheets with a number of false assertions. These included claims about planned residential development around the mosque site, the size of the mosque development, and the expansion of Bendigo Airport to facilitate religious pilgrimages. On this occasion, more than one year after the mosque approval, it was decided to respond by taking out a full-page advertisement in the Bendigo Advertiser to rebut misinformation and to distribute rebuttals in fact sheets made available in individual Facebook posts.

Arguably, the Council lacked an approach to communication informed by best practice, as indicated, for example, in British government publications. Further, Council seemed always to be on the back foot: it did not set the agenda; it was reactive, not proactive.

What was needed was simple, clear, and repetitive messaging directed to issues in contention by the Mayor and Council media. The required elements in such messaging were:
• A clear statement of the limited power of Council, repeated over a period of months, to lessen the focus of opposition on the Council, as part of a strategy to depoliticise the role of Council and deny a local target to those opposed to the mosque.

• Clear and consistent statement of rights enshrined in the Australian Constitution and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities – and emphasis on the importance of fundamental human rights for all Australians and for maintenance of the Australian Way of Life.

• Timely ‘myth busting’.

• Publicising the human impact on vulnerable fellow citizens of the anti-mosque campaign.
PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In the two years after November 2013, when plans for a local mosque were submitted and became public knowledge, Bendigo witnessed increased levels of community division and increased incidence of interpersonal racism, directed both towards Muslim residents and other visible immigrants. This project was undertaken to further understanding of mainstream opinion in Bendigo and of the experiences of residents of the Islamic faith. It presents a critical evaluation of response strategies to the controversy that developed over the building of a mosque in Bendigo. As such, in addition to its local significance, the project provides an evaluation of the scope for effective response to Islamophobia and serves to further understanding of best practice response of relevance to Victorian communities.

The research for the project involved

- The conduct of four focus groups with members of the Muslim community, to document their experiences of life in Bendigo during the mosque controversy, including experience of racism and discrimination and the impact of the anti-mosque movement, as well as their perspectives on life in Bendigo.

- 40 interviews with members of the Bendigo community, with the main emphasis on interviews with people from the mainstream of the community who were not directly involved as supporters or opponents of the building of the mosque.

- Workshop consultations with staff of the Greater Bendigo City Council, non-government organisations and local media; this included a full-day workshop discussion with mid-level management at the Bendigo City Council and senior police officers; the workshop sessions included discussion of what worked and what could have been done better, which contributes to the critical review of responses to protests against the mosque approval which forms the final section of this report.

- Detailed examination of available quantitative data to determine the balance of public opinion in Bendigo; this included election results, Australian surveys of public opinion, and a survey conducted in Bendigo, including a 2015 survey conducted by the author of this report as part of the Scanlon Foundation’s Australia@2105 project. This survey data is interpreted in the context of the data collected by ten years of Scanlon Foundation national and regional surveying.

- Evaluation of Facebook records to which access was provided by the City of Greater Bendigo Council and Dr Julie Rudner.
1 THE PHASES OF PROTEST, AN OVERVIEW

‘Possibly the ugliest racist outbreak in Australia since the Cronulla riots’

In November 2013 the Australian Islamic Mission submitted an application to build a mosque in the City of Bendigo. This provoked substantial opposition from within Bendigo and beyond, which was concerned less with planning issues, and more with opposition to a feared growth of Bendigo’s Muslim population. Opposition was fed by growing anti-Islamic sentiment. By June 2014, when the application was considered by Council, 437 written submissions had been submitted, 327 of these from the Bendigo municipality.

Hostility to the mosque proposal and to Muslim settlement in Bendigo was demonstrated at public meetings, demonstrations, on social media, in letter box drops, and other contexts. There was increased community division and incidents of interpersonal racism, both towards Muslim residents and other visible migrants.

There have been various assessments of the significance of the Bendigo protests, pointing to the seriousness of the threat to community harmony. Kevin Childs writing in the Saturday Paper in an article headlined ‘Landmark in racial strife’ observed that Bendigo had seen ‘possibly the ugliest racist outbreak in Australia since the Cronulla riots 10 years ago’ (Childs 2015).

Cameron Stewart writing in The Australian commented that

The Bendigo mosque controversy has become a case study of how the new wave of far-right anti-Islamic groups operate in Australia. It has seen a local issue in this town ... inflamed and co-opted by outsiders from the radical right who have helped fund and feed a small anti-Islamic campaign in Bendigo .... The rise of Islamic State last year and the associated spectre of homegrown terrorism have breathed life into far-right anti-Islamic groups in Australia. For these groups, some of which have only emerged in the past year, the news that a large mosque was being planned for Bendigo was a call to action. (Stewart 2015)

Protest activities were maintained for over two years and there remains the potential for its revival at a significant level. The following narrative outlines the five phases of protest:

1. Initial mobilisation, January-June 2018;
2. The first flashpoint, events leading to Bendigo Council approval of the mosque town planning application on 18 June 2014;
3. The VCAT appeal, July 2014-August 2015;
4. The second flashpoint: civil disobedience late August to mid-October 2015;
5. Attempts to appeal the VCAT decision in the Victoria Court of Appeal, November 2015-June 2016.
Figure 1: South elevation (GKA Architects, Images reproduced in the *Bendigo Advertiser*, 10 January 2014)

Figure 2: West elevation (GKA Architects, Images reproduced in the *Bendigo Advertiser*, 10 January 2014)
Figure 3: GKA Architects, artist illustration of the proposed mosque

Figure 4: GKA Architects, artist illustration of the proposed mosque
Figure 5: GKA Architects, artist illustration of the proposed mosque. This image was reproduced on a number of occasions in media coverage – see, for example, Herald Sun, 30 November 2014, 16 December 2015; The Age, 15 June 2015, 16 December 2015
[1] The initial mobilisation of protest

An application for the building of a mosque to serve the local Muslim population was submitted by the Australian Islamic Mission in November 2013. Artist drawings submitted with the application depicted a multi-story structure in which human figures were dwarfed by the building’s size. It was left open to interpretation whether a building of such apparent size could be built for the costed amount of $3 million. Amendments to the planning application were lodged in January 2014 and March 2014.

In January 2014 the application became public in a featured story in the Bendigo Advertiser; a number of images of the mosque were included in the Advertiser’s coverage (‘Bendigo’s first mosque in the pipeline,’ Bendigo Advertiser, 10 January 2014).

Almost immediately, on 11 January, local residents established a Stop The Mosque Facebook page, with the objective of mobilising opposition to prevent approval of the project by the Bendigo Council. Early activists were identified as Kathleen Howard, Monika Evers, and Julie Hoskin.

The Facebook page, which featured daily postings, attracted 1,700 likes in the first few days (Bendigo Advertiser, 14 January14); by March it had increased to 4,700 likes (Bendigo Advertiser, 20 March 2014), by 30 May nearly 7,000, and in June over 8,000 (Online Hate Prevention Institute 2014).

In February 2014 the reach of the site was said to be doubling each week; it stood at 80,000 in mid-February and was close to 200,000 between 2-8 April, a level which was matched in June. Analysis by the Online Hate Prevention Institute released on 24 June 2014 indicated that most of the site’s supporters were from outside of Bendigo:

Our analysis of the ‘Stop The Mosque in Bendigo’ page shows that the percent of supports from Bendigo itself is tiny. In our sample of 100 users who had recently engaged with the page, only 3% were from Bendigo. Victorians (including those from Bendigo) made up 20% while those from other Australian states and territories collectively made up 59% of the sample (over half of them from Queensland). 13% of the support was from outside Australia altogether. (Online Hate Prevention Institute 2014)

In pursuit of its objective to influence Council to reject the application, the Stop The Mosque group urged people to contact Bendigo Councillors with their objections. People were asked to be ‘firm but polite when objecting to this mosque’ (21 February 2014). In early March, followers were advised that ‘The world is watching if the City of Greater Bendigo will show leadership and say NO to the mosque in Bendigo!’ (3 March 2014).

In mid-March a printed publicity sheet was produced, with negative claims concerning the nature of the Islamic faith. An objection form for submission to Council by individuals was
prepared, with the group said to be preparing 1000 objection forms for Bendigo residents. The material to be distributed featured the artist drawings of the proposed building (22 March 2014). These drawings were reproduced on the Facebook page on a number of occasions.

A tally of objections lodged was regularly featured on the Facebook site: 87 at the end of March, 170 by mid-May. A Bendigo local, identified as Jason, stated to a reporter that he met an unknown man in an Eaglehawk pub who had a pile of objection forms for people to sign (Bendigo Advertiser, 28 June 2014, first published in The Age).

In the period February-May 2014, the Stop The Mosque group, through its social media presence established contact with far-right groups across Australia, receiving advice, information for distribution, funding and encouragement. It also established a facility for individuals to make online payments to support the cause. These groups included the Australian Defence League, the Patriots Defence League, Concerned Citizens, Rise Up Australia, Restore Australia, and the Q Society.

In March the Stop The Mosque Facebook page made reference to activity in Bendigo by the Bendigo Chapter of the Patriots Defence League and Concerned Citizens of Bendigo. In early May, Pastor Danny Nalliah, the leader of Rise Up Australia, visited Bendigo to give talks. In the same month, the Q Society’s president, Debbie Robinson, and its head of media and public relations, Andrew Horwood, held meetings, with one information session titled ‘Islam, Mosques and Sharia Law in Bendigo.’ There was also reference to another organisation, Battle For Bendigo.

In May the Stop The Mosque group attempted to raise funds to host the visit of Gavin Boby, a British lawyer and self-proclaimed ‘mosque buster.’ Because of the failure to raise sufficient funding, and advice from the Bendigo Council that they would not give a hearing to Boby, they compromised with virtual meetings. The Facebook page advised that ‘Gavin has been advising us behind the scenes and addressing meetings of Concerned Citizens.’ An address by video-link in early June attracted ‘an almost packed hall,’ with other speakers exposing ‘a litany of planning incompetencies’ uncovered by ‘fastidious research.’

A Fairfax media investigation found that the Queensland-based organisation Restore Australia funded two Victorian groups fighting approval of a Bendigo mosque. Restore Australia was headed by Mike Holt, a Vietnam veteran, author, and former One Nation candidate, and Charles Mollison, a former lieutenant-colonel who was also a Vietnam veteran. Both men lived on the Sunshine Coast. Holt confirmed that up to $10,000 from money donated to Restore Australia was given to the Stop The Mosque group in Bendigo and also to a Victorian chapter of the Patriot Defence League Australia (Johnson 2014b)

Restore Australia had a sub-group called Islam4Infidels, which issued written advice to communities wanting to campaign against mosques. Holt stated that groups in Bendigo worked closely with three like-minded national organisations:
• Q Society (describes itself as ‘Australia’s leading Islam-critical movement’).
• Defence Conservative Action Network, whose members included former members of the army.
• Concerned Citizens, a group based in Wyee, south of Newcastle, which set up branches in towns and suburbs where mosques were proposed.

Holt stated that Restore Australia was in contact with and exchanged propaganda material with two groups in Britain, the English Defence League, known for anti-Islamic street protests, and Liberty Great Britain, a newly established (2013) far-right political party.

Holt claimed that the Bendigo mosque issue had served to unite previously separate Australian anti-Islam groups: ‘this issue has managed to unite us.’ The groups were also involved in campaigns against mosques in Queensland and the Northern Territory (Johnson 2104b).

Professor Andrew Jakubowicz, of the University of Technology Sydney, commented that his research into internet use by racist organisations indicated that there were networks connecting Australian groups with like-minded ultra-nationalists in the United States and Europe. Central organisations that he termed ‘switchers’ compiled information and distributed it through global internet networks. The far-right groups were involved in what he described as ‘community development projects.’ They were looking for places such as Bendigo to build a support base through involvement in anti-Muslim campaigns. Bendigo was a great opportunity – and subsequent success – for these organisations (Johnson 2014a).

The Stop The Mosque Facebook campaign

One basis for objections submitted to Council was planning issues, such as the impact of increased traffic, inadequate provision of parking space, noise, and the impact on wildlife. But there were many objections focused on the negative impact of Islam.

The main focus of the Facebook campaign was the Islamic threat to the Bendigo community, and in a wider perspective to the Australian way of life. Negative depictions of Islam were regularly featured.

Islam was said to permit rape, murder, incest, bestiality, beheading, paedophilia. Islamic rule entailed female apartheid, child trafficking, terrible punishments, such as cutting off of hands, and indiscriminate terrorist acts resulting in mass civilian casualties. Mosques were depicted as sites for the preaching of hate against the west. It was asserted that ‘once land is purchased for a mosque it ... becomes “Ummah” the property of the Islamic collective.’ An early post featured a quote from a Muslim leader (Anjem Choudary) to the effect that ‘Westerners need to accept the fact that Islam will dominate all lands it touches! The Holy Koran teaches us that where we put our feet we shall rule that land, it’s that simple!’ (5 March 2014).

Islam’s policy was supposedly one of non-integration: a separate way of life, with its own government (mosque), legal system (Sharia) and military (Jihad). ‘When full Islam comes to
Bendigo it will bring female inequality, because that is what is decreed in the Koran, FGM [Female Genital Mutilation], (Sharia), child marriages (Sharia), burquas (Sharia)’ (28 June 2014).

Accounts of a supposed Islamic plan for world domination were featured, supported by passages quoted from the Koran. ‘Fight them until all opposition ends and all submit to Allah’ (Koran: 8:39). Translated pages from a Sharia Law manual were reproduced (6 June 2014).

Muslim infiltration into Europe was allegedly underway. It was stated that in Britain there were now areas of the country where Sharia Law was practiced. These assertions were supported by links to overseas internet sites, including Jihad Watch (1 June 2014) and the ‘Free Online Library – Secret Saudi funding of radical Islamic Wahhabi groups in Australia.’ (13 June 2014). There were also links to publications with titles such as ‘The Islamification of Britain’, ‘Islam Exposed (The Truth About Islam),’ and to YouTube videos: ‘British schoolgirl’s testimony: Muslims threaten children with violence and rape outside school daily’ (18 March 2014); ‘Jihad – Radical Islam’s Goals’ (25 March 2014); ‘Arizona man says Islamic law gives him right to kill his wife’ (3 May 2014); ‘Muslims Shoot Innocent People, Behead them while they are in agony ..Warning: Extremely graphic video’ (14 May 2014); ‘Muslim Sharia Law in Australia’ (15 June 2014); ‘Luton. This journalist goes back home and discovers the change to her home town’ (19 June 2014); ‘Britain’s Future: Demographic takeover and civil war’ (29 June 2014).

Indicative of the attitude of the opponents of the mosque, in late June the Bendigo Advertiser received an anonymous email which said that by accepting Islam into Bendigo, the community would be ‘endorsing domestic and child abuse’ because under Sharia Law it was acceptable to 'marry off child brides, perform genital mutilation, forbidding [sic] women to express themselves, and not being treated as equal to men’ (Bendigo Advertiser, 28 June 2014).

Pro mosque activities

In response to the opposition campaign, supporters of the right of the Muslim community to build a mosque established their own Facebook page. Their first site was named ‘I Fully Support the Establishment of a Mosque in Bendigo.’ Late in March it was said to have 2,700 likes, a substantial number but less than the Stop The Mosque site (Bendigo Advertiser, 20 March 2014).

Bendigo’s Haven: Home, Safe organisation created a second Facebook page, ‘This Is Bendigo,’ and a Twitter account, @thisisbendigo. Haven: Home, Safe is an organisation set up to provide shelter and support to people who are homeless or in housing crisis, making its services available to everyone regardless of ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, age, cultural or religious background, and marital status. The organisation proudly upheld a practice that embraced diversity.

This Is Bendigo’s message was that ‘we believe in a prosperous, multicultural community of people living together.’ Some 500 posters promoting diversity and freedom of belief were produced and made available without cost to people and businesses willing to publicise the cause (Australian, 25 September 2015).
Late in 2014 a Bendigo Interfaith Council was also established with representatives from Catholic, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Uniting Church, Jewish and Anglican faiths. Community and business leaders, concerned at the damage to the reputation of Bendigo, issued media statements with messages of support for diversity and the Muslim community, with a campaign later rebranded as ‘I Believe in Bendigo.’

On 4 April the Bendigo Bank terminated the Stop The Mosque account, a decision justified in a public statement:

This was a considered decision by our Bank, and we respect everyone’s right to voice their opinions. Equally we have a right to ours, and we want to do business with organisations whose values align with our own. Our Bank values tolerance and inclusiveness, qualities which are an important part of a strong community. This is the only comment we will be making on this matter.

A number of major banks, including NAB, Westpac, Commonwealth, and Macquarie, also announced that they would not accept a Stop The Mosque group account. (23 May 2014)

As to be expected, the decision of the Bendigo Bank was greeted with outrage and became a rallying ground for opponents of the mosque. In the short term it may have garnered increased support for their campaign, with the action of the Bendigo Bank depicted as an attempt by a major corporation to stifle freedom of speech. The Stop The Mosque group urged its supporters to close their accounts with Bendigo Bank and in subsequent months sought every opportunities to disparage. Thus when, in July the Bendigo Bank Customer Satisfaction Rating was announced to be 63%, the site commented that in past years a satisfaction rating below 85% was considered a disaster, 90% was the absolute minimum acceptable (30 July 2014).

While the closure of its account was a hinderance, it did not in the long-term put a stop to online fundraising. On 26 May it was announced that with the support of likeminded organisations it was now possible to make donations via Pay Pal at three websites. Other groups indicated that they would accept payments on their websites and pass on the donations to Bendigo.

[2] The first flashpoint: events leading to Bendigo Council approval of the mosque planning permit on 18 June 2014

A high level of opposition had been mobilised by the time the Bendigo Council came to consider the mosque town planning application in June 2014. The campaign fuelled displays of intolerance within segments of the Bendigo population. Bendigo City Council staff were subject to unrelenting harassment by email and other sources over an extended period of time. For many of the opponents, there were no arguments to be made, nothing to discuss. Support for
the building of a mosque was seen as a criminal act, a betrayal of the Bendigo community and of the nation.

One manifestation of this mindset was the black balloon campaign, seen by mosque advocates as symbolising hate and vilification (*Bendigo Advertiser*, 28 June 2014). Black balloons began appearing in Bendigo in May 2014. The Stop The Mosque site urged supporters to ‘tie black balloons to visible sign posts in your community to show you do not approve of removing the rights of and the abuse of women and children ... We in the Western world will never allow legislated inequality or abuse or women and children.’

In the weeks leading up to the Council vote there were acts of intimidation; death threats were made against Muslim residents, a business leader, and Councillor Mark Weragoda, a Christian man of Sri Lankan heritage who moved to Bendigo when he was 14, and was a former President of the local Rotary Club (Online Hate Prevention Institute 2014). The death threat against Weragoda was investigated by the police and a suspect was arrested. He was subsequently tried and received a suspended gaol sentence. There were also threats to bomb the mosque if it should be built. Council staff were targeted for attack, with thousands of abusive emails sent to Council email accounts, a number with obscene images and links to videos, although the exact number cannot be established as no systematic record was kept.

As part of a regular process of public consultation, a City of Greater Bendigo Whipstick Ward meeting was held on 13 May. The meeting was taken over by a dozen or more anti-mosque protestors, who engaged in a heated argument and yelled at the Councillors present (*Bendigo Weekly*, 13 May).

In this environment, with no apparent opportunity for orderly and reasoned discussion, it was announced on 30 May that the Council had decided to abandon proposed mediation with objectors. The decision meant that the Council would strictly follow statutory planning requirements, without consultation meetings, but would still provide opportunity for written views to be submitted. Members of the public were also invited to attend the Council meeting on the evening of 18 June 2014 that was to consider the mosque planning application – with a copy of the agenda posted on the Council website.

A packed public gallery, with a number of people carrying placards, faced the Councillors as they sat to consider the town planning application. There were varying estimates of numbers attending, but the indication in photographs is that there were at least 120 in attendance, with people on the stairs and outside unable to gain admission. Estimates of total attendees range up to 350 (*Bendigo Advertiser*, 18 June 2014). The large majority of those present were opposed to approval of the application and heated debate raged for two hours. Indicative of the tone, one woman asked Councillors if they would be able to sleep at night if Islam ‘descended’ on Bendigo; another asked what safe measures had been put in place to stop a terrorist attack. When Councillor Weragoda rose to speak he was mocked, subjected to insulting comments,
with Middle Eastern music played by a person in the audience (Bendigo Advertiser, 18, 19 June 2014).

The vote, when it was finally taken, was 7 in favour, 2 against. The Councillors voting against the application, Elise Chapman and Helen Leach, had earlier made known their opposition. Upon the vote being passed there were angry scenes, with people in the gallery screaming ‘Shame on you, shame.’ The following day, the Stop The Mosque Facebook site featured photographs of the seven Councillors who voted to approve, with the caption ‘These are the people that just sold out Bendigo’s future. Remember their legacy.’ Posted comments included ‘TRAITORS 18-6-2014 – Shoot the cunts!!!’ and ‘... kick the mayor and all the Muslims out of our country, time we stood up and tell them GET OUT’ (16 July 2014).

Indicative of the character of Facebook postings, a Bendigo resident of the Muslim faith who consulted the site found that her husband’s name and phone number, along with those of other Muslims, had been posted. There were threatening comments, warning of attacks on people’s homes. One person had offered to donate a gun, a second then wrote ‘I will donate two bullets,’ (Australian, 26 September 2015).

To affirm its support for cultural diversity and the rights of minorities, in the month following the approval of the planning application, the City of Greater Bendigo ratified formal support of the Human Rights Commission’s ‘Racism: It Stops With Me’ campaign and signed the Declaration making Bendigo a Refugee Welcome Zone.

In response to the use of black balloons by the anti-mosque activists, the pro-diversity group encouraged their supporters to tie coloured balloons in public places. Public gatherings in parks were organised to foster unity, celebrate victories and affirm values of multiculturalism and diversity. These included an event held in the park on Saturday 21 June following Council’s approval of the mosque application, and a Believe in Bendigo event held in September 2014 during the Grand Final public holiday to celebrate Bendigo as a culturally inclusive community.
Figures 5 & 6: Bendigo City Council meeting, 18 June 2014
(City of Greater Bendigo Council [COGB] records)
Figures 7,8 & 9: ‘I Believe in Bendigo’ logo and celebrations in the park, June and September 2014 (COGB records)
Anti-mosque activists realised that the town planning application was likely to be approved by Council and had planned to appeal to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), a process that is common in the context of contested planning approvals. The Stop The Mosque Facebook site had warned that ‘If Council dares approve the planning application in the face of planning irregularities we are poised to take immediate action’ (Stop The Mosque site, 16 June 2014).

The VCAT appeal was made in the expectation that the Council approval would be overturned, although by the time of the subsequent appeals to the Victorian Court of Appeal and High Court of Australia, there was much lower level of interest or of expectation.

The anti-mosque activists were convinced that the approval process was flawed. In their understanding, the ‘social impact’ on a community was a major consideration in granting a building approval, yet it had been ignored by the Council in face of legitimate and widely held community concerns.

The opponents of the mosque considered that there was no doubting the level of public support for their stance, a viewpoint that was often presented on the Stop The Mosque Facebook site. It could hardly be ignored that nearly all who attended the Council meeting on 18 June were opposed to the mosque. It was noted that on the Facebook site that a Morgan Gallop Poll conducted for the Q Society in 2014 found that 77% of Australians were concerned about Islam in Australia (28 June 2014). The 2014 Bendigo Residents Wellbeing Survey, whose findings were reported in July 2014, found that 82% of residents indicated that they had no influence on the decisions of the Bendigo Council. This finding was reported in the local press under headlines ‘We don’t have influence,’ ‘Residents feel they have little say in future actions of council’ (Bendigo Weekly, 25 July 2014, 29 July 2014).

Not only were community wishes ignored, there were also attempts to silence critics, to prevent concerns being heard. Thus, the Bendigo Bank had shut down the bank account of opponents; Bendigo Councillors refused to meet with local objectors; and there had been an attempt, which failed, to shut down their Facebook page. These actions fed a conspiratorial view of decision making, one in which corporate interest prevailed, corruption was rife, and community views were ignored or suppressed (20 August 2014). These views also fed a sense of mission, that the objectors were part of a patriotic national movement, as stated on the Facebook page, ‘We know we speak for more than our town – we speak for all Australians’ (4 July 2014).

The VCAT appeal, initially lodged by 13 residents, was led by Bendigo resident Julie Hoskin (City of Greater Bendigo press release, 31 August 2015). Legal advice and representation was provided by a Sydney lawyer, Robert Balzola, described on the Facebook site as a ‘mosque and constitutional legal expert.’ Balzola was linked to conservative New South Wales Member of
the Legislative Council, Reverend Fred Nile, and also to the conservative faction of the NSW Liberal Party. He was involved in action against a planned Islamic school in Camden, Sydney, and a mosque in Doveton, Melbourne, (Bendigo Advertiser, 17 July 2014). Payment for his services was provided by diverting money that had been raised for the aborted visit of Gavin Boby and by further fundraising.

The appeal was long drawn out, with a number of contested issues, including a submission of a public identification of the objectors, a request for extra time to prepare the appeal, and a call for the VCAT President Greg Garde to recuse himself from the case on the basis of alleged bias. This objection was dismissed and the final hearing was held on 11 May 2015.

In the early months of 2015 there were continuing tensions on Council. In response to a constituent who tweeted ‘I hope the mosque gets built soon,’ Councillor Elise Chapman responded with a photo of five babies with bloodied and mutilated genitalia and the comment, ‘Oh, we could have this here too? Would you like your fanny sliced off?’ (The Age, 26 February 2015, Saturday Paper, 10-16 October 2015)

Several councillors referred Chapman’s actions to a Councillor Conduct Panel, on the basis that the Bendigo Council Code of Conduct required Councillors to treat members of the community with dignity and ensure that neither offence nor embarrassment was caused. Chapman was subsequently found guilty of misconduct by the Councillor Conduct Panel. She appealed that finding to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal where the conviction was upheld.

A significant feature of the Bendigo protests was the leading role of women; this may have been simply a chance occurrence, or it may be related to a perceived heightened sense of threat posed by Islam to welfare and freedom by women in Bendigo. The Stop The Mosque Facebook page was reportedly established by Kathleen Howard and Monika Evers. Both votes on the Bendigo Council against the town planning application were by women, Councillors Elise Chapman and Helen Leach; the leading role in the appeal process was assumed by an early prominent campaigner against the mosque, Julie Hoskin; and of those who stood for parliament on anti-mosque policies were Elise Chapman (2014 Country Alliance, at one stage One Nation’s lead Victorian Senate candidate in 2016), Anita Donlon (2016 Independent), Sandra Caddy (2014, 2016 Rise Up Australia).

The VCAT ruling on the appeal was handed down on 6 August 2015, upholding the planning permit approval granted by the City of Greater Bendigo. In his ruling, Justice Garde found that a mosque with capacity of 150, and 375 at Eid and other festivals, was appropriate for a city of Bendigo’s size. To the further discomfort of the anti-mosque activists, not only was the appeal rejected but restriction on the use of the mosque was struck out. It had taken more than one year after the initial approval by Council to reach this point.
[4] The second flash point: civil disobedience, late August to mid-October 2015

There had been an expectation by Council staff that protests would die down with time; this had happened in the past when controversial planning issues were dealt with. But there was a failure to grasp that the mosque issue was different; that feelings were so passionately held that they would not simply abate. The opponents felt that they were fighting to defend their way of life and the future of their children.

In the view of the objectors the legal process failed, not because the basis of objection was unsound in law, rather because of a failed and corrupt system. They believe they were denied justice – and the remaining course of action was seen by many objectors as civil disobedience.

A further factor was an opportune timing, the play of chance. The rejection of the VCAT appeal coincided with the emergence in Melbourne of a far-right group on the lookout for publicity; they wanted a cause that would provide them with profile. The United Patriots Front (UPF) was a splinter organisation that broke away from Reclaim Australia (Saturday Paper, October 2015). It became active in May 2015, describing itself as ‘Australia’s first patriotic street movement … the most controversial political force in Australia’ (http://www.fortitude-australia.com/about-us/, accessed 11 December 2017).

The civil disobedience phase of the anti-mosque campaign was marked by four events.

First, the UPF organised a public demonstration in the aftermath of the VCAT ruling, which was held in Bendigo on 29 August 2015. In turn, the Socialist Left organised a counter demonstration.

The UPF saw Bendigo as the patriot movement’s Ground Zero, a site of Australia-wide importance. The perceived lesson from Europe was that it was necessary to stop the spread of Islam while there was still time, before it reached a position of dominance. It was necessary to ‘Stop Sharia Law,’ ‘Stop Halal.’

Led by UPF members from Bendigo, about 400 protesters staged a rally in the area between the Bendigo Town Hall and Bendigo library. Some 350 police were brought to Bendigo from other regions in a major operation, as a consequence of police intelligence and risk assessment. The UPF were confronted by an estimated 250 counter-protestors carrying anti-racism banners. The police largely succeeded in separating the groups and while there were heated confrontations there was very little physical violence. Councillor Elise Chapman attended the rally draped in an Australian flag and holding a placard denouncing Islam (Bendigo Advertiser, 29 August 2015; The Feed 2015).

The demonstration was accorded extensive national media coverage and also received international media attention. The level of media coverage was seen as a great success by the UPF and its supporters, gaining publicity for the far-right nationalist agenda.
Figure 10: Councillor Elise Chapman draped in the Australian flag at the August 2015 demonstration (COGB records)

Figures 11-14 below: Selected images of the Bendigo demonstration

Figure 11: Image from the Bendigo demonstration (COGB records)
Figure 12: Image from the Bendigo demonstration (COGB records)

Figure 13: Image from the Bendigo demonstration (COGB records)
The second act of public disobedience occurred in mid-September, with the leading role assumed by Rights for Bendigo activists.

An ordinary Council meeting, held on 16 September 2015, was taken over by protestors. Almost immediately after the meeting’s opening and acknowledgement of country, the protestors began chanting, thumping timber with their fists and shouting ‘Traitor’, ‘Traitor.’ Mayor Cox attempted to initiate question time, but he was met with uproar from about 100 protestors, many with cards bearing postcodes attached to their clothing to show that they were locals.

A motion of no confidence in Cox was proposed, with the mover attempting to present a petition with 300 names and declaring to applause that, ‘You’ve told a lot of lies, and now you can piss off.’ In the ensuing disorder Cox adjourned the meeting, which had lasted 42 minutes. Police were called and escorted the Councillors and Council staff from the building.

In an interview some days after these events, Cox reflected that the orderly process of local government had broken down. There was no respect for the Council, with people yelling at the top of their voices so no one could be heard. ‘I never, never thought it would happen here’ [Bendigo CEO PP].

At the next ordinary meeting of Council, held on 14 October, members of the public were separated from Councillors. The main hall area of the Town Hall was set up as the public viewing gallery and the Council meeting took place upstairs. The meeting was live streamed to the public gallery and was also streamed via YouTube and broadcast via local FM radio.
The third and fourth events occurred early in October.

The UPF decided that given their earlier success, they would return to Bendigo to stage a second demonstration, which was held on the internationally proclaimed patriot’s Day of Protest. The UPF Facebook site advised on 10 September 2015:
As we have announced, the United Patriots Front will be returning to Bendigo for a second rally, since our first rally in August was such a huge success! This rally will be attracting global attention as we will be holding it on 10/10/15, in cooperation with the Global Rallies for Humanity, being held across the world on this date. (COGB records)

There was considerable planning prior to the demonstration, with online fundraising to meet the cost of equipment hire, flags, banners and buses, ‘so more patriots are able to attend the rally’ from outside Bendigo.

Some members of the UPF arrived in Bendigo prior to the event, with the organisation’s leader Blair Cottrell and two others staging the mock beheading of a dummy outside the City of Greater Bendigo offices. The beheading involved the spilling of a large quantity of red liquid to create the appearance of blood. The event was recorded on video and posted by the UPF on Facebook. Subsequently the three UPF members were charged under Victoria’s Racial and Religious Tolerance Act and at their trial, held almost two years later in September 2017, they were convicted of a criminal offence and fined, the first to be convicted under the Act.

The fourth event, a demonstration on 10 October, again produced extensive confrontations and gained wide media coverage. Both the UPF and its opponents seemed to be looking for an opportunity for conflict. The police estimated the attendance at 350-400 UPF members and supporters and about half this number from the Socialist Left. The Sunday Herald Sun report estimated 1000 UPF, 300 Socialist Left. Police numbers on the day were over 400, supported by a police helicopter, 2 canine units and 10 horses (Bendigo Council, Protest rally on 10 October 2015, debrief report, COGB records).
The height of civil disobedience was reached in October 2015. To the present (May 2018) there have been no further major demonstrations or conflict at Council meetings.

Following the unsuccessful VCAT appeal further appeals were lodged in the Victorian Court of Appeal and then the High Court of Australia.

The case in the Victorian Court started badly, with Chief Justice Marilyn Warren describing the appeal documents as ‘embarrassing’ in the level of preparation, while the objectors’ solicitor conceded they were like an ‘alphabet soup.’ The appellants sought to argue that the mosque would bring negative social effects to Bendigo, but provided no substantial supporting evidence. In its ruling on 16 December 2015, the Court denied a leave to appeal the VCAT decision, described the basis of the case as ‘overstated and unfounded.’ It was held that the Victorian Charter of Human Rights protected freedom of religion and the act of practicing a religion could not be considered an adverse ‘social effect.’

Even this unambiguous ruling was not acceptable to the Bendigo activists. With Julie Hoskin and Kathleen Howard as lead applicants and attempts to raise funding online via the Robert Balzola Trust Account, an appeal was lodged in the High Court of Australia. In the decision handed down on 15 June 2016, almost two years to the day of the initial Council approval of the town planning application, Judges Patrick Keane and Susan Kiefel refused leave to appeal (Bendigo Advertiser, 15 June 2016).

Costs were awarded against the applicants, with both the Australian Islamic Mission and the City of Greater Bendigo able to pursue recovery, which in the latter case was assessed at almost $20,000. Ms Howard sought to deny liability for costs, stating to a local reporter that ‘If they want to get blood out of a stone, let them try’ (Bendigo Advertiser, 9 January 2018).

The mosque supporters in Bendigo celebrated what was hoped to be a final resolution, posting on the Believe in Bendigo Facebook site:

We … welcome today’s High Court decision and congratulate council and everyone else who has worked so hard to get here. … The line has now been drawn and it is time to move on. This decision is a landmark day in Bendigo’s history, but it is not the end of something, it is the start of something magnificent. It is time to now look forward and celebrate Bendigo for what it is … We are a diverse, welcoming and inclusive community that celebrates the contribution every culture makes to Bendigo life. Whatever country you are from, you are welcome in Bendigo. Bendigo can now come together to help the diverse and beautiful Islamic community build the city’s first mosque. How magnificent.

The scope for protest was, however, far from over. Rather, there was a dormant period. The commencement of building could provide further opportunities.
2 THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF BENDIGO

The best available data on the size of religious groups in Australia is the census. There is, however, a problem with the reliability of census data because an answer to the question on religion is optional. A further problem with reliability of census data on religion arose in 2016 when a change was made by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to the response options provided in the religion question. For the first time, the response option ‘no religion’ was placed first in the list, followed by Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church, with a total of nine religions specified, and space to specify a religion that was not listed. In previous census forms, the response option ‘no religion’ had been placed last. Possibly because of this change, a substantially larger proportion of those completing the census indicated ‘no religion.’ In Bendigo the proportion indicating ‘no religion’ increased from 27% to 36% of the population.

Because of the way in which data on religion is obtained, it can be regarded only as a rough measure; it is likely that it undercounts the proportion of adherents to specific religions.

Australia’s Muslim population

Australia’s Muslim population is growing, at many times the rate of growth of the general population.

Australian population growth over the last ten years has been in the range of 1.4%-1.9% per annum. Between 2006 and 2011 Muslim population growth averaged an annual rate of 8%, and between 2011 and 2016 an annual rate of 5.4%.

In 2011, Australian Muslims made up 2.2% of the population, in 2016 they made up 2.6%. The Muslim population increased by 135,900 between 2006-2011, and by 127,950 between 2011-2016.

Islam is now the largest non-Christian faith group, at 2.6%. It is followed by the 2.4% who are Buddhist, 1.9% Hindu, 0.5% Sikh, and 0.4% Jewish. This compares to 52.1% who indicated that they are Christian.

Table 1: Muslim population of Australia, 2001-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rate of increase – intercensal (%)</th>
<th>Rate of increase – annual average, intercensal (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>281,578</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>340,393</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>476,290</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>604,240</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census
The Muslim population is ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse, with adherents of several streams of Islam.

The largest proportion of Muslim Australians indicate that they are of North African and Middle Eastern ancestry, closely followed by Southern and Central Asian. Smaller proportions trace their ancestry to Oceania, south-east Asia and north-west Europe. It can be expected that if current immigration trends continue, the largest proportion in future years will be from Southern and Central Asia.

Table 2: Ethnicity/ancestry of the Muslim population (first response), 2011-2016 (percentage of the total Muslim population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity/ancestry</th>
<th>2011 %</th>
<th>2016 %</th>
<th>2016 Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Africa and Middle East</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>221,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern and Central Asia</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>194,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>45,324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>33,605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-west Europe</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>31,936</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census

Although large numbers are recently arrived immigrants, the largest proportion, (36%), are born in Australia, and in the majority of cases born to immigrant parents; 64% of Australia’s Muslims are born overseas (compared to 28% of the total population born overseas).

Reflecting recent patterns of immigration, an increasing proportion of Australia’s Muslims are born in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A decreasing proportion of Muslims are born in Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Lebanon, countries which contributed in the largest number to earlier waves of Muslim immigration.

In 2011, 128,904 Australian Muslims were born in Australia, almost double this number in 2016 at 219,940. Almost three out of ten Australian Muslims (29%) are under 15 years of age, some ten percentage points higher than the total Australian population under the age of 15 (19%).
### Table 3: Muslim population of Australia, country of birth, 2006-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2016 Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>219,940</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>54,650</td>
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<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>42,705</td>
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<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>34,192</td>
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<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>33,506</td>
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<td>Iraq</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>21,137</td>
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<td>Turkey</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>20,605</td>
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<td>Iran</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>18,106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>15,605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>13,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia &amp; Herzegovina</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>5,561</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census

### Table 4: Muslim population of Australia and total population by age, 2011-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census
Muslims in Victoria

The Muslim population is highly concentrated; 44% live in New South Wales, and 33% in Victoria, with a combined total of 77%.

In 2016, Muslims comprised 3.6% of the total population of New South Wales (3.2% in 2011), 2.9% of Victoria (2.9% in 2011), and smaller proportions in Western Australia (2%) and Queensland (1%).

Table 5: Muslim population of Australia by state of residence, 2006-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>168,788 (49.6%)</td>
<td>219,378 (46.1%)</td>
<td>267,654 (44.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>109,369 (32.1%)</td>
<td>152,779 (32.1%)</td>
<td>197,029 (32.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>24,187</td>
<td>39,117</td>
<td>50,650 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>20,318</td>
<td>34,048</td>
<td>44,881 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>10,521</td>
<td>19,511</td>
<td>28,547 (4.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>4,373</td>
<td>7,434</td>
<td>9,882 (1.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>1,083</td>
<td>1,587</td>
<td>2,332 (0.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>1,049</td>
<td>1,708</td>
<td>2,497 (0.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census

Within Victoria, 94.7% of the Muslim population live in Melbourne. Outside of Melbourne, the largest Muslim populations are in the Shepparton area, numbering 3,522 in 2016, and Greater Geelong, numbering 2,529. The only other regional centre with a Muslim population more than 500 is Mildura, with 944 residents. According to the census, the major regional centres of Bendigo and Ballarat have Muslim populations close to 450, although this may be an undercount as the problem of placing full reliance on the optional religion question may be compounded by low English competence and high distrust of officials in some communities. In Bendigo, the 2016 census found that the Muslim population more than doubled between 2011 and 2016, recording the fastest rate of increase in regional Victoria. Of the total Bendigo Muslim population, 168 (or 37%) arrived in Australia between 2011 and 2016.
Table 6: Muslim population of Australia, major population centres (Melbourne and Local Government Areas), 2011-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011 number</th>
<th>2016 number</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater Melbourne</td>
<td>144,650</td>
<td>186,652</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Shepparton</td>
<td>2,977</td>
<td>3,522</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Geelong</td>
<td>1,579</td>
<td>2,529</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Bendigo</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>130.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballarat</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan Hill</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>74.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latrobe</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moira</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>(32.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wodonga</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census
Muslims in Bendigo

Compared to Melbourne, a relatively high proportion of Bendigo residents indicate Christianity as their faith (52%, 46%); conversely, a much lower proportion compared to Melbourne indicate their faith as one of the three main non-Christian faith groups (1.9%, 10.9%), which are indicative of the lower level of religious and cultural diversity in the city. In 2016, in Bendigo there were 1,078 of the Buddhist faith, 493 Hindu and 460 Muslim.

Table 7: Persons resident in Greater Bendigo (LGA) by religion, 2011-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011 Number</th>
<th>2011 %</th>
<th>2016 Number</th>
<th>2016 %</th>
<th>2016 Greater Melbourne %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>62,800</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>56,948</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1,078</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religious affiliation</td>
<td>27,003</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>40,180</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>8,289</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>10,204</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequately described</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100,617</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>110,479</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census

The age profile of the Bendigo Muslim population is different to the total Bendigo population. A relatively high proportion are under the age of 15 (31.6% of the Muslim population, 19.2% total Bendigo population); also a relatively high proportion is aged 15-44 (56.6% Muslim, 38.9% of the total), with very few over the age of 54 (5.3%, 29.7% of the total).

Table 8: Muslim population of Bendigo (SA3) by age, 2011-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011 Muslim %</th>
<th>2011 Total %</th>
<th>2016 Muslim %</th>
<th>2016 Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census
With regard to gender balance, the proportions are close to equal, with 52.3% male and 47.7% female; there are, however, a higher proportion of females in the 0-14, 15-24 and 65+ age groups, and higher proportions of males in the other age groups.

Table 9: Muslim population of Bendigo (SA3) by gender and age, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Proportion of the total Muslim population by age and gender</th>
<th>Proportion of the Muslim population within age group by gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male %</td>
<td>Female %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census

As in the rest of Australia, Bendigo’s Muslim population is diverse in terms of country of birth, ancestry, language, and stream of Islam.

The largest proportion, one-quarter of the Bendigo Muslim population, is born in Australia. Of the overseas birthplace groups, 72 (16%) are born in Afghanistan, 51 (11%) in Pakistan, 48 (11%) in Bangladesh, and 30 (7%) Iran. Unlike the composition of Muslim populations of Sydney and Melbourne, there are relatively few Bendigo Muslims born in Lebanon (12%) or Turkey (4%).

Table 10: Muslim population of Bendigo (SA3) by country of birth, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Aged 0-14 (number)</th>
<th>Aged 15+/ (number)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>451</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census. Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance can be placed on small numbers.

Humanitarian entrants are one important source of recent arrivals. Of the Humanitarian entrants who arrived in Australia in the period 2011-2016, almost 500 settled in the Bendigo region. Of these, close to one in five (89) are of the Muslim faith, including a relatively large number from Afghanistan and smaller numbers from Iran.

The diversity of the Muslim population is also evident in its occupational structure, with representation in a broad range of occupations, including the high and low skill. Thus 67 are employed as professionals, 35 as labourers. The proportion employed as professionals and labourers are almost double the proportion in these occupations in the total Bendigo workforce. Of the professionals, the largest number (44 of the 67) are in the health field, with a number of medical practitioners. Small numbers are employed as community and personal service workers, clerical and administrative workers, managers and sales workers.

A substantial minority of the Muslim population is fully engaged in education: of those aged 20-29, close to 45% (numbering 40) are full-time students, of those aged 30-39, 13 are full-time students.

Indicative of this pattern of employment and engagement in education, among the participants in the focus groups conducted for this project with members of the Muslim community there was a doctor who worked in Bendigo and Castlemaine, and whose wife was also a doctor, a pharmacist, an aged care worker, a community health worker, a business analyst, a banker, and several in unskilled occupations, some employed at a chicken farm, others at an animal products processing factory. Several were students at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University, including one studying dentistry and a student at Bendigo TAFE. In the focus groups conducted with women, several participants indicated that they were mothers with household duties.
### Table 11: Muslim population of Bendigo (SA3) by occupation, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Muslims Number</th>
<th>Muslims %</th>
<th>Bendigo (total) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and personal service workers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and administrative workers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicians and trades workers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery operators and drivers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian census. Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance can be placed on small numbers.

### Muslim life in Bendigo

Among the Muslim participants in the four focus groups conducted for this project, life in Bendigo was discussed in largely positive terms. Participants commented on their friendly interactions with locals.

I was really impressed with how friendly the people are, like you walk in the street and people say hello and say G’day.

If I walk in the street, every few metres I will see someone who I know and I will say hello, and I don’t think that’s possible in Sydney.

People from Bendigo, most of them are very friendly and you can pass, ‘Hello.’ It’s not like Melbourne.

The city was seen as having a broad range of services and educational providers, including a hospital and university campus, and employment opportunities. While sufficiently large to meet the needs of residents, it did not have the impersonal character and traffic problems of capital cities, with places in close reach and with accessible parking. Some of the established Muslim residents commented on the strong social networks that they had been able to establish, within the Muslim community and beyond:

We all know each other … We have a very coherent bonding among Muslims and even non-Muslims as well, so we know each other, which is really good.

Another advantage is that Bendigo is located close enough to Melbourne to provide easy access to a broad range of shops catering to a Muslim community and opportunities to participate in a full Muslim life.
There were, however, some negatives noted. The lack of cultural and religious diversity meant some Muslims were not fully integrated in the life of the city. One person commented that her son was the only Muslim in his school, and further he was the only ‘non-Aussie’. When he started school ‘he was very upset.’ Some women wearing covering indicated that they were treated like objects to stare at, which contrasted with their experience of Melbourne where there was easier acceptance of Muslim women:

In Melbourne, there are women who wear massive hijabs and massive flowy dresses, and they’re walking around in the middle of the CBD and no one bats an eyelid.

For some Muslim residents, their local community was too small and Melbourne too far away for regular contact. Some discussed the limited supply and high cost of Halal food.

It gets so expensive that I even think that I’d rather drive us to Melbourne and get a whole stock of halal things than to buy it from here.

Female participants observed that they would buy clothes and other Islamic requirements overseas, with one noting that she obtained goods from Pakistan.

For children there were limited education opportunities. The absence of an Islamic school meant they had to take correspondence lessons via Skype to learn Arabic. Some adults were concerned by the absence of a mosque, and of the opportunity to attend public discussions and seminars. They contrasted the opportunities available in Melbourne and Sydney with Bendigo.

While some participants discussed friendships and unity within the Muslim population, others noted that there were also divisions – a reality that is not evident to outsiders who have a false understanding of ‘Islam’ as a monolithic entity. These divisions include divisions of social class and of nationality and language, with the focus groups including participants from Burundi, India, Iraq, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Most were adherents of the Sunni stream of Islam, but there were also Hazara from Afghanistan who are Shia. Many of the Afghans are recent arrivals, having entered as asylum seekers after a hazardous trip from Indonesia by boat. Some continued to face problems with their residence status determination, and others with their application for and grant of Australian citizenship, which was a necessary step to enable them to sponsor family members for admission to Australia, some men live on their own, separated from families overseas). Several Hazara participants had limited English language ability. One of the established Muslim participants observed that

I don’t feel the Afghan community likes to mix with us a lot, even though the feeling is not necessarily the same from our side, and I think probably it’s because they left Afghanistan after the division started, so they probably have a trust issue.

Several Afghan Muslim participants indicated that they had little or no involvement in the planning and application process for the Bendigo mosque.
A division that was noted in discussion related to time of departure from home countries; before or after the bitter conflicts that erupted in recent decades in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. These conflicts created divisions within Muslim communities and they were reflected to some extent in the outlook of Muslim Australians.

**Planning for a mosque**

For several years, Muslims in Bendigo had accessed a room at the La Trobe University campus that could accommodate some 40 people. It was provided by the university mainly for international students, but Muslim members of the Bendigo community were welcome to use it. On Fridays they had access to a larger room with space for some 70 people for midday prayer.

With the increase in the Muslim population, this arrangement was no longer viable even for weekly prayers, and they had need for a larger facility for festivals and social events, such as birthdays and weddings. In recent years they had rented premises for Ramadan and Eid.

As explained by one focus group participant, the community was grateful to the university, but the situation no longer met their needs:

> Not that I’m complaining, I mean I’m grateful that we at least have that little room. But at the same time, Bendigo has plenty of churches and I think .... we are large enough as a community to have a place of congregation ... We need a place of congregation that is pleasant to be in. Because the room at the uni, it is damp and it’s dusty and it’s small. And I just go there, and I get like a coughing fit, because my allergies.

A mosque was of importance not only for prayer and festivals, but also for the education of children, ‘where all can be together; where children can be involved; where they can learn the faith, learn appropriate way to conduct themselves.’ In the words of one focus group participant, the children ‘didn’t know what Ramadan means, the fasting month, or Eid ... They were familiar with Christmas and Easter, and they know that we don’t celebrate it, but ... not much about Eid and Ramadan.’

Having a mosque was also vital to sustain the growing community; it was needed as a place of meeting and where ‘new arrivals can go to establish contacts, to make them feel at home, feel connected.’ One female participant, who arrived as an immigrant, commented that the absence of a Muslim centre and the support that it could provide ‘added to my struggle.’

**Unexpected trouble**

The Bendigo Muslim community comprised moderate members of the faith, otherwise they would not have moved to a city with a limited Muslim life. They had been ‘talking about it [the construction of a mosque] for years’ and did not expect to encounter trouble. Indeed some members of the community had hoped that the mosque would be welcomed as a valuable
addition to the diversity of the town, as had been seen in the positive reception of the Buddhist Great Stupa of Universal Compassion that was being built near Bendigo.

Figure 17: The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, Sandhurst Town Rd, Myers Flat, Victoria (https://www.bendigotourism.com/things-to-do/bendigo-shopping/arts-and-crafts/bendigo/the-great-stupa-of-universal-compassion)

The community leaders were aware that in Melbourne there were mosques in suburbs with large Muslim populations and mosques have been built in Victorian towns and regional centres.

At the time of the Bendigo protests, there were at least 35 mosques in Melbourne and close to ten in regional centres (see Appendix). The community leaders were aware that in the Shepparton-Mooroopna region, 120 km to the west of Bendigo, there were four mosques serving the Muslim population of some 3,500. These were the Shepparton Mosque, the Turkish Cultural Centre and Mosque, the Shepparton Albanian Mosque, and the Afghani Mosque and Afghani Community Centre. It was also commented in the focus group discussion that in Ballarat the Council had given land for the building of a mosque and ‘there was no issues on it, no conflict, anything in the community.’
The ground shook underneath me

Participants indicated their surprise at the changed mood in the town as opposition to the mosque was mobilised. One commented that she had lived in Bendigo for seven years and had only had friendly interactions, then ‘suddenly everything changed.’ One resident of seventeen years, observed:

I’ve been in Bendigo for 17 years. I work here and my wife as well, and we have two kids. Yeah. My experience in Bendigo, it’s so far been positive, except when we had the issue with the mosque where I was a little bit shocked with some of the feelings... We always have this view that people are very friendly, that’s why I felt the ground shook underneath me when we started to have the protest, and the things that you read, it’s really bad. And shocking because I never imagined the people who [we] felt are very friendly for the last seventeen years, the words [that] can come out of them.

In the focus groups, a range of experiences were discussed: verbal abuse, being stared at in shops and when walking in a shopping centre; threatening behaviour; being pushed; a physical attack. Abuse shouted from cars seemed to be the most frequent type of incident; it seems that some men feel a sense of safety and are emboldened to harass people when they are in a car, mobility gives them freedom to shout and make threatening and insulting signs.

Particularly at risk were those who were visibly identifiable as Muslim: women with covering and heavily bearded men. A point made by an Afghani participant was that his countrymen were seen as Chinese or of other Asian origin and were less likely to be targets of hostility, compared to those from the Middle East or the Indian sub-continent.

In the focus groups with Muslim women, participants who wore hijab had experienced racism in Bendigo in public places. The most common instances were being followed and harassed in supermarkets and shopping centres, and being shouted at from cars. Participants who didn’t wear a hijab had mostly not experienced racism in public places. Some women expressed that they felt safer in hiding their religion from strangers and chose not to let people know they were Muslim.

Women wearing a hijab said that they felt ‘on show’ in public; they often felt people staring at them. Bendigo was contrasted with Melbourne, where diversity is the norm. One female participant commented that

I haven’t had any negative experiences, because it’s probably because I don’t cover my head so much .... I don’t have any negative experiences, but a lot of my friends do. They’ve been called names. They’ve been pushed in public.

But experiences of women wearing covering were not uniform. A participant who started wearing a hijab eighteen months before the mosque protests indicated that she had no negative interactions:
I used to walk to the shops to buy my groceries from home. It’ll be like a half an hour walk along a busy road. And when I first started wearing them, my family was like, ‘Don’t walk on your own. Go take the bus or go with someone else.’ And especially when the protests were happening, they’re like, ‘You’re not allowed to go walk.’ But I still went anyway. But I just didn’t tell them ... After a while, they got used to it and they were fine with me walking on my own outside. Nothing negative, even though I take the public transport quite frequently to and from Melbourne. I’ve had one positive – if any experience, it was a positive one. I got off the bus at the ... at the Bendigo station, and this older lady, she would’ve been in her 60s, she came up to me and she’s like, ‘You’re more than welcome. You and your people are more than welcome here in Australia. Don’t worry about what they say.’ I was like, ‘Okay. Thank you. Yeah.’

Perpetrators of hostile actions were more likely to be men, especially young men, but women also engaged in verbal abuse, with examples of hostility directed at female Muslim students at the university campus.

To capture a fuller sense of the experiences of Muslim residents, four incidents are presented in the words of focus group participants:

INCIDENT #1

We always thought it was a very calm and welcoming town until recently when the protest came up and this particular incident that happened ... We went on the main street, coming out of the medical practice, it’s an x-ray place. We were coming out and we were just sitting in the car and I put my child – she’s three years old – I put her in the child’s seat and I was going around the car. Some guy stopped on the main double road ... They just stopped and they shouted at us. I can’t exactly recall the words, but they said something about being Muslim and hijab and about my beard and I just ignored it. Then they shouted and my wife was traumatised ... But I must mention, whilst I was putting my seatbelt on, I think maybe within thirty seconds of this incident, a woman came to my window and knocked on the window and she apologised. She was listening, she was sitting right next to our car and she came out of her car and she said, ‘I apologise, this shouldn’t happen.’ I appreciated it and also told her that she didn’t need to apologise for anything, it’s not her fault, but for some reason she felt [it was necessary.]

INCIDENT #3

While I was driving with my husband on a road it was a motorbike who came so close to our car and start swearing too loudly and point at us. And I scared I will hit him because he just get close to scare us. I pushed brake [to] stop ... [and the car] went on top of the concrete. Yeah. It was a scary experience ...
We got a phone call from someone who’s actually not Muslim, ... I think they’re Indian, and they were actually physically abused in Bendigo, in the petrol station. Teenagers actually attacked them. They had a BMW so they were telling them, ‘You steal our money and you have all these good jobs,’ and when she’s tried to call the police, [one of them] ... hit her hand and dropped the phone on the floor.

**INCIDENT #4**

My wife is usually wearing hijab and at that time I was in Africa ... My wife was doing a night course in Melbourne, took her car to the train station. In the day, she parked her car in the market centre, so when she came back at night from Melbourne it was about 10:00pm from Melbourne. She went to take the car ... So because she was wearing a hijab and when she went to get her car, one car followed her. While she’s driving ... she sees the car behind. When she turned left, the car turned left. When she turned right, the car turned right. She was very traumatised. She tried to accelerate the car, accelerate, ... the car followed her. Then she didn’t know what to do. She just drove until our street. She thought maybe if she goes home, the car would follow her and kill – because she thought that, maybe they’ll go and kill the kids. She went back to the neighbour’s house and asked for help. When she asked for help, the neighbour just came along, and the car had gone. The neighbour called the police, the police came and took her into the house because we have seven kids at home, and my wife was very traumatised. She called me several times, I tried to make her understand ... She didn’t want to stay in the house, she wanted to shift house .... The police tried to take a note and settle it, but ... we didn’t hear anything and then I changed my [flight] ... and came back quickly.

**Long term impact of the anti-mosque protest**

The focus groups indicate a diversity of experiences; assessment of their impact defies simple generalisation.

Some participants were left with a sense of insecurity. They felt isolated from the Anglo-Australian community, less confident in their interactions. Some lacked the confidence or desire to continue living in Bendigo and moved away, others thought about moving but stayed.

Those with families had heightened concerns. ‘If I’m alone, that’s fine, but I’m more worried about my family’s safety.’ Men worried about their daughters and wives, and about their ability to shield young children from hostility. One female participant commented that she became very guarded in her interactions, ‘because I’ve got my daughter with me, and I don’t want anything for her to face or anything. So that happens a lot. Yes.’
Among those without family and living on their own, some indicated confidence in standing up to threats. One person observed that he had been warned by friends to stay away from a demonstration but had gone anyway: ‘I went deliberately to see what is going on, but nothing happened.’

There is the hesitancy that comes with it: oh, what if something does happen? But, ultimately, if you keep giving into that atmosphere of fear, then you are just helping to perpetuate it, and you need to rise above it and still do what you’re going to do, because you have just as much right to be here as [anyone else]

So they just give you a look like okay, ... - you’re not from us. They don’t give you a nasty look. They just look at you like there’s something different about you. So, yeah, that happens to me as well. I say As-salamu alaykum when I’m picking up the phone. And when I’m in public, because of all the things that happened, I’m like ‘Hello.’ Now I ... just say ‘hello.’

One participant, a professional in the health field, explained that the impact of abuse is not simply to be understood in terms seriousness of an incident, it is also necessary to consider the varying capacity of each individual to deal with hostility and discrimination:

I was attending a conference on emotional intelligence two weeks ago and they said a very nice thing and I can relate to it. It’s not what a person says to you or does to you, it’s how they make you feel that you will always remember. Like I said to you before, I can’t exactly recall what they said [when I was verbally abused with my wife and children in the car], but I can exactly recall how I felt ... [and] how my family felt. I think it’s going to stay with me for a very long period of time. That’s the feeling that makes me stop going out more independently as I used to go before. I’ve been here over 16 years. I had issues in Melbourne before, similar issues when I was a student. People would commonly say, ‘Go back to your country’ and things like that. We were young and just ignored it, but being alone with a family, we take these things quite seriously. So it’s not exactly what they say, but it’s how they make me feel, or make my family feel. I think that is the lasting feeling that’s going to stay with us... It’s a horrible feeling.

A young woman, gave a parallel explanation of the role of individual personality in shaping reaction, in her case her response to life in an environment in which Muslims are not accepted as equals:

When I first moved here, I had just turned 18, and I constantly felt this need to apologise for who I was. Like, ‘I’m different but this is why I’m different, and please take my explanations, because there’s nothing wrong with me.’ It was just like a whole bunch of insecurity. But now, I think with time and with independent living away from my parents ... and like support from my peers and stuff, I think I’m just a lot more confident in it, in that I don’t feel the need to apologise. But I do still feel a sense of responsibility that I am dressed a certain way, therefore I’m a walking, talking flag ... In a way, there’s
this burden of this whole ideology weighing on your shoulders ... Where I am right now in my stage of life, I’m like, ‘Oh my God, I have to give a positive impression of Islam and all of that.’

For some others, who came to Australia as asylum seekers from war zones in which a human life counted for very little, the main impression was one of heightened respect for the working of Australia democracy and for the actions of police in both protecting Muslim residents and upholding the rule of law.

A1: The main thing is we know there is a rule here. Even if someone attack you ... there is something, there is a court ...

A2: There is a law, and there is the police.

A1: They are going to be cautioned. But in those countries, it is pretty much war zone. Anyone can do whatever they want ....

Q: So you have confidence in the police and the law here?

A1: Definitely.

Q: No problems with the police here?

A1: No.....
3 A TYPOLOGY OF ATTITUDES

Forty in-depth interviews were conducted for this project between November 2016 and February 2017. Of these, 19 were conducted by the project leader (Andrew Markus), 18 conducted by Susan Gardiner, a LaTrobe University social work student on placement at the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS), and three by others associated with the LCMS. Susan attended more than ten interviews conducted by the project leader before conducting interviews on her own. The project was undertaken under terms approved by the Monash University Research Ethics Committee.

Recruitment of people for interview was undertaken by LCMS staff and Susan Gardner and participants were rewarded for their contribution with a small payment of $50. The criteria for selection of interview subjects was that the persons were from the mainstream of the community, not activists involved in support or opposition to the mosque, although two people actively opposed to the mosque, including one in a leading position, presented for interview and were included. Of the 40 interviewees, 22 supported the building of the mosque, 13 were opposed, 4 were equivocal, and one person had no opinion. Twelve of the interviewees had attended one or more demonstrations in opposition to the mosque, most with the objective of seeing what was happening rather than actively participating; 28 had not attended a demonstration.

A broad range of age groups were represented in the interviews: 7 were aged 18-29, 6 aged 30-39, 9 aged 40-49, 12 aged 50-59, and 6 were over the age of 60; 24 were female, 16 male.

In terms of ethnicity, 3 interviewees were born overseas, 37 were born in Australia; of these, 28 indicated that both their parents were born in Australia; 9 had one parent born in Australia and the other parent born overseas.

In terms of residential history, 13 of the interviewees were born or grew up in Bendigo, or in country Victoria, including the Bendigo region; 8 were born outside the region, but had been resident in Bendigo for more than 20 years; a further 11 were residents for between 10 and 19 years; a minority, less than one in four participants (8 in total), were resident in Bendigo for less than ten years.

A range of occupations were represented among the interviewees: 7 were continuing their studies, 6 were social, health care, or community workers, 6 were employed in a semi-skilled occupation, 5 in a professional occupation, 2 were in business, 4 were unemployed, 7 were in other fields of work, including home-duties, and 3 were retired.

The interviews provided a non-judgemental environment for participants to discuss their views on the building of the mosque, including the planning process and the handling of the issue by the Bendigo Council. The interviews also provided the opportunity for participants to discuss their views of Australian politics, Australia’s immigration policy, multiculturalism, ethnic and
religious diversity, and Islam. Also discussed were views of life in Bendigo and media access, with a focus on sources of information, and knowledge of the development of the mosque issue. The interviews also provided information on the participant’s background, including ethnicity, length of residence in Bendigo, friendship networks, highest level of educational attainment, and employment. The length of interviews ranged from 30 to 80 minutes.

Interviews were professionally transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. The analysis of the transcripts indicated a complex range of attitudes, classified in the following discussion within ten categories. While separated for analytical clarity, attitudes are not necessarily clearly demarcated and there may be varying degrees of overlap in thinking across the categories. It is, however, important to distinguish attitudes at an analytical level if the objective is to optimise strategies and messaging to counter threats to community harmony.

Of the ten categories, three are negative in their view of Muslims based on a view of the character of the Islamic faith; three are negative but based on contingent grounds, such as current employment shortages in Australia; three are accepting or favourable toward religious freedom and diversity; and one indicates disinterest in the issue.

The broad thematic categories are:

1. Hidden conspiracies: politics of the paranoid style;
2. Muslim association with terrorism and community discord;
3. The negative impact of Muslims in Australia;
4. The impact of immigration on employment opportunities and the Australian way of life;
5. Misinformation, rumour and myth;
6. The flawed approval process and the failure to consult;
7. Disinterest;
8. A critical perspective and dismissal of rumour;
9. Freedom on religion and life in Australia;
10. The positives of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.

The following analysis dissects the views of Bendigo residents, presented largely in their own words. Interview transcripts have been edited to remove repetitions and ambiguities of meaning; some of the views presented are composite, combining the statements of several interviewees. The objective is to provide in-depth understanding of local perspectives.
(1) Hidden conspiracies: politics of the paranoid style

This first view interprets contemporary issues in terms of a struggle for world domination in which the forces opposed to Australian nationalism and sovereignty seek to subjugate the Australian people.

This world view is a variant of earlier forms of conspiratorial understandings of international events – ones that have been circulating for centuries in western culture. The conspirators have been seen in various guises, including:

- Freemasons, the Illuminati, Socialist, Communists, the Fabian society;
- Jews (Protocols of the Elders of Zion);
- Cosmopolitans, Internationalists, Globalists;
- Any promoters of a universal, ‘one world order’;
- The United Nations, its multiple treaties limiting the sovereign power of nations;
- Climate Scientists, promoters of new international treaties which limit national sovereignty, such as the Paris Accords.

The truth of the conspiracy, in its various guises, is hidden – as it was in past historical periods. The truth is only known to or understood by a very small minority, in this case the Patriots and the Defenders who keep alive the fight for the freedom and independence of their own people.

For believers in conspiracy, there is a surface reality, the way the world appears, and a hidden reality, the truth seen by the few. The media acts to hide the truth; it controls the flow of information and spreads falsehoods, ‘false facts.’ Corruption is viewed as widespread, people are paid off to prevent the truth from becoming known. For example, corruption is the only way to explain the actions of the Bendigo Council in ignoring the will of the Bendigo people.

In one version of this world view the dark force is Islam, which is not conceived as a religion as it claims, but a totalitarian political system. The objective of Islam is world domination. Swamping of western countries is being achieved through the uncontrolled flow of refugees and the high birth rate, once a Muslim population is established in a western country. The Halal tax on food certification is used to fund terrorism. Acts of terrorism are orchestrated to undermine western capacity to resist; no-go zones are established in western cities, creating Muslim enclaves closed to westerners and shutting out police forces. A ‘worldwide Jihad’ is being fought to re-establish the Caliphate and impose Sharia Law as the law of the land.

The United Nations, set up to undermine national sovereignty, is a key player in the conspiracy. The secretive planning underway is evidenced by Agenda 21, Agenda 2030, the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), which is establishing concentration camps in the United
States in which Patriots will be imprisoned. Those with access to the truth know that over 800 concentration camps have already been established.

It is, however, not entirely clear how some key tenets of the conspiratorial view of the world relate to Islam, but logical consistency is not one of the requirements within this paranoid style of political theory. For example, with regard to control of the media by the dark forces, why are there such negative depictions of Islam in the media if Islam controls the news? Or what is the link to Islam of a person such as the financier George Soros, a Hungarian of Jewish descent, who figures prominently in the conspiratorial mindset as a supporter of political forces that act against the national resistance? How is it that leading Australian politicians, including John Howard and Julia Gillard, become the puppets of Islam? Where is the Islamic presence in the ranks of the Climate Scientists who warn of global warming?

These elements are captured in the following composite narrative of personal discovery related by Bendigo interviewees.

(1.1) Hidden forces

I couldn’t understand why the world was the way it was. Why we were importing a culture that was alien to our own? I did my own research, to look behind and see what the real issues were. And then I saw this massive push for globalism that I hadn't seen before. I kept asking the question, what's driving this? What's driving this? .... What's driving all these anti-conservative forces?

I kept asking the question and then I found Soros, I found globalism, and I was just really shocked. I now saw socialism, Fabianism, globalism, Freemasonry, the UN, the militant left, the anti-racism movement – and the effects on our culture.

I later found out, didn't know then, that it was all sponsored by Soros, by big money. I can now see the manipulations because I know that George Soros is behind a lot of things. He was actually producing leaflets to tell immigrants where to land and how to go about doing it. He gives $15 billion to his causes every year. He’s one of the backers of Hillary Clinton and Obama.

At the moment we’ve got a globalist government. We've got Turnbull who’s globalist, Bishop who’s globalist, we've got the Greens who are globalist. Look at all the Fabian Socialists we've had, Keating, Hawke, Gillard, Howard, hard to find anyone who wasn’t a Fabian. They have been taking our sovereignty.

Pauline Hanson is the only non-globalist we have. And maybe Cory Bernardi. Pauline Hanson is a very brave woman to stand against this mighty, mighty globalist push. And I think she's going to engender more and more support because people are waking up. We don't want our sovereignty comprised. We should get out of the UN and build up our borders.
Once I understood the conspiracy I was furious. But then I realised that its up to us, we've got to educate Australians. That became my purpose in life, my number one thing.

1.2 Corruptior

The Council election results (were falsified). I know people who were there as scrutineers, and they were not able to see the votes locked up; they were ushered out of the room. And they made the comment to me that they were shocked. We had three staff members contact us to tell us what was going on.

1.3 Media manipulation

I saw the lies. At one stage when we first started, nobody would use the M word, nobody would socially profile the Muslim. When they were doing all the sex scandals, when they were doing the Muslim rape gangs, nobody would use the M word.

Angela Merkel in Germany worked with Facebook and they put a ban on any anti-Muslim, any anti-refugee, any anti-immigration posts. There's a censorship on this. We've got real Socialist censorship happening in many countries in Europe, but that doesn't stop them coming behind the scenes to sites like ours and sharing what's going on. We get a lot of reports from people through Facebook. They can send us messages. We just delete the messages once we've got it so that they're safe. That's crazy that this kind of stuff has to happen, but it's what's happening.

During the demonstrations in Bendigo the media reported lies all the way through. The left even paid for this guy who had a Nazi tattoo to infiltrate our rally, giving him a really divisive sign and putting him into the rally and then getting photographed by the paper. The papers followed him up. That was the level of sabotage.

We established the Stop The Mosque Bendigo Facebook site, it's got about 47,000 likes and it has a reach of about half a million. It's one of the key anti-Islam sites in Australia and it's an education site. We started reporting what the media lies were compared to what actually happened.

We do a lot more now, just studying, watching news media. With the advent of the Islamic invasion of Europe we're finding it's a really great cultural mirror to what we can expect if the doors to Australia are opened. We look at what the Imams are saying, how they're asking Muslims to take up arms and things like that. Looking at groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir and Muslim Brotherhood who have sway here, who shouldn't be here at all.
(2) Muslim association with terrorism and community discord

News reporting of acts of terrorism activates a high level of uncertainty and concern for some individuals. This uncertainty feeds anxiety and opposition to Muslim immigration. Terrorism is explained in terms of supposed essential characteristics, the ‘core teachings’ of Islam, less often in terms of the current dislocation and zones of conflict in the Middle East and the problems faced by Muslim refugees.

Concern is raised by the increase in the Muslim population in Bendigo, which is assumed will greatly accelerate as a result of the construction of a large mosque. People are ‘worried it’s going to create trouble,’ ‘there is a bit of unease.’ Terrorist incidents discussed by interviewees were the 9/11 attacks, Lindt café, Cronulla riots, the plan to ‘blow up the MCG,’ to ‘blow up Flinders Street Station.’

(2.1) Islam is a violent religion and way of life

Islam is a violent religion. Muslims have a culture that is ready to do jihad, they believe that you can’t get to Heaven unless you actually do violent jihad. In other religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, there is no message of extermination, only Islam.

It is in chapter eight of the Koran; it’s about killing, beheading, don’t take prisoners. I know not all Muslims are terrorists, but the terrorists are always acting out the teachings of the Koran.

The core teaching is the problem to me. You can be as moderate as you like with it but on the other hand you can chop off someone’s head and be just as faithful to the teachings. That's the concern.

The Koran teaches that they’re doing something good if they kill someone who is not of the same faith. They’re particularly hard on Christians and Jews. They call them People of the Book in the Koran and in one place it says you’ve got to be kind to them, but in another place it says kill them every chance you get. It's not consistent within itself, so the later teachings abrogate the earlier ones and the later teachings are the more violent ones that seek control of the whole world.

(2.2) Region of war

If you are letting in Muslim refugees, they’re coming from a place that’s violent. They’re coming from a place that’s got real issues. They’re going to bring a whole lot of baggage with them that we don’t necessarily want here. When Trump talks about the potential risk of letting in too many Middle Eastern refugees I think he’s probably got a pretty good point. Just look at what’s happening in Europe and the European countries. When you look at the rape statistics for example for Sweden they’ve gone through the roof in
the last 12 months and it’s because of refugees. It’s because the majority of refugees
go to that country are Muslim, are young men, are unemployed, don’t have skills and
they’re just going to cause problems.

(2.3) Impact on Bendigo

I’m concerned there’s going to be riots around the streets. How do we resolve a problem
if the mosque causes issues? That’s a reason people are against it, because they’re
worried it’s going to create trouble and they’re not going to feel safe on the streets.

Its making me wonder what is going to happen when they start to go ahead with the
building. Is it going to create issues? Because we want a quiet community. We want
everybody to be friendly. We want to help each other. We don’t want anyone to - ...
come here and bring this disagreement amongst the community. There’s this bitterness
now in the community.

The terrorists since 9/11 have made people really frightened. Then there was the Lindt
café in Sydney two years ago. That man was left roaming around the street when he
already had issues. He should have been in jail, but he was out. Why was he allowed to
do when he’d done so many things wrong. And at the airport the other day in Florida,
that fellow just shot five people dead in the airport.

And I think when people watch the news and then they bring out the person who has
shot and killed, most of those names are Muslim names. I think that’s why people think
that all Muslims are killers. I think to myself, ‘I don’t want to think that they’re all bad
people. But why is it every time there’s a murder, some sort of terrorist, terrorism going
on, when they bring up the names of the people, their names are some sort of Muslim
names?’

We’re going to have Muslims here, and if they’re not happy, are they just going to go
round and shoot someone? They’re going to just walk in and hold people hostage? I
don’t know. There is a bit of unease there. Because since the riot in Bendigo it’s made
a lot of people uneasy. That was very disturbing, people talked about it for weeks
everywhere we went.

People say are you sure they’re not terrorists? Are you sure they’re not part of the ISIS
or whatever they’re called? How do you know where they come from? And you sure
they’re not going to do anything nasty?

They were going to go blow up the MCG. You know, stuff like that, it turns you off going
to the football, or going to a concert, or something like that. They were going to do it
on Christmas Day, they were going to blow up Flinders Street Station, if they hadn’t got
those guys.
It’s going to hit Australia sooner or later, it’s the law of averages. They got us in Bali, but they want something bigger in Australia, like they got Paris, Germany, London.

I think there’s going to be drama down the street, on the nightclub areas and the pubs and what-not. It’s happening in Sydney. There’s going to be gangs of the young ones, there’s going to be fights. I don’t think the town’s going to go ahead. I think it’s going to go backwards. I just feel there’s a lot of trouble wherever they go.

I remember the Cronulla riots, they’ve got no respect for our law. They just jump on police cars and expect they can do anything, a lot of those Lebanese and Syrians. There are gangs of them in Melbourne as well. They’re not up here at the moment, but they will be.

I’ve got nothing against people from the Middle East. Human beings are human, I take everyone on face value. I take everyone as I find them. It’s just what you read and what you hear. There hasn’t been a lot of good stuff about Lebanese and Syrians, and they are the people that frequently go to these mosques.

(3) The negative impact of Muslims in Australia

Among those who regard Islam as having a negative impact on Australia, some interviewees stated that in their view Islam was not a religion but a political ideology which enforced a distinctive way of life. One participant commented that ‘The issue is not just about a church, a mosque is not just a building for worship.’ A mosque is ‘a political influence and it’s a source of law.’ Mosques were seen as the basis for enforcement of values in conflict with Australian society,

Sharia Law is seen as in conflict with western values: the Koran ‘holds values against our values and beliefs’. The conflict with Australian values was evident in the place of women in Islam, the practice of polygamy, the treatment of minorities, the lack of freedom that Muslims have to live the lives of their own choosing. Extreme statements were that within Islam it is acceptable ‘for a husband to beat their woman,’ ‘for a man to rape a woman,’ to treat women with disrespect. ‘In Australia we give women a better place.’

There were also assertions that Muslims do not integrate in Australia: ‘they forbid assimilation’; ‘they don’t mix’; ‘they are intolerant of others’; ‘they have no freedom to change their religion’, ‘people are free here ... we can choose to be who we are.’

It was asserted that in some western countries Muslims have ‘taken over parts of a town and won’t let people in.’ Muslims allegedly did not respect Australian traditions and culture, as indicated by opposition to Christian festivals, notably Easter and Christmas. Interviewees spoke of the need for Muslims who settle in Australia to ‘accept our laws and don’t try and change
our laws.’ There was concern over the impact of Islam on social cohesion, given the difference in value systems: ‘if we bring in too many people that are totally different there’s going to clashes.’

(3.1) The building of a mosque is not simply a matter of religion, there is more at stake – a way of life

The issue is not just about a church, a mosque is not just a building for worship. It is more than that. Their religious leaders are more than just religious; they are also political leaders, they have authority over the whole secular life of their own people.

My concern is not just about a mosque in Bendigo, it is more general, it is about mosques in Australia. We have a lot of places of worship, of different kinds of worship and that’s fine. But a mosque to me is political, it’s a political influence and it’s a source of law and I think having a mosque hinders people from being able to integrate. Because they have a mosque it makes more division between Muslims and others.

(3.2) Values in conflict

I don’t think it’s the right time for a mosque in Bendigo, not while we’ve been at war, not while we’re at war, not while the immigration problem is happening the way it is. Not when they practice the Koran and it holds values against our values and beliefs in Australia. If we want to eat beef, we’ll eat, if we want to have a drink, we’ll have a drink, if we want to wear a skirt or a t-shirt we will wear a skirt and t-shirt. I’ve seen a lot of the mosques in Great Britain in documentaries and they literally guard the whole block. I’m scared, I’m concerned about the future, our future girls and wives and women and gay people, people with disabilities and all those people that they single out.

(3.3) Sharia Law

Sharia Law is being practiced in places in Australia. I know in the UK there’s a lot of it. It’s not our law. We don’t punish people for the things that they punish people for.

They forbid assimilation, they forbid befriending the non-Muslims. A true believer is somebody who gives their life and possessions for the cause of Allah. The cause of Allah is that the religion of Islam predominates.

(3.4) No respect, no integration

I've got nothing against what you believe in, or who believes in what. You can believe in Jesus or you can believe in Allah, whatever your beliefs are. I've got nothing against that part, it's just that these Afghans, Syrian or Lebanese, that are mostly into Allah, they've been nothing but trouble in Australia since they've been here. Like the riots in Cronulla, they've got no respect for Australians. They come over here and they just want to treat
us with disrespect as far as I can see. That's the only thing I have against those sort of people, they don't mix. ...

I have watched documentaries on TV... It was an English girl, and she travels the world ... and she was about 30 or something; she went back to her home town and the Muslims there were the full burkas, they were walking the street, and they dominated her .... and everyone was too scared to come out of their homes. How many times have I seen that on a TV lately, that they've taken over parts of a town and won't let people in, the police won't go there?

(3.5) Treatment of women

The people that immigrate to Australia should accept our customs and our way of life. Because it’s not acceptable for a husband to beat their woman, their partner, their wife. It's not acceptable for them to have more than one wife.

And I think if all the mosques come they will be kept locked in to that part of the culture which to me does not seem to give women the respect. We need to respect our husbands, I agree with that, and I agree with some of the modest dressing. But I don't think there's an excuse for a man to rape a woman.

We give women a better place. We like equality. We can't all necessarily be equal in everything but as far as the dignity of a human being, I would like to think that a Muslim woman coming here is free to be the wife of one husband and free not to be treated badly.

(3.6) Extent of intolerance – apostasy forbidden, compared to freedom of belief in Australia

But I'm very concerned that the teachings in the Koran which I think they're taught in mosques and schools, they are intolerant of others who do not belong to them and they're very controlling of their own people. They have no freedom to change their religion whereas we have, we're free here to believe what we want in Australia. No one is required by law to remain in the faith they were born in, they can choose. We can choose to be whoever we are; we can learn, we can discuss, we can talk, we can change what we want to do, people are free here. And the countries where Islam is the majority, there's not the same freedom at all.

(3.7) Accept our way of life or do not come to Australia

They don’t like the laws in their own countries, so they come here to have a better life. But they want their laws to come with them. Hang on a minute; you've left your country because you can't have a say because the law doesn't allow you to have your say, the freedom to say no. Yet you want those laws to be brought here. That doesn't make
sense to me. So if they're coming to Australia to live with us, then they need to accept our laws and don't try and change our laws.

I've got open arms for anyone to come into the country. But they must accept our law and our way of life. If I want to go down the street with shorts and a t-shirt, I should be allowed to. Or if I feel like I want to go to church, well, I should be allowed to go to church. I've been to the Great Stupa that they're building outside Bendigo and I think that's a fantastic idea. They have different times of the year when they invite the community, which is a good idea.

(3.8) Impact of cultural diversity

I think it's important that we have a fairly cohesive culture in Australia. I'm not talking about Christian, I'm not talking about Western, not necessarily, but I think we all need to be able to get along and if we can't get along then that's an issue. I think if we bring in too many people that are totally different there's going to be clashes and that clash is just going to continue on for a long time. It will eventually sort itself out but not in our lifetime.... I think Muslim culture is very different. It's incredibly different and particularly it's not so much just Muslims but it's where they come from. You've got Middle Eastern Muslims are very different to Indonesian Muslims for example so I think that is a factor as well. ... There are Muslims from countries that have a fairly violent history, countries where they treat women pretty poorly, where they treat kids pretty poorly.
(4) The impact of immigration on employment opportunities and the Australian way of life

One of the concerns voiced in interviews related to the impact of immigration on employment opportunities and the Australian way of life: As one participant said, ‘I’m grieving at the moment for the Bendigo lost. ... Bendigo was my culture.’

This perspective is not narrowly concerned with Muslim immigration and the Muslim presence in Bendigo but is a more generalised opposition to changes occurring in Australia. These concerns lead to opposition to the building of a mosque in Bendigo as it is seen as a development that will lead to increased migration to Bendigo of people who will compete for scarce employment opportunities and have negative social and cultural impact on the city.

The mosque issue is caught up in a range of concerns; about the failure to obtain an adequate income, to realise life expectations, about the changing economic environment leading to loss of jobs in some industries. ‘The Muslims are everywhere and they’re taking over the jobs.’ Immigration is seen as impacting on the world into which Australians had been born, on what had been their established way of life.

Some interviewees discussed their sense of concern that there is no place for them in the future Australia; they feel that they are being pushed aside to make way for others: ‘I’m not getting looked at ... I’m not getting the help.’ Where is the help to the ‘Aussie battler?’

Governments are focused on assisting ‘minorities.’ It is perceived that refugees are provided with housing, cars, and discounts for their purchases. There is no understanding that support for refugees is in large part limited to their initial period of settlement. In place of understanding, there is the assertion that before any large-scale immigration intake, governments should deal with existing problems, including homelessness and poverty, with the needs of ‘ordinary Australians.’ For some, it is not an issue of lack of understanding, it is a statement about priorities and entitlements: ‘I’m struggling too ... Where do we factor in on this?’

In this context, a number of interviewees see Pauline Hanson as a voice of reason, as a person who understands the real needs in the community, although there was a diversity of views expressed. One interviewee characterised Hanson’s views on immigration as ‘disgusting’; another commented: ‘I don’t like her. I don’t know her. I don’t like her views and I think she does a lot of fear mongering.’ But many talked about Hanson in positive terms: ‘what she’s saying is 99% of what Australians are thinking’; ‘she’s trying to have a go for everyone’; ‘she’s very Australian and she’s all about people of Australia ... She loves her country.’

Also expressed was concern at the level of political correctness that sought to stifle freedom of expression. One interviewee commented that ‘when someone does make a statement like Sonia Kruger, [a media personality], what happens to them? She gets pounced on. That’s why I feel like we’re constantly under attack because we can’t even defend ourselves anymore.’

(4.1) Look after our own
A bit like Pauline said, ‘Just stop, can’t we just look after our own for a minute, get them on track, then once they’re going bring some more in.’

We have a lot of issues here, and we should clean our backyard before we start to worry about other countries. Not that I’m against immigration or anything like that. But I … did my placement … at the Salvation Army, that’s when I realised that in Bendigo alone there’s probably between 2,000 and 3,000 homeless people. And I think to myself, that’s just Bendigo.

There’s that many homeless Australians around and I’m not just talking about Muslims, Sudanese, Australia’s got to look after their own first before and they just keep bringing them in. I know that they want a better life, because Australia is a good place, but it’s just getting a bit overboard I think.

The Muslims are everywhere and they’re taking over the jobs. There’s that many Australians that are out of work and can’t get work, but everywhere you go, there’s different cultures everywhere and I get very annoyed that the Government subsidises them to go to work, pays part of their wage; the Government doesn’t pay half of my wage.

I’ve found my own opportunities have lessened in the last five years with the influx of other people because I’m not getting looked at because I’m not getting the help I need because there’s so many more people that need extra help. I’m not the one that put them through the war; I’m not the one that traumatised them.

Why aren’t I getting scholarships? That’s right, because this person has been traumatised more. Well I’m sorry but I’m struggling too, I need to make a life for me and my daughter. Where do we factor in on this? Is it just focused on the minorities? Whereas I’m the minority of my own culture so where does that leave me? I’m a single white female with a child, a single parent, I’m struggling to change my life …

They’re just like, ‘Oh I’ve had such a tragic life. Now just give me lots of money, give me a car and give me education, and I want it all for free.’ Well fuck that, that’s shit. What about my mum and dad that have worked all their bloody lives and now they can’t even get their super, and they’ve put so much into this country and you’ve got people coming here and they don’t even respect the country. It’s disgusting.

I don’t think the people that walk in as a refugee should be given an instant house. They seem to be set up. They’ve got better cars - like, people that live in my street have got better cars than me and a nicer house than me and I’ve been working since I was 15, and it’s just like all you have to do is arrive here and then you just get gifted. You don’t have to pay for hardly anything, you get discounts and everything. It’s just frustrating I suppose, to the everyday Australian that just works hard and that sort of thing and then people just walk in and they get it handed to them.
(4.2) The Australian battler

We’re all battlers here, we’re Aussie battlers. That’s what we’ve come from, that’s the stock that we’ve come from. Why should we be displaced as well?

I feel like I’m grieving at the moment for the Bendigo lost – the heritage of Bendigo is lost, and I will start to feel displaced and as a refugee in about five to ten years because many more people come in, I will have to leave to a smaller country town where my culture is accepted. Is that fair?

One of the positive things of Bendigo was that it was my culture, it reflected my culture. It was Anglo Saxon and a little bit of Chinese and a little bit of other places, but it wasn’t dominated by those. It’s a Christian founded country after colonisation and that’s the forefathers, that’s what it has been. It’s been stamped basically; this is the culture of it and we all manage to strive and be okay in that. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with it. Then when people started coming over and saying, ‘My country’s shit, it’s in war. I’m traumatised but I’m going to live in your backyard and you can’t do anything about it, and I’m not going to respect your view and I’m not going to respect your ways because you don’t have a culture because you’re white.’ They don’t [respect] ... the white people of Australia – white people of Australia are basically regarded as savage colonists that came along and took indigenous land. Well that’s bullshit. That is bullshit. The Australians are being pushed aside.

I think cultural diversity is great in a general sense. I’m definitely not all for white Australia or anything like that but I just think it needs to be managed in a way that the white Australians aren’t feeling like we’re getting pushed out to make room for all this diversity and that all the Australian things are getting taken away. Like, if they do change Australia Day and people are complaining about the anthem and burning Australia flags and all this sort of thing and it’s just like - yeah, I do feel that maybe everyday Australian or the people that used to be everyday Australians are now getting to the minority. I guess, even on TV shows and everything now, it’s got to be diverse and you’ve got to have an Asian person and a Middle Eastern person and someone with a disability. Like, you’ve got to have the full picture, so you don’t offend anybody and I think it’s just getting a bit tiring trying to keep everybody happy. I just feel like everyone else is allowed to be offended but we’re not allowed to [be] offended by them.

(4.3) The right to voice an opinion

And when someone does make a statement like Sonia Kruger what happens to them? She gets pounced on. That’s why I feel like we’re constantly under attack because we can’t even defend ourselves anymore.

(4.4) Pauline Hanson
I think what she [Pauline Hanson] says at the moment is controversial like it always was, but I think it’s less controversial now than what it was when she started. In another few years, I think it’s going to be even lesser, because you’re going to have more Australians agreeing with her. Because what she’s saying is 99 per cent of what Australians are thinking.

I don’t mind Pauline Hanson, I think she’s all right. Actually I think she’s trying to have a go for everyone. She’s one of the real ones I believe. I’ve got a bit of respect for Pauline. She’s an old fish and chip owner, so I can relate to her. (Laughs). She’s done the hard yakka. She’s very Australian and she’s all about people of Australia ... She loves her country. She’s proud of her country, and like I didn’t like her before, but I don’t mind her now.

(5) Misinformation and rumour

A common feature in periods of community tension is the spreading of misinformation and rumour. A British report on promotion of community cohesion observed that

Myths and stereotypes about different communities can develop and spread within neighbourhoods or regions, leading to prejudice, distrust and in some cases tensions and conflict. (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007, p. 73)

The circulation of rumour is well illustrated by a post on the Stop The Mosque Facebook site:

Just got a message from my friend [name deleted]. She was talking to a girl in our local IGA in Eaglehawk and was told they plan on building a refugee camp here in Eaglehawk. Now that’s just fkn great! Bloody hell, can’t see us living in this area much longer. All of Central Victoria is targeted and will be buggered.’ (14 July 2014)

Another example was a claim that ‘this mosque, that’s when it’s build in Bendigo they will run Bendigo, that scared me a lot ... That was very frightening.’ When asked where this claim was made, the response was that it was a ‘video clip that was on Facebook.’

The keystone of rumours circulating about the mosque was its size – that it will be able to accommodate 2,000 worshippers, that it will be the largest mosque in the southern hemisphere. Perceptions of size may have been influenced by the construction in Bendigo of the Buddhist Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, which was claimed to be the largest Stupa in the western world with capacity for 2,000 people.

The interviews indicated a high level of uncertainty about the size of the mosque, with the idea of huge mosque widely accepted as fact amongst opponents. This was a key feature of the
development of opposition in Bendigo, differentiating it from other campaigns against mosques. One interviewee commented:

I think that the people on the right are seeing the mosque as a way to somehow sneak around and get more Muslims into the country or something like that. They haven’t actually made a logical connection in their mind, but they somehow think that the bigger the mosque the more Muslims are going to come into this country.

A range of misconceptions were linked to the assumed size of the mosque: Opponents or interviewees believed that large tracts of land had been purchased in the surrounding area; a huge housing estate was being planned; the Bendigo airport was being expanded so that large planes bringing Muslims could be landed in the city.

The misconception concerning the size of the mosque and the number of Muslims to be settled in Bendigo was also used to explain Council’s approval of the application. How could such a large development have been approved? The explanation could only be in terms of corruption, the Councillors approved the project because they stood to gain money from the sale of land, from Halal certification, from running training programs for asylum seekers and refugees. It was this corruption that explained failure to consult with the community.

Other rumours concerned funding from Saudi Arabia to bring a radical form of Islam, Wahhabi Islam, to Bendigo. Supposedly, the land on which the mosque was to be built would become sovereign Muslim land, with police unable to enter the premises. The mosque would cause disruption to the region in which it would be built, with the call to prayer broadcast from the minaret – it would have serious impact on the quality of life of people living in the neighbourhood.

Why is misinformation and rumour believed? Interviews indicate that people lacked information or were unwilling to listen to information provided by those who were either not believed or trusted, such as Council members or staff. The challenge in dealing with rumour is an unwillingness to listen, a disposition not to evaluate what is being said, and acceptance at face value. One interviewee commented:

You can’t argue with people who circulate ignorant rumours, they’re not going to listen to facts. What they say is so stupid.

(5.1) A super mosque

It’s going to be a super mosque. It’s going to have all the bells and whistles. It’s going to accommodate up to 2,000 people. Why do we need such a big mosque when there’s only around 300 reported Muslims in Bendigo? ... What I don't understand, and if you can answer this for me, why do they need such a bloody big mosque when there’s hardly any population, unless they’ve got the plan to bring the population here ... That’s what most of the people at that rally were saying ... 'We’re concerned about the size of it,
what does that mean?’ … Q: … so it’s the size of the mosque …? A: That’s what really triggered everything, yeah.

People have said that to me as well, that they were saying that – like, why do they need such a big mosque if there’s only a small community here and so on....

(5.2) Threats of violence

You hear lots of things, but the Muslims apparently, if the Bendigo people go against it, that there’s going to be consequences … If we don’t agree to it, then there’s going to be consequences; to me that’s some sort of violence... Q: So there could be an attack here in Bendigo and so on as a retribution? A: Yes … [heard that] just from a friend.

I can never remember which way it goes, but is it there’s the Sunni’s and the something else? I’m not sure. But either way, I think one of them is a little bit more linked to terrorism and probably not as ideal as you would want to be building in your city. And I think that’s the side that has funded mosque, which I think is a great concern to a lot of people in Bendigo. .... I think in people’s minds, of course it’s not the majority of Muslims doing these things, we know that. But of course, it only takes one bad apple in the fruit bowl. And with a massive mosque like that, especially if the funding is coming from the other side of the Muslims that are into their extremism, I don’t really want 2,000 potential terrorists running around Bendigo. ... I just think having a young family, it’s something that you have to think about now. You can’t just go walking down the street in Melbourne without worrying about something happening in public places.

(5.3) Noise

It’s going to blare out music and disrupt our birds singing and our horses.

(5.4) Rape ... and territorial control

[In] places in Queensland ... the rape percentage has tripled or quadrupled since the mosques have been put there.

A: There’s the noise, there’s the fact that apparently once they get the mosque built they will have the legal right to take and rape women inside of it and stuff like that.

Q: Rape women inside?

A: Yes, seriously, that’s a thing I hear regularly on the street talking about how once a woman goes in there they can be forced into marriage, or kidnapped, or beaten, raped, it doesn’t matter, police can’t do anything, stuff like that. That’s what people are convinced is going to happen if the mosque is built. ... The main thing is apparently if the mosque goes in effectively it becomes their own country and the area around it is what they’re saying. They reckon if that mosque goes in that mosque becomes
effectively part of their country therefore they do what they want there and we can’t do anything about it.

Q: And these are Muslim women, presumably, that are being raped, or just anybody?
A: Any woman, if you walk past that mosque as an Australian woman you get grabbed and pulled inside the grounds apparently there’s nothing the police can do about it. I’m serious, people of my age are convinced of this in this town.

(5.5) 20,000 Muslims

Well they reckon 20,000 of them are going to come out don’t they? 20,000 Muslims, but where are they going to live and work? That is the number, that was the word going around. So they reckon there could be up to 20,000 coming here. I read it in the local paper. That’s when they have their mosque, that’s when they move here. I started reading that and went ‘what’? They reckon up to 20,000 could be coming here, 20,000 people, my God. It is not just a little church. We’re getting an invasion, Bendigo is going to lose its identity, isn’t it? We could always move somewhere else if we don’t like it, but why should we have to?

(6) The flawed approval process and the failure to consult

A consistent theme raised in several interviews relates to a flawed process. Bendigo residents, it was asserted, had been denied an opportunity to voice their views and determine the future of their town – ‘no one was actually asked;’ ‘they do not listen to the people. It’s like they don’t want to discuss it.’

The building of a mosque in Bendigo was seen as representing a major change for the town, one that would have major consequences for its future. As such, the people of the town should have the right to decide, yet they had been denied a voice. Their concerns had not been addressed, their questions were left unanswered.

Those who presented this view had no or little understanding of process. They were not aware of (or chose to ignore) the events prior to the meeting of 18 June 2014, the failed attempts to enter discussion, the shouting match and attempted intimidation at the key Council meeting. Similarly, there was lack of understanding of the limited autonomy of a local town under the Australian system of government, of the limited power of the Bendigo Council when considering applications, and the over-riding freedom of religion enshrined in the Australian Constitution and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights.

(6.1) The first step should have been consultation
I think when people feel like something’s being forced on them they react negatively. That is how the issue was created. Whereas if it had been introduced in a less authoritarian way, people might have been more receptive.

(6.2) They do not listen to the people

I think the biggest issue, whether it’s the Victorian government, the Australian government, or the Bendigo council, is that they do not listen to the people. It’s like they don’t want to discuss it.

I was one of the objectors. There was 400 who objected. Normally if you object to something they will have a discussion with you. We went to that meeting and the media was saying we were all out-of-towners. We weren’t. There may have been a couple, but there were a lot of locals. When they came to discuss the mosque, to vote for it, they refused to receive questions on it. It was cut off.

So, what are they hiding? This is not due process. A lot of locals were angry at the process. It’s like whether you agree with it or disagree with it, why can’t we have our say? A lot of people are so frustrated. And I think that’s why you see the likes of Pauline Hanson getting the reaction and response she’s getting, because people are fed up with being shut down and not listened to.

There seems to be opinions in Bendigo that our Bendigo council need a really good shake-up. They’re not listening to the people; we feel that they're not listening to the people. They're hearing what we’re saying but nothing's being put down as a vote, giving us a more of a choice. The way they vote does not reflect the views of the community, the people who live in this town. They need to step up and make the changes that the people are asking for and then see what becomes of that decision. If it’s not a right decision then you pull it out, you stop it.

(6.3) No one was actually asked

No one was actually asked about it. They didn’t do a survey or anything to see what the consensus was and that it sort of just happened. So, I think yeah, that’s probably the biggest thing that people think about when they think local council they go, ‘Oh!’

(6.4) There is no trust in government

This is part of the trouble: people are so over politicians, government. They’re just full of distrust, and I think people are probably even thinking that if they’re trying to sell us something then it must be bad. Somehow, we need community leaders we can trust, who connect at the grass roots level.

(6.5) We did not get the answers
We’re about the size of the mosque and we didn’t get answers, all we got said was, ‘You’re just racist, you’re just a bigot.’ I am no bigot, I care for people. I have real concerns and they have not been answered.

(7) Disinterest

It is wrong to assume that all Bendigo residents were engaged in debate over the building of a mosque. Not all people saw it as an important issue with relevance to their future.

Surveys indicate that there are substantial segments of the population who are not engaged in political issues. These people have no opinion on a range of issues and do not claim to know what is right or wrong; they have no interested in being informed. For them the mosque was of no consequence.

It is to be expected that those with such views would have little interest in participating in a project concerned with the development of the mosque issue, but one interviewee, a young man, indicated such an opinion: ‘Me and my friends, we’re just getting along in the world. Whatever happens, happens. Just let it go. …’
(8) A critical perspective – the absurdity of rumour

Support for the mosque was indicated on a number of different grounds. One perspective was that the issue had been magnified and exaggerated by opponents. For these people the claimed threats to life in Bendigo or the wider threat posed by Islam were not able to be sustained if a reasoned and critical approach was taken to the assertions being made – they could be shown to be alarmist and absurd if subjected to critical consideration.

Two interviewees were forthright in the argument that if claims were subjected to critical scrutiny they could be shown to be groundless. For example, there was an unanswered question posed to opponents who claimed that Bendigo would be swamped with Muslims – how would such a huge increase in population be sustained in economic terms, what jobs would be available to so many immigrants? As for the introduction of Sharia Law, how would it be possible to obtain sufficient number parliamentary support for the enactment of legislation to establish Sharia Law?

(8.1) How could you believe something like that

I think too many rumours, too many false accusations, too many outsiders, people that aren’t from Bendigo. They say they’re going to do this, and they’re going to do that. When I hear what people are talking about I think, oh, my goodness, how could you believe something like that?

(8.2) Be realistic. How are they going to support themselves?

Q: There are alarmist things that people have been saying: there’s going to be a huge mosque and 20,000 Muslims are going to come to Bendigo.

A: Rubbish.

Q: Rubbish?

A: Rubbish.

Q: Yeah?

A: Yeah. Where are you going to support 20,000 Muslims? Where are they going to get work? How are they going to support themselves? You’ve got to be realistic. Where are they going to work, what are they going to do? Most of them will not be able to find jobs, so why would they come here? They’re going to go where the work is, you probably wouldn’t get 2,000 extra people in Bendigo working.

(8.3) The chances of introducing Sharia Law
I don’t think they’re going to bring Sharia Law. We’ve got Australian law. They can try and bring Sharia Law but that’s not going to work. There’s not going to be enough of them here to change our culture to Sharia Law. They would have to outnumber us, totally outnumber us, to be able to do that. It’s not going to happen.

(9) The Australian way of life – and freedom of religion

A central argument presented by supporters of the mosque concerned freedom of religion – the right of all Australians to practice their faith. If some were permitted to practice their religion then all should be permitted, there was no reason for Muslims to be singled out as the ones denied this basic right. Some interviewees referred to the Constitution, but most who expressed this view did so on the grounds of support for equality. Support on this basis was indicated by some alongside a critical perspective on aspects of the Islamic faith, but it was the view that the perceived negatives of the faith were not grounds for denying freedom of worship to its followers.

In the context of the revelations of the Royal Commission into abuse of children, there was a heightened sense of the fallibility of Christian priests and religious institutions; some indicated that they were more concerned with the failures within Christianity than within Islam.

(9.1) Why can’t they?

It happened all the way through my childhood. There was seven different churches, synagogues and whatnot happening. Then in late primary school, in the late eighties, there just seemed to be this sudden non-acceptance of other cultures. I think it was around when the Vietnamese started coming. I’m not religious by practice, but if we could have all these different churches, synagogues, mosques everywhere else, why can’t they? The position of women in Islam, I find that quite shocking. I’ve read a few books about women in Islam. There are things I wouldn’t want to see in Australia. Even the fact they have to hide their face I think’s also quite sad. But should we stop them having their religion? No.

(9.2) It just makes sense

Whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing it’s neither here nor there. I think that there should be a mosque if there are Muslim people in this community that want a place of worship, it just makes sense. If we can have the Catholics in their big church on the hill, if they can bug me every Saturday morning practicing their bloody bells when I’m trying to work, why not a mosque.

(9.3) Our Constitution – they have every right
They have every right to ... People will say crimes will come with it, they’ll breed terrorists. Look at what the Catholic Church has done. Look at what the Church of England has done. Come on. There’s a lot of bad things come out of religion, but it doesn’t mean you should stop anyone from having it. It’s not part of our Constitution.

(9.4) I’d be more worried about the Catholic church

I don’t see that it’s really any different from having the cathedral up the road, and the Anglican church up the road, and all the different religious groups. Don’t know why you would be worried. I’d be more worried about the Catholic church on the hill, and the men in and out of there, what they’re doing. Why would we be worried about a building? I don’t feel any concern about it.

(10) The positives of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism

Some of the interviewees discussed their understanding of issues not in simple black and white terms, all good/ all bad, but with recognition of complexity. In this perspective there is acknowledgement of good and bad in all people. There are individuals within Muslim communities who cause problems, but there are also Muslims who make a major contribution to Bendigo, such as doctors and others working in the health field.

Ethnic and religious diversity is seen as a defining characteristic of modern Australia, one that is not about to change. Australia is not seen as a country that has recently become ethnically diverse, but as always diverse. There is nothing to be gained by attempts to shelter and isolate Bendigo from the main currents of Australian life. In this perspective, fear and hatred of people of other cultures and religions, the isolation of Bendigo, will only serve to foster bitterness and intolerance and hinder the city’s development. It is far better to embrace diversity, to learn from others, and to use that learning to enrich lives. One interviewee commented when asked what he thought about diversity: ‘More the better. I love the world, it’s an amazing place.’

An elderly member of the community recounted an experience with her grand-daughter in Melbourne:

I was in McDonalds at Campbellfield one time, my daughter had taken my granddaughter to the toilet, and I was sitting there and I’m laughing when she got back. She said, what’s wrong? I said, just have a look at all those school kids. See there’s your daughter, and there was every nationality you could possibly think of, and this one red head, which was my granddaughter. That’s what it’ll be like when she goes to school. It will be so multicultural. So I think it’s a great way for your children to be brought up.

But views are complex, with several different perspectives indicated. Some are happy to co-exist with people of other backgrounds, but still expect immigrants to adapt to Australian ways,
Division in Bendigo

...to integrate. Others see no problem with the maintenance of different value systems and lifestyles: ‘how boring would it be just for us to be all from the same culture?’ Some indicate respect for Muslims as people, see both positives and negatives in their culture, but still would not like to see a mosque built in Bendigo at this time.

(10.1) Complex reality: good and bad in all people

I try to point out to people, every group has a minority, and there’s bad in every minority group, no matter what there is. But 95% are wonderful people.

But there is good and bad in every religion and whatever. I judge a person as I find them. I just feel the mosque is going to be detrimental a little bit to Bendigo.

There’s some lovely wonderful Muslim people. The wonderful doctors.

(10.2) The realities of a multicultural society

From the age of about 8 to about 15, I was in an Anglo orientated area, but I went to very multicultural schools, had Greek and Italian babysitters as a kid. I’m quite respectful of cultural diversity. I’ve worked with many different cultures in the kitchen, Muslim and the like. I’m not being racist saying this, but it was awkward when it was beginning, and the Muslims would leave the kitchen at 12:00 and go and pray. But no one ever told them they couldn’t. It was just like, ‘There they go again.’ So in a kitchen of ten people, four would go off and pray. It’s a lot of pressure for the 10 or 15 minutes, but no one really gave a damn. It was just - it’s their culture. Yeah. I’m proud at Southern Cross Station we’ve got a prayer room, so they can do that now. There’s some places where it’s really good in society and there’s some places and things that’re really tainted.

I’m finding out more as I get older. So we’ve not just become multicultural, we’ve always been multicultural.

I guess if you look through people coming to Australia, over the years, it was the Greek and the Italians who were the ones that came out and worked really hard, and had the local shop or the fish and chip shop and whatever, and they were really belittled for a while. And now they’re part of the norm. Then the Vietnamese refugees that were really belittled for a while. As for the Australian way of life today, it is different from what it was when I was young, we all learnt to cook fried rice, we started to get lots of Chinese food, then we had the Thai takeaway down the road. Our food in Australia is so multicultural that I think it’s probably a way that people can track who came into Australia. We’ve had all these eras of different groups of people needing our help and needing support.

I’m a fifth generation. My husband, he’s about third generation Scottish, and his grandparents are Swiss. Living in Melbourne, around Newport, Altona way, is very
multicultural. Even the little country town where I went to school, I was best friends with Greeks, Aborigines, Chinese. No problems. Found that you do the right thing, you’ve got a friend forever. Yeah, always. Our Macedonian friend was our best man. I don’t have a problem. I feel [diversity] brings a wealth of history, knowledge, we have wonderful people in our medical services all round, and especially in the rural areas.

(10.3) Prejudice and bitterness harms us

Just treat everybody with respect instead of having your political views and ideological views and all the rest of the stuff and bagging them. That’s probably why I got the views about Muslims that I have. I know there are ex-servicemen who are anti but I just don’t – to be honest with you, I don’t hate the Vietnamese either. I can’t see the point because you look at some of these old soldiers that hated the Japs and they were hating the Japs until the day they died, who was it affecting? It wasn’t affecting the Japs, it was only affecting them and, as far as I’m concerned, the Vietnamese who fought against me, us, they were fighting for what they believed in, we were fighting for what we believed in. Now it’s all over, see ya mate, thanks very much, I’ll shake your hand or whatever, you know? Why hold bitterness? It doesn’t do you any good. And I think a lot of these people, your anti-mosque people, are very bitter. They’re very bitter about the whole thing.

(10.4) The benefits of diversity

Q: What do you think about cultural diversity and immigration?

A: More the better. I love the world, it’s an amazing place. I know I’ll have a chance to go see it myself, [but] I’d rather it come to me. It gives me more of an opportunity [to learn about other cultures].

Q: Is cultural diversity a problem for this country?

A: Oh no. The country was founded on it. I’ve got no problem with cultural diversity … as long as everyone’s trying to fit in

I don’t have a problem with diversity. Yes, and all sorts of different cultures. I think they add to the richness of Australia, from accepting each other as fellow human beings to diversity in the food that we’re eating, festivals, and things like that, I think, bring people together.

My reading of the plans and everything, the mosque will be open to the community to use some of their facilities and meeting rooms, I thought well that was something really wonderful, that they’re trying to connect with everyone. I was really proud of all the other faith groups and churches that were joining together to promote togetherness.
The For Bendigo Committee, too, I thought they were doing a great job to unite people in a friendly way, and all multicultural. We've got a lot to learn.

(10.5) How boring it would be

How boring would it be just for us to be all from the same culture? I find it hard when someone asks me what my culture is, I have a lot of trouble answering that question, [is it] thongs and beers, it is a hard question to answer. Other people have a rich cultural history and they have a lot to offer the rest of us.

Q: And that wouldn’t concern you … if there are people who don’t want to integrate into mainstream values?

A: Why do they have to if they don’t want to? As long as they’re not being rude to anyone, why should they have to integrate if they don’t want to? See, I come from Mauritius. And in Mauritius, we’re very multicultural, like Australia. We have Muslims, we have Hindus, we have French, we have Creole, Christians. Different cultures, different outfits. I love seeing African women with their turbans and their colourful outfits. I love seeing a Japanese lady with a kimono on. In Mauritius, we wear a lot of floral clothing, you know. I think everyone – every culture has got some sort of outfit that they like to wear. And it’s the same with the Muslims. They like to be covered up. And if that’s part of the way they’ve been brought up, well, so be it. If everyone has the same values, it’s going to be a boring world, isn’t it?

But I’m interested in people and learning about them and stuff. As a matter of fact I’m doing, I’m learning some conversational Arabic. It’s just conversational and I couldn’t have a long conversation, but I could say hello and welcome and talk about a few things if I get better … I’ve been to one of the welcome dinners and I love to get to know people. I think it’s good to get to know people and their backgrounds and to understand them.

My ex-husband’s parents were Hungarian. Some of my dad’s friends were Turkish and Egyptian and from Jordan and stuff like that. In school, we had your Greeks, your Italians, your Russians. So, there has always been people from other countries around in the community. I don’t discriminate between skin colour, language, sexuality or religion. Understanding other people’s religion and understanding or finding out where it originated and where it come from can enhance my life. Because otherwise, if – if we didn’t have any immigration, we’ll be just here in a box.

(10.6) It’s a great way for your children

I feel immigration brings a wealth of history, knowledge, we have wonderful people in our medical services all round, and especially in the rural areas. There wouldn’t be any doctors without our multicultural. I don’t have a problem, I’ve always had this thing,
you never know who your grandchildren are going to end up with, so you can’t afford to have that feeling.

Our daughter’s in Melbourne, and it’s just so multicultural. I was in McDonalds at Campbellfield one time, my daughter had taken my granddaughter to the toilet, and I was sitting there and I’m laughing when she got back. She said, what’s wrong? I said, just have a look at all those school kids. See there’s your daughter, and there was every nationality you could possibly think of, and this one red head, which was my granddaughter. That’s what it’ll be like when she goes to school. It will be so multicultural. So I think it’s a great way for your children to be brought up.

(10.7) Personal contact – beyond fear

Q: Have you ever had the chance to go to a mosque?

A: Yes, I have.

Q: Like for an Eid festival and so on?

A: Yes, just - some of them in Melbourne. I haven’t been very well set for my whole life. There was sometimes I was quite impoverished. I would go – there was a mosque where I could go and sit, get food, and you’d hear their praying. I always dreamed of going to Turkey one day and leaning out the hotel room and hearing them sing in the morning. There’s some parts of Islam that are really, really great, and I love it, but then there’s these key core factors … that people can pinpoint to say it’s disgraceful. But look at all our religions. There’s holes in them too.

(10.8) Empathy

I can’t imagine being a Muslim and living here during that time, and I’m sure it is still not good. I guess you walk in their shoes. How awful it must be for someone and I also work with a women’s refuge where most of the clients, 90% of the clients, are non-English speaking women who have been in the country for a very short time and it is so difficult, so difficult for them. They don’t speak the language. They don’t get Centrelink benefits because they’re on maybe a bridging visa or a fiancé visa and they’ve got no income, they’ve got no language, they don’t know the services, and I just think, ‘Wow.’ People have been making a lot of assumptions, ‘They get this, the government is giving them so much money,’ and I think, ‘No, they’re not.’

I think it is really difficult. I can’t imagine how hard that must be and how brave it is to move to a different country where you don’t know the language and you don’t know anyone. And I keep thinking, if tanks came rolling down my street, I’d be the first one on a boat with my kids, expecting asylum elsewhere, so I don’t blame people for wanting
to do that here. I am sure most people have the ability to empathise, but they choose not to, and I think fear stops them.

Really intelligent people tend to be taken over sometimes by what I see as an irrational fear of things they don’t understand.
4 PUBLIC OPINION, A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

There is no consensus among Bendigo residents interviewed for this project in their assessment of balance of public opinion on the building of a mosque in their city.

One view is that majority opinion supports the mosque; that those strongly opposed make a lot of noise and get public attention, but are only a minority of local residents. Thus one person interviewed observed:

I think the majority of the silent Bendigonians would probably share my view [in support of the mosque] and the outspoken ones are probably generally the ones who are anti and I don’t think they’re of a huge number. It’s just that they stirred everything up and got all these other people, this mob from all over the countryside coming here and creating dramas.

A second view is that opinion in Bendigo is divided. According to one interviewee, one third of the residents support the building of the mosque, a third are against, and one third are undecided or in the middle. In the judgment of another interviewee, probably one quarter support, one quarter are against, and there are ‘half who don’t care, don’t know, [or have] no opinion.’

The third view is that the majority of residents are against the mosque: ‘they’d be the majority.’ One interviewee, who stated that he had a large number of contacts because he had owned takeaway food shops, observed that ‘I know a lot of people ... Everyone I know, everyone, ... [they] don’t want it here.’ One young person, in his early twenties, commented that the majority of his age group were against; the ‘young people I’ve met are actually even worse racists than most of the middle aged.’ A person who supported the mosque was ‘surprised at the number of our friends that were very anti .. I felt very uncomfortable that I knew these people, which we’ve known for 40 odd years ... But both my husband and I just would go home and say, I just can’t believe it, I never thought. So we’ve found that very hard.’

Some commented that it was difficult to determine the true state of public opinion because people were frightened to make known their views. ‘I think a lot of people have the same concerns but not a lot of people are prepared to speak them out. ... A lot of people don’t say what they really feel about it.’ It was commented that Facebook was used to intimidate, that people who attended a rally were ‘terrified for weeks for their life because pictures were taken of them and posted on Facebook pages.’

This view that people were scared to reveal their views was a common theme in interviews: ‘there’s a great reduction in the freedom of speech now because there’s a lot of labelling ... If you feel someone has offended you, you can kick up a big fuss and take them to court’; ‘we have to keep our mouths shut at times and can’t say what we really feel;’ ‘I don’t like to speak out too much about politics in this day and age, it just causes dramas.... I don’t like to talk to
people about politics and religion because you’ll have no friends left by the time you both state your opinion;’ ‘they probably don’t dare say;’ ‘It is really hard to have a sensible conversation about it. For a long time people weren’t even willing to be caught in a discussion about it because they were afraid of one person on one side or the other hearing them.’

Both people for and against the mosque felt intimidated by those with opposing views. In the words of one interviewee, if you indicated that you supported the building of the mosque ‘my head might get killed by them, [they] might just stomp on you,’ while on the other side there was a comment that ‘if you say anything bad against them you're ... a racist or a bigot.’

One person asserted that on the La Trobe University campus students were told what to think and were prevented from questioning

I've had a Left lecturer come in and totally go off at the class, and about how it's not right for the uni look for anyone to disagree with the mosque. Me and my friend are the only ones in the whole class going, well we don’t necessarily agree with this. But we couldn’t have our say, but it’s okay for her to come in and have her say. But ... if we had of put our hands up, we would have been the outcasts, we're the ones that are acting in a way that we shouldn’t be because we’re asking too many questions, or we’re being conflictable or you know.... I don’t like to think I'm a racist and I don’t like to think I'm a bigot and it really upsets me when we talk about these things and straight away we’re put on the bigot. Number one that is the most annoying thing with Australian communication at the moment. If the mainstream don’t agree, we’re bigots and we’re being racist.

It is difficult to establish the balance of opinion in Bendigo because no survey of attitudes to the mosque utilising a random sample of the population was conducted during the period of anti-mosque protests. A journalist writing for the The Australian commented that

Remarkably, no one has commissioned a credible poll in Bendigo to see what the community thinks about the mosque, so each side of the debate claims to have public opinion on its side. *The Bendigo Advertiser* tried to conduct an online poll but abandoned it after it believed antimosque forces had hijacked the survey to artificially inflate the no-mosque vote (*The Australian*, 26 September 2015).

The following discussion reviews the available quantitative evidence that provides insight into public opinion.

One indication is provided by election results. In the period that the mosque issue was commanding public attention three elections were held: the 2014 Victorian state election, the 2016 federal election, and the 2016 local council election. There are also indicators provided by surveys conducted in the Bendigo region between 2014 and 2016, during the height of the controversy.
2014 Victorian state election

The Victorian state election was held on 29 December 2014, less than six months after the Council approved the mosque town planning application and while the VCAT appeal was pending. Two Bendigo electorates were contested, Bendigo East and Bendigo West.

A leading opponent of the mosque, Councillor Elise Chapman, stood for the seat of Bendigo West as the candidate of the Australian Country Alliance, subsequently renamed The Australian Country Party. Her candidature was supported by the Stop The Mosque Facebook site, as was that of the Rise Up Australia candidate. Voters were advised that ‘both of these candidates are AGAINST the mosque being built in Bendigo’ (29 November 2014). The party’s objectives included ‘effective representation and promotion of the traditional values, culture, views and aspirations of Australian communities … We believe in “Old School Values”, common sense, fairness, equality and a fair go for all’ (Australian Country Party, http://countryparty.org.au/about-us/, accessed 11 December 2017). Indicative of her outlook, Chapman explained in an interview that ‘I see Islam as a seventh-century, barbaric, inhumane ideology’ (The Australian, 26 September 2015). Chapman obtained 2.8% of the vote, coming fifth of the six candidates standing for the seat.

The anti-Muslim party, Rise Up Australia, stood candidates in both Bendigo seats. Their policy statement is unequivocal in its opposition to Islam.

[Rise Up Australia] oppose their texts (Koran) and Islamic doctrine and ideology because it is oppressive and incompatible with the Australian way of life. We stand robustly on the foundation of our Judeo-Christian heritage, which includes the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the 1215 Magna Carta and the 1688 Bill of Rights…. Muslim extremists do not want to accept our laws but want to govern themselves by introducing Sharia Law into Australia. … Practices consistent with Sharia Law, unsanctioned by the government, have already crept into Australia. … Rise Up Australia Party is totally opposed to the introduction of Sharia Law in Australia – it is incompatible with our democracy and in particular curtails the civil rights and freedoms of women. (Rise Up Australia, http://riseupaustraliaparty.com/#values, accessed 11 December 2017)

Rise Up Australia obtained 1.8% of the vote in Bendigo West, 1.4% in Bendigo East, an average of 1.6%.

The major parties – Labor, Liberal and Greens – upheld the right of Muslim residents to build a place of worship. Opposition to the mosque or Muslim immigration was not an issue on which the major parties campaigned. Their combined first preference vote was in excess of 90% for Bendigo seats at the 2014 state election, with both seats won by Labor Party candidates.
Table 12: 2014 Victorian election, Bendigo region, first preference vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labor</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Greens</th>
<th>Country Alliance</th>
<th>Rise Up Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bendigo West</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bendigo East</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2016 Federal election

Late in 2015, while the appeal against the grant of the town planning application in the Victorian Court of Appeal was pending, in pursuit of her political ambitions Councillor Chapman met with Pauline Hanson. In January 2016 she was announced as the lead Victorian Senate candidate for Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party. At this time Chapman announced that

If elected, I will ask the hard questions and demand answers so that Australians can be fully informed on a range of issues and I will vote against any legislation that will harm the Aussie way of life.

On the One Nation website, Councillor Chapman was described as a ‘tireless campaigner for the rights of her constituents,’ a ‘regular media headline in the Bendigo region’ for her opposition to the Bendigo mosque (Bendigo Advertiser, 7 January 2016).

However, in April 2016 she withdrew her candidacy for One Nation ‘due to personal issues’, specified on the Stop The Mosque Facebook page as ‘health issues.’ (27 April 2016). The One Nation party commented that ‘Elise is a hard-working and dedicated person who cares for her community and we wish her the best with her continued role as a Bendigo councillor.’ (ABC News, 27 April 2016). Shortly prior to her withdrawal, she was reprimanded by VCAT on the basis of complaints lodged following her message to a constituent which was judged to be, ‘wittingly or unwittingly,’ giving ‘voice to ugly and unjustified stereotyping of Muslims in the Bendigo community’ (Herald Sun, 23 March 2017).

The 2016 federal election was held in June, in the aftermath of the major Bendigo demonstrations and after the failed appeals to the Victorian Court of Appeal and the High Court of Australia. In Victoria One Nation obtained its lowest Senate vote, just 1.81%; this compared to 9.19% in Queensland, 4.1% in New South Wales, 3.99% in Western Australia, 2.98% in South Australia, and 2.57% in Tasmania.
The Rise Up Australia’s candidate for the federal electorate of Bendigo obtained 2.1% of the vote (2,058 votes), only marginally higher than that obtained in the 2014 state election. For the Victorian Senate, Rise Up Australia obtained just 0.29% of the vote. The Labor Party candidate retained the federal seat with a vote of 53.7%, after distribution of preferences.

**Table 13: 2016 Federal election, Bendigo, first preference vote**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Vote Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise Up Australia</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was one additional anti-mosque candidate in the 2016 election. Anita Donlon, who stood as an Independent, had been a fringe political activist in Bendigo for a number of years. In the 2010 state election she was the endorsed Liberal candidate for Bendigo West and won a very low (for a major party) 20% of the vote, compared to 39% for Labor (see *Herald Sun*, 3 July 2014). In the 2013 Federal election she stood as the Palmer United candidate and won 2.52% of the vote. Donlon had developed a profile as an opponent of the mosque. She was, for example, a speaker at the June 2014 Bendigo Council meeting at which the application permit was approved (*Crikey*, 20 June 2014). In 2016, she campaigned as ‘The only Independent candidate in the Bendigo electorate that will serve you, not a party!’ (*Stop The Mosque*, 20 June 2016).

The *Stop The Mosque* Facebook page endorsed Donlon’s candidature, along with that of Elise Chapman who at that point was still the One Nation candidate. On 19 March 2016 the site posted: ‘People of Bendigo – Anita and Elise stand for Australia and our values yet continue to be maligned for doing so. Make your vote count.’ In April 2016 the site messaged: ‘In Victoria we have Anita Donlon running for House of Reps Bendigo and Elise Chapman in the Senate for Victoria. Get to know the people who care for Australia in your area.’ Rise Up Australia directed its second preference vote to Donlon. Although she had developed an activist profile over a number of years, Donlon obtained just 1,922 votes, 1.97% of the total.

Despite the level of publicity and protest in Bendigo, these minor party candidates who were identified as opponents of the mosque did not obtain any significant increase in the vote they had obtained in earlier elections.

These election results indicate that whatever the level of unease about the building of a mosque and the presence of an increasing number of Muslims in Bendigo, it was not of sufficient strength to translate into even 3% of the vote for a single issue anti-Islam party or prominent local anti-mosque campaigner.
The 2016 Local Council election

The October 2016 Victorian local Council election provides evidence of an election in which there was greater potential for a local issue to gain prominence than in the federal and state elections. Mosque opponents had warned of a day of reckoning when they would get the chance to deliver the verdict to Bendigo citizens.

Council election results need, however, to be examined with care, as the interviews conducted for this project indicate that some who voted did not know the candidates or the issues on which they stood, while others had no interest in the Council election and only voted to avoid being fined.

Further, no candidate campaigned on a single issue, unlike the Rise Up Australia candidates in the state and federal elections. Votes were determined by a range of issues; a vote for a candidate known to oppose the mosque did not necessarily indicate agreement with the candidate’s opposition, it could also indicate the person’s record on other issues or their accessibility to the community.

It is the view held by several people consulted for this project that the anti-mosque candidates did not do well. This view seems to be supported by the election outcome, as both Councillors who voted against approval – Elise Chapman and Helen Leach – lost their seats. At first impression this evidence supports the view that those against the mosque were a small but vocal minority, too small to ensure election of preferred candidates even in Council elections. Closer examination of voting patterns indicates a more complicated picture.

Peter Cox, the mayor during the height of controversy, a strong public defender of the approval process, the rights of the Muslim community and of multiculturalism, lost his seat.

There were more candidates in 2016 than in the previous 2012 local government election – 32, compared to 21 – so the number of first preference votes gained by candidates was necessarily lower in 2016 as it was distributed among a significantly larger number. The number of votes that Cox received fell from 6,863 to 2,856; he received only 42% of his previous level of support. Nonetheless, he still gained the fourth largest number of votes in the election (with nine candidates elected), and he lost his Council seat because of the flow of preference.

A further significant loss was that of Councillor Mark Weragoda. Weragoda was the one Councillor identified as of non-Anglo-Australian background, and he had been targeted by anti-mosque protestors, it seems for no other reason than his ethnicity. Black balloons had been tied to his property, he received a death threat that was treated by the police as sufficiently serious to warrant an arrest and prosecution, and when he spoke at the June 2014 Council meeting protestors sought to drown-out his voice by playing Middle-Eastern music. Weragoda’s vote slumped from 2,667 to 957 (36% of the previous vote). Of the ten candidates for the Eppalock Ward (with three places on Council) he came ninth, having obtained the second lowest vote. Clearly there was no sympathy vote to ensure that the one Council member
targeted for his non-Anglo Australian background retained his position. Some of this loss of votes, however, may have resulted from his conviction on a drink driving charge which produced negative reporting in the local media and the requirement for him to stand down for one month from his Council position.

The candidate who led opposition to the mosque on the Council, Elise Chapman, won a substantial vote (2,753), the second highest vote of the twelve candidates for Lockwood ward and the seventh highest vote of the 32 candidates who stood for election across the three wards. Her vote was only 100 votes less than that of the previous mayor, Peter Cox. She gained 79% of the vote that she won at the 2012 election, and as with Councillor Cox her defeat was the result of preference flows. In terms of first preference votes, she obtained close to 900 more first preference votes than the last candidate who won a seat on the council.

Julie Hoskin, who led the legal challenge to the mosque through the appeal courts, gained election to the Council with 2,528 votes, although it was 225 fewer than Chapman. Thus one of the leading anti-mosque campaigners gained election.

Table 14: Bendigo Local Council Election 2016, selected candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>First preference vote 2016 (% of 2012 vote)</th>
<th>First preference vote 2012</th>
<th>Elected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FYFFE, Rod</td>
<td>5815 (80%)</td>
<td>7300</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLACK, George</td>
<td>3515</td>
<td>3683</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’ROURKE, Margaret</td>
<td>3159</td>
<td>3683</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COX, Peter</td>
<td>2856 (42%)</td>
<td>6863</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METCALF, Andrea</td>
<td>2851</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRIGHTLESWORTH, Yvonne</td>
<td>2827</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPMAN, Elise</td>
<td>2753 (79%)</td>
<td>3465</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAMS, James Alan</td>
<td>2688</td>
<td>3941</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMOND, Matt</td>
<td>2589</td>
<td>3683</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOSKIN, Julie</td>
<td>2528</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINCE, Thomas</td>
<td>2516</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GREGSON, Wayne John</td>
<td>2198</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOLDSMITH, Michelle</td>
<td>2091</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LYONS, Barry</td>
<td>2071</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARRINGTON, Colin</td>
<td>2070</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALDEN, Jennifer</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAWKE, Susie</td>
<td>1717</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEACH, Helen</td>
<td>1696 (72%)</td>
<td>2343</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WERAGODA, Mark</td>
<td>957 (36%)</td>
<td>2667</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Surveys

As has been noted, there was no, scientific or probability based survey conducted in Bendigo to determine attitudes to the building of the mosque. Such a survey requires a random process to ensure that a representative sample of the population is obtained. Indication of public opinion in Bendigo on a range of other issues was, however, obtained by other surveys, that comprised two probability based and two non-probability based, further insight was provided by national surveys conducted by the Scanlon Foundation and commercial survey agencies.

General Indicators of Wellbeing – the 2007, 2011 and 2015 VicHealth surveys

A probability-based survey with a random sample of respondents contacted by telephone (both mobile and landline) was conducted by VicHealth in 2007, 2011 and 2015 in each of Victoria’s Local Government Areas. The target was 300 respondents in each LGA, and in 2015 the total achieved sample was 22,819. With a sample of 300 the maximum margin of error is calculated at the 95% confidence level to be plus/minus 6%.

The 2015 survey found that levels of wellbeing in Bendigo were similar to other Victorian LGAs. The average wellbeing score for Bendigo was 77.8 out of 100, marginally above the Victorian average of 77.3. No significant change was recorded in results obtained in Bendigo between the 2007, 2011 and 2015 surveys.

When asked to rate their life satisfaction on a scale from 0 to 10, residents of Bendigo reported an average score of 7.9, almost the same as the Victorian average of 7.8.

The proportion of Bendigo residents who agreed that people in their neighbourhood are willing to help each other was 76.6%, again marginally higher than the Victorian finding of 74.1%. Agreement that people in their neighbourhood could be trusted was again at a higher level in Bendigo (76.1%) than the average for Victoria (71.9%).

The VicHealth survey is important in providing findings that rank Bendigo at a similar or marginally higher positive level than the average for Victoria: it does not indicate a community in which levels of wellbeing, life satisfaction, and trust in fellow residents are at a relatively low level, or have significantly declined.

Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2016 – Greater Bendigo City Council

Local Government Victoria has conducted an annual community satisfaction survey with a focus on five key performance areas since 2011. The Greater Bendigo City Council has participated in the surveys. The 2016 survey was conducted in February-March and employed a random sample of residents contacted by telephone (mobile and landline), with a sample size of 400 which yields a maximum margin of error at the 95% confidence level of plus/minus 5%. As this survey makes possible the tracking of opinion prior to and over the course of the mosque controversy, with surveys conducted in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016.
Between 2012 and 2014 there was no decline in the satisfaction rating of the Bendigo Council. The perception of ‘overall Council direction’ was more positive in 2014 than 2013. The survey was conducted in February-March 2014, before the approval of the town planning application in June. The 2015 and 2016 surveys recorded a decline in approval. ‘Overall’ perception of ‘Council direction’ fell sharply in both 2015 and 2016, and in 2016 it was substantially below the average for Victorian regional centres. Between 2015 and 2016 there was also substantial decline in the indicator of ‘overall performance’ and ‘advocacy ... on behalf of the community,’ with the 2016 level marginally below that for regional centres. Satisfaction with ‘community consultation’ fell between 2014 and 2015.

The Local Government Community Satisfaction survey, narrowly focused on Council performance (unlike the VicHealth focus on general wellbeing), thus registers a negative shift in the perception of Council performance, with the sharpest differentiation between Bendigo and Victorian regional centres in response to a question on ‘overall Council direction.’

Table 15: Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey 2016 – Greater Bendigo City Council, 2012-2016, percentage, shifts in opinion highlighted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall performance</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community consultation</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy – lobbying on behalf of the community</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making decisions in the interest of the community</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Council direction</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Greater Bendigo Wellbeing Survey 2015

The Greater Bendigo Wellbeing Survey was conducted in October 2015, at the high point of public protest (August-October 2015). The survey employed a comprehensive range of questions, both substantive and demographic. A total of 2,090 surveys were completed and it was the third in a series, with the first survey in 2011 with 1,544 completions, and the second in 2014 with 2,174. Comparison across the surveys is made difficult, however, as a number of questions were changed between surveys and because of the methodology employed.

The Bendigo Wellbeing Survey was a non-scientific, opt in survey, designed by Bendigo Council staff, and the data file is unweighted. In 2015, 3,000 households were randomly selected from the list of ratepayers to complete a hard copy of the survey, but the completions which were obtained from this sample were not separately coded to enable disaggregation of this random component. Most of the completions were obtained by open access to the survey, promoted to the general community through newspaper advertising and articles in the local print media,
the *Bendigo Advertiser*, *Bendigo Weekly* and *The McIvor Times*, and on Facebook. In addition, 10,000 postcards were distributed in public places, such as post offices and libraries, and by direct delivery to homes (Information provided by COGB).

Almost two-thirds (68%) of completions were online (on the Survey Monkey platform), one third (32%) completed in the hard copy version and returned by mail. It is not possible to calculate the proportion of surveys completed as a proportion of total invitations to complete, which would enable a partial assessment of survey reliability as the lower the participant rate the higher the risk of an unrepresentative sample.

It is possible, however, to obtain some indication of the reliability of the achieved sample using several indicators, particularly comparison of response patterns to identically or similarly worded questions in the Bendigo survey and the random sample employed by the Scanlon Foundation’s national surveys. It is important to undertake this exercise as this Bendigo survey has the potential to provide key insights into local opinion on a broad range of issues at the height of public protest and controversy.

One limitation, however, of such a comparison of the survey findings is difference in mode of administration; the Scanlon Foundation survey was interviewer administered while the Bendigo survey was self-administered, a mode of surveying that produces a higher proportion of mid-level (neither agree nor disagree) responses, although comparable levels are expected at the extremes (strong opinion either positive or negative). As a consequence, this analysis focuses on the proportion indicating a strong positive or strong negative response.

Questions on level of personal satisfaction and national identification which were asked in identical terms in the 2015 Bendigo and Scanlon Foundation national survey find similar patterns of response. When asked to indicate level of happiness over the last year (‘Taking all things into consideration would you say that over the last year you have been happy or unhappy …’), 26% of Bendigo respondents indicated that they had been ‘very happy,’ 28% in the Scanlon survey; 10% in the Bendigo survey and 8% in the Scanlon Foundation indicated that they had been ‘very unhappy.’

A similar pattern of consistency in response was obtained in response to a question which asked ‘To what extent do you take pride in the Australian way of life and culture?’ This question has been found to obtain a high level of strong positive response, with 55% obtained in the 2015 Scanlon Foundation survey, almost the same proportion, 58%, in the Bendigo survey, a marginal difference to be expected as a higher proportion of Bendigo residents are Australia-born than in the total Australian population; 5% of Bendigo residents indicated pride ‘only slightly’ or ‘not at all,’ 9% in the Scanlon Foundation survey.

A second approach to assessing the reliability of the Bendigo survey considers indication of political activism, an issue that was dealt with in several questions. If the survey had attracted a disproportionate number of activists in support or opposed to the mosque, it would have obtained a disproportionate number indicating activism. Benchmarked against the Scanlon
Foundation surveys, there is only marginally higher level of political activism indicated by Bendigo respondents, a direction of difference to be expected given the extent of political controversy as a consequence of the mosque issue in Bendigo. When asked if they had joined a protest, march or demonstration over the last twelve months, 17% of Bendigo residents indicated that they had, compared with 15% of Scanlon Foundation respondents. When asked if they had signed a petition in the last twelve months, 58% of Bendigo residents and 52% in the Scanlon Foundation survey indicated that they had.

The Bendigo survey also employed a broader definition of activism not included in the Scanlon Foundation survey. At this general level, some form of political participation was indicated by slightly more than one one-third of the participants; 36% had attended a community meeting, public hearing or discussion, and 35% had participated in an online discussion about political or local community issue. Importantly, however, this was still close to one-third of respondents, further indication that survey completion was not limited to activists for and/or against the mosque.

A third indication of reliability is provided by consideration of the extent of skew in the Bendigo survey. If it had been disproportionately completed by one segment of the Bendigo population the data would be skewed to favour a particular perspective. For example, if supporters of the mosque had been disproportionately represented in the survey, a high proportion indicating a favourable view of the Council’s actions would be indicated. Contrary to such expectation, the perspective of a substantial proportion of respondents was negative in assessment of the Council, as indicated in the following discussion. On the other hand, if the respondents were skewed in favour of opponents of the mosque, a relatively large proportion indicating a negative view of cultural diversity and multiculturalism would be expected. While the survey does find that a substantial minority is negative, the proportion is in large part consistent with Scanlon Foundation national findings.

The conclusion from these assessments of the representative character of the survey is that it provides a reasonable indication of Bendigo opinion on a broad range of questions at the height of public protest.

The substantive finding, consistent with the Victorian Local Government Community Satisfaction survey, is that there was a high level of negative opinion on the way the Bendigo Council dealt with the mosque issue, but also a high level of agreement that all ethnic and religious groups deserved to be accorded full equality. There is evidence of strong negative sentiment on immigration and multiculturalism, but such views are held by a minority, similar to the proportions indicated by the Scanlon Foundation national surveys.

With regard to local issues, questions asked in general terms found that a substantial minority held negative views, a larger proportion positive. In response to the proposition that ‘I am able to have a real say on issues that are important to me in my local area,’ 16% strongly disagree,
17% disagree, (a total of 33%), while 50% are in agreement. In contrast, the same question in the 2015 Scanlon Foundation national survey found disagreement at 23%, agreement at 70%. In the national survey, just 5% indicated ‘strong disagreement’, compared to the 16% in Bendigo.

Questions which specified Bendigo local government found the majority endorsing a negative assessment. In response to the proposition that ‘Greater Bendigo City Council provides adequate opportunities for all residents to be involved in local planning issues and decisions,’ 22% ‘strongly disagree,’ 17% disagree, a total of 39%; a large proportion opt for a middle ground response, with 25% indicating that they neither agree nor disagree, and 9% that they do not know, a total of 34%; the smallest proportion, one-in-four respondents (26%), indicate agreement that they have adequate opportunities to be involved.

A more direct approach, which asked respondents ‘As a citizen of Greater Bendigo, how would you describe your ability to influence local government decision making?’, provided four response options, without a middle ground; it found that just 11% of respondents indicated that they had a ‘great’ or ‘moderate influence,’ 24% ‘a little influence’, and a very large proportion, 56%, indicating ‘no influence’ (Table 16).

Table 16: ‘As a citizen of Greater Bendigo, how would you describe your ability to influence local government decision making?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BENDIGO 2015</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Great influence’</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Moderate influence’</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘A little influence’</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No influence</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/ Decline</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bendigo Council data file

The Bendigo survey included a number of questions on attitudes to immigration, multiculturalism, and cultural diversity. The finding is that a majority indicate a positive attitude, while the minority who indicate negative response is similar to that obtained in the Scanlon Foundation national survey.

In response to the proposition that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Bendigo stronger,’ 26% disagree, compared to the same proportion (26%) in a similarly worded question in the Scanlon Foundation national survey, although a higher proportion indicate strong disagreement (14%, 9%). 42% of Bendigo respondents indicated agreement, with a relatively high proportion in the middle ground, likely the result of the different mode (self-completion, interviewer administered) of surveying.
Table 17: ‘Accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Bendigo/ Australia stronger’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BENDIGO 2015</th>
<th>SCANLON 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree/ disagree</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/ Decline</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bendigo Council data file; Scanlon Foundation 2015

In response to the proposition that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Bendigo, 20% disagree, a higher proportion than in the national survey (11%), although only one-in five respondents; again, a higher proportion indicate ‘strong disagreement’ (12%, 4%) (Table 18).

Table 18: ‘Multiculturalism has been good for Bendigo/ Australia’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BENDIGO 2015</th>
<th>SCANLON 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree/ disagree</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/ Decline</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bendigo Council data file; Scanlon Foundation 2015

Several additional questions on immigration and ethnic diversity, not included in the Scanlon Foundation surveys, were included in the Bendigo survey. Two of the questions find level of negative sentiment indicated by close to one-in-four respondents.

Thus 20% of respondents disagreed with the proposition that ‘Greater Bendigo City Council needs to be a leader in setting an example for fostering and celebrating cultural diversity,’ 44% indicated agreement. A second question obtained almost an identical pattern of response: 19% disagreed with the proposition that ‘I prefer to live in a community that attracts and welcomes people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds,’ 44% indicated agreement.

When presented with the proposition that ‘it is important to me that people from other racial, ethnic or religious groups are treated fairly,’ the proportion indicating disagreement fell to 7%,
while those in agreement increased to 69%; the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ response was 12%, and 12% ‘did not know’ or ‘declined’ to answer.

**The Australia@2015 survey**

Further evidence on public opinion in Bendigo is available in the Scanlon Foundation’s Australia@2015 survey. The survey was completed by 10,548 respondents, including 1,267 whose postcodes indicate that they live in the Bendigo region. It was promoted by the Bendigo based partners of this project, staff at the City of Bendigo Council and the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services.

Australia@2015 was a self-completion survey available online to local residents between September 2015 and February 2016. It was an opt-in survey, not a random sample, so in the following discussion it is not used to gauge the balance of opinion in Bendigo, but to establish the pattern of opinion and concern within subgroups of the population defined by political alignment. Sub-group analysis is less open to sampling error as it is concerned with self-defined groups, it does not seek to establish the balance of opinion across a population.

The survey is of particular interest for the insight it provides into the outlook of those more likely to be opponents of the mosque, those who indicated that they were disenchanted with politics and identified as supporters of minor political groupings or independent candidates. The Scanlon Foundation national surveys, and other surveys, indicate that this sub-group is characterised by relatively low level of acceptance of immigration, ethnic and religious diversity. (See discussion of One Nation voters in Markus 2017, pp, 81-87).

At the 2016 federal election, 9% of Bendigo voters supported a minor party or independent; this is close to the proportion of those indicating support for a minor party or independent candidate among Bendigo respondents in the Australia@2015 survey, which was 10% (127 survey completions). In addition, there were sufficient number of Bendigo respondents to enable analysis of the attitudes of supporters of the major parties: 269 surveys were completed by Liberal/National voters, 267 Labor, 263 Greens. A substantial number of respondents (298) did not indicate their party preference, so they are not included in the following analysis.

Reflecting the impact of the protests directed against building of the mosque, when Bendigo respondents were asked what they least like about Australia, a high proportion of the supporters of the main parties indicated concern about racism and discrimination as their first choice. This was highest among those indicating that they supported Greens or Labor. In contrast, among supporters of a minor party or independent candidate, the first ranked issue was ‘too many immigrants;’ the second ranked issue was ‘too much corruption,’ a view expressed by several people interviewed for this project in the context of the Council approval of the town planning application (Table 19).
Table 19: ‘And which three things about Australia do you least like? Please choose the one you like the least.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP THREE ISSUES</th>
<th>Greens</th>
<th>Labor</th>
<th>Liberal/National</th>
<th>Independents/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are too many immigrants</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism/discrimination against immigrants</td>
<td>[#1] 58%</td>
<td>[#1] 43%</td>
<td>[#1] 25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High cost of living/ cost of housing</td>
<td>[#2] 13%</td>
<td>[#2] 16%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High unemployment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate public transport</td>
<td>[#3] 5%</td>
<td></td>
<td>[3] 11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes are too high</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[2] 12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are too many immigrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>#3 10%</td>
<td>[1] 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is corruption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[2] 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australia@2015 survey, Bendigo residents

A characteristic of those who indicate support for a minor party or independent candidate is a heightened negative view of their life circumstance, a stronger sense that their local area is getting worse, and a much stronger negative view of immigration, multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. Indicators of heightened negativity are

- Dissatisfaction with present financial circumstances: 30% minor party or independent, 17%-22% Liberal-National, Labor and Greens.
- Sense of disempowerment, indicated by disagreement with the proposition that ‘I am able to have a real say on issues that are important to me in my local area’: 40% minor party or independent, 9%-17% Liberal-National, Labor and Greens.
- Sense that life in local areas is becoming worse: 46% minor party or independent, 16%-20% Liberal-National, Labor and Greens.
- Disagreement with the proposition that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’: 47% minor party or independent, 15% Liberal-National, 6% Labor, 2% Greens.
- Disagreement with the proposition that ‘A society that has a variety of ethnic and cultural groups is better able to tackle new problems’: 43% minor party or independent, 15% Liberal-National, 5% Labor, 2% Greens.

Some issues concerned with ethnic, religious and cultural diversity also find a relatively high level of negative response among those who indicate that they are Coalition voters, in addition to minor party or independent voters. The issue of integration of immigrants was asked in terms of the proposition ‘Immigrants should change their behavior to be more like Australians’: 76% of supporters of a minor party or independent were in agreement, a majority (54%) of Coalition voters, compared to 34% Labor and 21% Greens.
### Table 20: Selected questions, Australia@2015 survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Greens</th>
<th>Labor</th>
<th>Liberal/National</th>
<th>Minor party/Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your present financial situation?’ – ‘strongly dissatisfied’ or ‘dissatisfied’</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I am able to have a real say on issues that are important to me in my local area’ – ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Would you say that living in your local areas is becoming better or worse …?’ – ‘much worse or ‘worse’</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Multiculturalism has been good for Australia’ – ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘A society that has a variety of ethnic and cultural groups is better able to tackle new problems’ – ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It is best for Australia if all people forget their different ethnic and cultural backgrounds as possible’ – ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘People who come to Australia should change their behaviour to be more like Australians’ – ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australia@2015 survey, Bendigo residents
Attitudes to Muslim Australians

One element lacking in the survey findings discussed above concerns attitude to Muslims within mainstream Australian society. There is no known survey conducted in Bendigo that included questions on attitudes towards Muslims. Evidence is, however, available in a number of national surveys that may be projected to provide indication of Bendigo opinion, given that similar questions employed in Bendigo and national surveys establish that there is a large degree of commonality in opinion, with marginally higher level of negativity in Bendigo.

Seven Scanlon Foundation surveys (2010-12, 2014-17) have asked questions on attitudes to three faith groups: Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim. Over the course of the seven surveys, there has been consistency in response. Negative opinion towards Christians and Buddhists has been in the range of 4% to 5%, but towards Muslims some five times higher, in the range 22% to 25%. The proportion indicating negative (‘very negative’ or ‘somewhat negative’) over the surveys has been 24%, 25%, 24%, 25%, 22%, 25%, 25%.

In self-completions surveys, however, the proportion indicating negative views of Muslims is higher.

The use of interviewers in telephone surveying has the potential to lead to what is known as ‘social desirability bias’ (SDB). SDB refers to the tendency of respondents to give answers they believe are more socially desirable, rather than responses that reflect their true opinions. This form of bias is of particular importance in questions that deal with socially sensitive or controversial issues, such as attitudes to Muslims. An online questionnaire completed in privacy on a computer, or an anonymous printed questionnaire returned by mail, can provide conditions under which a respondent feels greater freedom to disclose opinions on sensitive topics.

The proportion indicating negative sentiment towards Muslims has been close to 40% in self-completion surveys conducted by the Scanlon Foundation in 2014 and 2017 (Markus 2014, p. 50; Markus 2017, p. 58). This finding is supported in other surveying discussed below. Level of negative sentiment towards Muslims among minor party and independent supporters is even higher, at 64% in the 2017 Scanlon Foundation self-completion survey.

Other research findings on attitudes to Muslims

A number of surveys conducted by commercial polling agencies have found negative opinion towards Muslims to be at or above 40%.

In a much publicised survey conducted in September 2016, Essential Report, which employs an online non-probability panel, asked: ‘Would you support or oppose a ban on Muslim immigration to Australia?’ It found support at 49% (21 September 2016). The following month, October 2016, Essential Report asked: ‘Are you concerned about the number of Muslim people
In response to this general question, a majority of 53% indicated that they were concerned, 42% were not concerned (11 October 2016).

In February 2017 in the context of President Trump’s ban on entry into the United States from specific Muslim countries, the Essential Report asked: ‘Would you support or oppose the Australian Government instituting a similar ban on people from Muslim countries from entering Australia?’ Support for such a ban was at 41%, opposition at 46%, while 14% of respondents did not know; it was at 66% among minor party supporters, 48% Liberal/National, 31% Labor, and 15% Greens (7 February 2017).

A Newspoll survey for The Australian, conducted using a mixed interviewer administered and self-completion methodology, found support for a ban similar to that adopted by President Trump to be at 44%.

A telephone administered ReachTel poll in August 2017 found that 44% of respondents ‘strongly’ supported a ban on the burka in public places while a further 13% agreed with such a ban, a total of 56% (The Australian, 25 August 2017).

**Calibrating the level of concern**

A number of self-completion surveys find level of general concern over the presence of Muslims is in the range 40%-50%, although this does not translate into a high level of support for single issue anti-Muslim campaigns, as evidenced by election results.

Analysis of a range of questions which have been posed in Scanlon Foundation surveys indicate that ‘strong negative’ views on immigration, ethnic and cultural diversity are held by 11%-13% of respondents, ‘strong positive’ by 15%-21%, while those in the middle ground indicating a second level or a neutral response which is by far the largest proportion, in the range of 64%-69%.

The key to understanding levels of concern is the way that the middle ground shifts on specific issues (Tables 21, 22). On an issue such as the benefit to Australia of the policy of multiculturalism, a majority in the middle ground tend to a positive position. But on attitudes to Muslims, a higher proportion in the middle ground tends negative, based on issues of concern discussed in the second section of this report. This distribution in attitudes is presented in the following table.

**Table 21: ‘Multiculturalism has been good for Australia?’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly negative</th>
<th>Middle – tending negative</th>
<th>Middle – tending positive</th>
<th>Strongly positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%-20%</td>
<td>30%-40%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 22: ‘Is your personal attitude positive, negative or neutral towards Muslims?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly negative</th>
<th>Middle – tending negative</th>
<th>Middle – tending positive</th>
<th>Strongly positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>30%-45%</td>
<td>20%-30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regional/ remote Australia

A final factor to be considered is that the above findings are the average for Australia; in a regional centre such as Bendigo, survey findings indicate that negative and tending negative opinion is likely to comprise a larger proportion of the population, a finding also evidenced by comparisons between Bendigo and national opinion in an earlier section of this chapter.

An Ethnic and Cultural Tolerance Scale developed on the basis of the Scanlon Foundation’s Australia@2015 survey, found that negative opinion was higher by 7% percentage points in an inner regional centre such as Bendigo, with considerably higher negative opinion in outer regional areas.

Table 23: Au@2015 survey, Ethnic and Cultural Tolerance Scale, low score by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major city</th>
<th>Inner regional</th>
<th>Outer regional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

There is no consensus among Bendigo residents interviewed for this project – nor indeed within the wider public – in their assessment of balance of public opinion on the building of a mosque in their city. A journalist has commented that ‘no one has commissioned a credible poll in Bendigo to see what the community thinks about the mosque, so each side of the debate claims to have public opinion on its side.’

A review of quantitative evidence in large part resolves the uncertainty.

Federal and state election result indicate that whatever the level of unease about the building of a mosque and the presence of an increasing number of Muslims in Bendigo, it is not of sufficient strength to translate into even 3% of the vote for a single issue anti-Islam party or prominent local anti-mosque campaigner.

In local government elections, however, there is greater potential for anti-mosque campaigners to gain support. In the 2016 Bendigo Council election those identified as anti-mosque campaigners did relatively well. The Councillor who led opposition to the mosque on the Council, Elise Chapman, lost her seat after allocation of preferences, but won a substantial vote (2,753), the second highest vote of the twelve candidates in her ward and the seventh highest.
vote of the 32 candidates who stood for election across the three wards. Her vote was only 100 votes less than that of the previous mayor, Peter Cox, who was defeated at the election after obtaining less than half the vote he had obtained in 2012. Julie Hoskin, who led the legal challenge to the mosque through the appeal courts, gained election to the Council.

Additional insight is provided by surveys of public opinion. The 2015 VicHealth General Indicators of Wellbeing ranks Bendigo at a similar or marginally higher positive level than the Victorian average; it does not indicate a community in which levels of wellbeing, life satisfaction, and trust in fellow residents are at a relatively low level.

But there are several surveys that find a relatively high level of dissatisfaction with the performance of the Bendigo Council.

The Local Government Community Satisfaction Survey, conducted annually since 2011, found a negative shift in 2015 in assessment of the Bendigo Council. Thus positive assessment of ‘overall Council direction,’ fell from 58% in 2014 to 44% in 2016, a level that is considerably below the average (51%) for regional centres.

The Greater Bendigo Wellbeing Survey 2015 found that when asked ‘As a citizen of Greater Bendigo, how would you describe your ability to influence local government decision making?’, just 11% of respondents indicated that they had a ‘great’ or ‘moderate’ influence, 24% ‘a little influence’, and a clear majority, 56%, ‘no influence’.

When asked for their views on immigration, multiculturalism, and cultural diversity, a majority of Bendigo residents indicate a positive attitude, although a substantial minority – close to one-in-four, or 25% of respondents – are negative. With regard to attitude to multiculturalism, this minority at 20% is almost double the level (11%) obtained in the 2015 Scanlon Foundation national survey.

The Australia@2015 survey provides insight into attitudes within the segment of the population, close 10% of the total, who support independent or minor party candidates and are more likely to be opposed to the mosque than supporters of the major parties. The distinctive characteristic of such voters is a heightened negative view of their life circumstances, a stronger sense that their local area is getting worse, and a much stronger negative view of immigration, multiculturalism and ethnic diversity.

When consideration is narrowed to attitudes to Muslims, Scanlon Foundation and other national surveys find that while 15% are ‘strongly’ negative, a substantial proportion of the middle ground – in the range 30%-45% - tend negative. For example, an October 2016 Essential Report asked: ‘Are you concerned about the number of Muslim people in Australia?’; 53% indicated that they were concerned, 42% were not concerned. On the basis of survey evidence it is likely that among Bendigo residents close to half the population have negative views or concerns over the prospect of an increase in the Muslim population. Survey findings support a
key argument presented in the final section of this report relating to the failure to recognise the extent of concern and adoption of an effective communication strategy.
5 THE HANDLING OF THE MOSQUE ISSUE, AN EVALUATION

There were positives in Bendigo community responses to the anti-mosque campaign, including the affirmation of multiculturalism and freedom of worship – and condemnation of racism and bigotry. Leaders in government and the business community were unambiguous in their support of the Muslim community. Seven of the nine Council members were determined to uphold the requirements of planning regulations and not give in to threats. Further, they continued their advocacy and support of Bendigo as an inclusive multi-ethnic and multi-faith community. The period of protests saw the establishment of an active Believe in Bendigo group, public events to celebrate diversity, and the formation of a supporting interfaith coalition. Councillors and community leaders upheld the law and chose to make a moral stand, for which they deserve respect and honour in the nation’s history.

But the argument presented in this report is that the handling of the application process, including consultation with community members and explanation of the issues involved in assessing applications, was not optimally handled by the Bendigo Council and council staff, and by state and federal political leaders and their instrumentalities.

This is not to say that it was an easy matter to develop a more effective response – rather, the analysis merely highlights that there were deficiencies. A more effective communication and consultative strategy was not beyond the realm of possibility given the length of time – more than eighteen months – between the stirring of protest and the first major public demonstration.

Local councils and other organisations in regional Australia with historic and currently low levels of cultural diversity have little experience or expertise in the handling of controversial issues within multicultural contexts – and in dealing with ongoing campaigns involving harassment and vilification of staff. Further, the contribution of the state government and its agencies, and local political representatives, did not contribute to the calming local tensions.

As a result, it was difficult to assess risk and determine best practice solutions. In assessing risk, council looked to mosque planning processes in other Victorian regional centres, and to contested planning issues that had occurred in recent years in Bendigo. They failed readily to identify some very different circumstances that were developing in Bendigo in the context of anti-mosque protest.

Much has been learned since 2015 and a world-class Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Plan has been developed. Additional multicultural and social cohesion support structures are now available. There remains, however, the potential for the revival of major protest activity once the construction of the mosque begins and sporadic small-scale demonstrations have been reported. The construction phase is a time of potential risk, as it is difficult to provide 24-hour protection for the building site – and any attack on the building would garner media attention, which would be the objective of such action and would embolden further attacks. Tensions
and opposition are in abeyance, but they have not been effectively neutralised; there is no evidence that those opposed have been convinced of the error of their arguments.

Central to evaluating the response by local and state government to the mosque controversy is consideration of why opposition reached a high level in Bendigo, but not in other localities where mosques were planned and constructed.

Dr Julie Rudner addressed this issue in the final section ('Analysis of events: why Bendigo?') of her report for the Victorian Multicultural Commission, but her argument remains inconclusive, in large part comprising a discussion of general factors. She writes:

Events in Bendigo distilled international and national debates about migration, terrorism, economy and security. Both anti-mosque and/or anti-Islam and pro-mosque / pro-diversity groups rallied around identity and community values, but their understandings conflicted. This was evident in their articulation of human rights, democracy and calls for political leadership. Strong social networks, dissemination of information, communication and physical presence were essential to stakeholder engagement with these issues, but they also contributed to vast gulfs between lifeworlds. The nature of the debate and the events, while reflective of a healthy democracy, also supported community polarisation and a need for the city and its people to identify pathways for moving forward. (Rudner 2017, p. 88)

In recent years, the capacity to mobilise public opposition has been significantly increased by the development of social media and platforms such as Facebook. Social media enhances the capacity to articulate concerns, to link like-minded people across local, state, and international boundaries, to develop strategy, to create audiences for charismatic leaders, to recruit supporters, and fundraise.

Social media raises levels of risk but is a constant across regions. Its development does not in itself explain the relative levels of opposition in Bendigo and in other localities in which mosques were planned, although it did greatly facilitate the capacity of Bendigo opposition groups to mobilise opposition locally and gain national and international support – and foster a sense of mission and camaraderie.

The interpretation presented here identifies four distinctive features which, acting in conjunction, serve to explain the heightened level of protest in Bendigo, when compared to the lack of protest in other regional centres in which mosques were built.

1. One distinctive aspect of the Bendigo mosque project was its ambition. It was seen to be a major construction, a perspective entrenched in public consciousness by artist drawings made publicly available with the initial application. These ambitious plans worked in favour of opponents who sought to raise concern – they were frequently reproduced, on Facebook, in the local and national media.
The bedrock of rumours was the supposed size of the mosque – that it would accommodate 2,000 worshippers, that it would be the largest mosque in the southern hemisphere. Perceptions of size may have been influenced by the construction in Bendigo of the Buddhist Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, which was claimed to be the largest Stupa in the western world with a capacity for 2,000 people.

In addition, there were unanswered questions in the application that opponents exploited. There was a failure to explain the source of funding. A building of such size was apparently beyond the capacity of the small local Muslim community and the role and involvement of the Australian Islamic Mission lacked clarity. The local Muslim community was unable to provide leaders capable of assuming a public role and respond to questions.

2. A second distinctive factor in Bendigo was the strength of local leadership opposed to the construction. There was early action to establish a Stop The Mosque Facebook page; those opposed were represented by two Councillors on the Bendigo Council, one of whom developed a significant public profile and harboured political ambitions. Other activists were willing to lead legal challenges through the appeal courts, at a personal and financial risk.

3. In the crucial early months following the lodging of the town planning application, in particular the weeks leading to its consideration by Council, there was the failure to develop an approach that would provide for community consultation. Given the vehemence of opposition, it was decided to end consultation and mediation. This decision served to magnify rather than ameliorate opposition. It provided an additional issue of significance utilised by opponents to marshal opposition. The difficulties of consultation and mediation that developed in the heated local atmosphere, encouraged and supported by outside organisations and individuals, are not to be minimised. But this critique highlights the lack of ongoing attempts at creative approaches, possibly guided by professional consultants, to provide opportunity for concerns to be voiced and discussed. The outcome was that Council itself became a target, depicted as part of a conspiracy to subvert democratic participation.

4. A key moment in the history of the controversy, the rejection of the appeal by VCAT, coincided with a development of far-right politics in Australia when a newly established splinter group with its base in Melbourne, the United Patriots Front, was seeking a cause that would provide them with public profile. Their staging of a major public demonstration and its success in attracting national and international media coverage emboldened their further involvement.
The following discussion presents an evaluation of the handling of the mosque controversy, with particular reference to the Council and the state government. This discussion highlights issues for consideration for future response strategies to racist campaigns targeting minorities.

**Effective communication**

The principles of effective communication are clearly articulated in guidelines developed by practitioners in government and other organisations, and in the academic literature on communications. There are specific principles outlined by United Kingdom authorities, who have long experienced racial conflict and in recent years mass casualty terrorist incidents.

Alex Aiken is a leading British communication strategist. Since 2012 Aiken has served as the Executive Director for Government Communications and has had responsibility for developing the Government Communications Service. Prior to his appointment as Executive Director, he was the Director of Communications and Strategy for Westminster City Council in which position he formulated key requirements for local authorities to connect with residents. These include understanding of the communities that they serve, consistent messaging to reinforce key themes, the involvement of individuals who hold positions of respect and influence, and priority accorded to ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of their communication strategy.

- Communication should build advocates. Identifying people who support your cause should be a primary goal of any communications campaign, and utilising them to support your drive to enhance reputation is essential.
- [Local authorities] need to understand how their reputation really stands in the community ... Their reputation is the sum of opinions that people assess from their actions. Understanding this, through research and engagement, is critical to communication.
- [Authorities] need to evaluate their communications. Too much money is spent on leaflets, posters and websites, and too little on research and evaluation. Working out what works has to be integral to a good communications strategy. Westminster’s campaign research informs everything we do, and allows us to make incremental improvements that increase mail open rates, publications read and media hits – all improving the effectiveness of communications, and enhancing reputation. (Aiken 2011)

**Trust and credibility**

A leading text on principles of communication stresses that the starting point in communication is the messenger: ‘The credibility of the message is inextricably linked with the credibility of the messenger’ (Eunson 2016, p. 437). The 2018/19 British Government Communication Plan places emphasis on ‘two-way communications,’ ‘active listening’ as the basis of trust; understanding the community, consideration of ‘audiences by personality as well as
demographic,’ ‘challenging declining trust in institutions through honest, relevant and responsive campaigns.’

**Simplicity, consistency and repetition**

Scott Edinger, a leading American communications consultant, writing in *Forbes* magazine (20 March 2013) quotes the dictum that the key to effective communication of high priority messages is ‘simplicity, consistency, and repetition.’ The need for repetition is discussed in the literature in terms of ‘effective frequency’ – the number of times messages need to be repeated before they have impact. There is no consensus on the optimum repetition rate, but the ‘Rule of 7,’ repetition seven times, is often quoted. While there is no agreed number of times a message should be repeated, there is agreement that repetition makes for greater effectiveness.

**Rapid response capability**

The British government’s Communication Plan for the current year (2018/2019) requires government organisations to develop ‘a rapid response social media capability to deal quickly with disinformation and reclaim a fact-based public debate’ (HM Government 2018). The UK *Guidance for local authorities on how to mainstream community cohesion* states that ‘a key role for every local authority is providing accurate information ... and tackling any divisive myths and rumours in ways that do not talk down to residents.’ Experience has taught United Kingdom authorities that ‘the sudden emergence of rumours ... can flare up and circulate with surprising speed to create tensions and unrest’ (Department for Communities 2009, pp. 58, 60).

**Research**

There is a constant need to monitor the effectiveness of the communication strategy. Australian National University Communication Strategy emphasises the need to ‘check for understanding’, the University of Oxford Strategy states that an evaluation process needs to be built into any communications campaign: ‘work out how you are going to demonstrate your success.’

**Misunderstanding public opinion**

Contrary to the principles noted above, the finding of this report is a failure of ongoing monitoring of concerns within the Bendigo community and failure to develop a communication strategy that effectively addressed those concerns.
As indicated by evidence presented in part 4 of this report, a high level of unease exists in segments of the Australian population concerning growing Muslim numbers and their impact on Australian society. Public statements by those in leadership positions indicate that the level of public concern has been neither acknowledged nor understood.

The messaging of political leaders, including the Victorian Premier, ministers and members of parliament, failed to acknowledge and deal with the level of concern within Bendigo. Messaging placed its emphasis on the affirmation of Bendigo as a community which welcomed immigrants and embraced cultural diversity. Those opposed to the mosque were depicted as a small minority, with emphasis on the role of outsiders in fomenting trouble and opposition.

Thus in June 2014 Jacinta Allan, the member for Bendigo East and Minister for Public Transport and Minister for Employment in the Victorian government, defended Bendigo’s values in State Parliament, saying the city was built on respect for diversity: ‘As a community we stand proudly for tolerance, respect and diversity.’ She asked her fellow politicians not to judge the town on the actions of a few, stating that ‘it is now known that key agitators on this issue are not residents of Bendigo … It is totally unacceptable for people outside of Bendigo to abuse our civic processes and divide our community in pursuit of their own disreputable agenda.’ She expressed her support for the seven Bendigo Councillors who had stared down the attempted intimidation. Bendigo was now stronger for having stood up to intolerance (Bendigo Advertiser, 25 June 2014).

In the same month Lisa Chesters, the federal member for Bendigo, congratulated the local councillors in similar terms for standing for the majority of Bendigo residents ‘who support multiculturalism and are excited to share the many cultures that make up Bendigo’ (Bendigo Advertiser, 18 June 2014).

At the time of the Council approval of the planning application, the Multicultural Affairs Minister Matthew Guy dismissed claims that Muslims would disrupt the lives of other residents and Deputy Opposition leader James Merlino (later Deputy Premier) praised the Bendigo community for not allowing a vocal minority to prevail.

After the major public demonstrations in 2015 Premier Andrews visited Bendigo. His messaging was in the same key: condemnation of protestors, with no evidence of reaching out to those with concerns. Headlines generated during his visit included:

- Anti-mosque protesters 'wouldn't be able to spell Bendigo': Premier Daniel Andrews. (The Age, 9 October 2015)
- Daniel Andrews slams anti-mosque protesters as nasty types. (The Australian, 6 October 2015)
- Daniel Andrews says diversity is Bendigo’s ‘greatest strength’. (Bendigo Advertiser, 9 October 2015)
The risk with such messaging is that it fails to build bridges, to open lines of communication; rather, it further alienates those with concerns and reinforces the sense that they are not being listened to, that as far as those in government are concerned, their views do not matter.

Consultation

Promoting social cohesion requires a two-way communication process to overcome a sense of alienation and foster a sense of empowerment of local residents.

Some interviewees indicated the view that the Council did consult as much as it could. The problem was that opponents of the mosque were not willing to listen, so there was nothing to be done.

They followed a process. It’s being now proven in the courts that the way the council handled this was correct and the planning procedures were correct, that’s it. It went all the way up to the High Court. Council have done all that they could, the courts have said yes, that’s it.

But a more frequently stated view was that fault lay with Council, with its refusal to consult and its decision to shut down public discussion, leaving a number of Bendigo residents with a feeling that they had no capacity to influence the development of their own town. Council did not foster understanding that it was open to reasoned discussion.

Consultation with Council staff undertaken for this project found the view that there was no point in holding further public meetings when it became clear that the only outcome would be a shouting match; there was no opportunity for reasoned discussion, any attempt at consultation would be used by opponents to draw attention to their objections and to silence contrary viewpoints. Individual Councillors did participate in meetings with constituents, but there was little or no public awareness of such private consultations.

The view of a number of interviewees was that when consultation did take place it produced positive outcomes. Members of the Bendigo Muslim community expressed regret that there had not been more opportunity to enter into dialogue. The comment was made that ‘we felt we needed to hide and I think that was a mistake. From the beginning we should have held our heads up.’ When they did enter into discussion the outcome was positive:

There’s a neighbour who was one of the biggest opposers to the mosque, a neighbour to the land where we’re building, and as soon as he met us and started asking questions, got the answers and got to know us, he’s one of our supporters now. So can you imagine how many people if they had the chance to ask the question [what a positive result it
would have] ... What I’m talking about is if you have fear, we should give them an avenue to come and ask questions.

Participation in programs run by the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services was similarly seen in positive terms:

LCMS is running a very good program at this moment, ‘Islam in Bendigo.’ They are giving the presentations to different schools, different colleges and different professional bodies. The target is for people to be aware of what are the things about Islam. After the session, they have a question and answer session as well, which anyone is free to ask about different questions about Islam. ... LCMS was running a few educational seminars. Leaders from Bendigo Islamic Association, they were actually going out to different schools locally and organisations, just to give a brief out of Islam, what are the basic teachings of Islam, what does Islam teach, just a general knowledge, to Year 10, Year 12 and Year 11 students, and these kids were coming up with so many questions and once those questions have been answered, they were really happy and then at the end of the seminar we were encouraging them, if they have any views or any questions, just go and speak to a Muslim rather than judging a whole community based on what they are seeing on television.

Focus group participants drew a distinction between those unwilling to listen and others who held ‘genuine’ fears but were open to discussion – and the failure to reach out to those who were open.

There are people completely convinced that this is bad for Bendigo, these people are probably mostly racist and there’s nothing will change them. The ones I felt sorry for are the people who have genuine fear, but there was nowhere to investigate that fear. There’s no way, no place to really ask the hard questions, like the question you asked earlier about the Wahhabis and where’s the money coming from; why do you need it; how many people are here? ... I would have loved if we had an avenue where people can actually put their question to us and learn more about what this could offer to them, and to the wider community being here in Bendigo. And I think a lot of people will have had a different view and reacted differently if we had that chance. As I said, I wish we could have done that, but I really don’t know how we could have done that.

**Timely action to dispel rumour and misconceptions**

An additional failure in Bendigo, in addition to the lack of consultation, was the delay in dealing with misconceptions and rumours that were spread by those opposed to the mosque.

In August 2015 Council staff noted that the Rights for Bendigo Residents group was circulating photocopied sheets with a number of false assertions. These included claims about planned residential development around the mosque site, the size of the mosque development, and the expansion of Bendigo Airport to facilitate religious pilgrimages (31 August 15 press release).
On this occasion, more than one year after the mosque approval, it was decided to respond by taking out a full-page advertisement in the *Bendigo Advertiser* to rebut misinformation and to distribute rebuttals in fact sheets. In announcing the Council’s action, Mayor Cox consciously used the language of ‘busting the myths,’ indicating that either manuals on responding to racist campaigns had been consulted or there had been advice received from government or another source.

In a media release headlined ‘Mayor Condemns Misinformation Campaign,’ Councillor Cox stated that ‘Council supports people’s right to free speech, however there is a responsibility on authors … to ensure the claims they make are truthful.’ Ten questions were posed and answered in the advertisement (see Figure 17), five of which were subsequently made available in individual Facebook posts:

- #1 – Why do we need a mosque in Bendigo? (30 September 2015)
- #2 – How many Muslims are there in Greater Bendigo? (1 October 2015)
- #3 – Will the mosque be the biggest in the southern hemisphere, with a capacity to accommodate at least 2,000 people? (5 October 2015)
- #4 – Will there be a call to prayer? (6 October 2015)
- #5 – Why was the community not consulted, particularly neighbouring residents? (7 October 2015)
Mosque development Q&A

The proposed development of Bendigo's first mosque has caused some misunderstanding in the community. Many claims have been made that are simply untrue. The City of Greater Bendigo is taking this opportunity to respond to some of the frequently asked questions.

Why is a mosque being built in Bendigo?

The mosque will provide a place for Bendigo's Muslim community to meet and pray. It will include prayer halls, classrooms, sports hall, cafe, library and offices, and will be built in stages. The Victorian Charter for Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 states every person has the right to freedom of religion and the freedom to demonstrate their religion as part of a community. Not allowing the mosque to be built based on religious prejudice would be unconstitutional. Section 138 of the Australian Constitution states the Commonwealth shall not... prohibit the free exercise of any religion...

How many Muslims are there in Greater Bendigo?

There are approximately 80 Muslim people in Greater Bendigo, many of whom work as medical professionals, academics, engineers and business people. For the past 20 years, the local Muslim community has had access to a room at LaTrobe University that holds approximately 40 people. On Fridays, they access a larger room to allow more people (approximately 70) to attend midday prayer.

Who purchased the land where the mosque will be built?

The Australian Islamic Mission purchased the 5.2 acre property. For more information on the Australian Islamic Mission visit wwwaim.org.au

Who is the City of Greater Bendigo's interest in the mosque?

Shared facilities are a great way to give the community better access to facilities with less duplication. The City supports the development of such infrastructure that will provide greater opportunity for people to improve their health and wellbeing.

Will there be a call to prayer?

The minaret - a tall, slim tower or a mosque that typically broadcasts the call to prayer - included as part of the mosque's design is only symbolic. Condition 26 of the planning permit approved by YCRA also prevents any noise, including a call to prayer, extending beyond the boundaries of the property.

Why was the community not consulted, particularly neighbouring residents?

They were. Notices were sent to 63 owners and occupants in the area around the site for the mosque inviting comment on the application. A public notice was also placed on the site. All submissions/recommendations were carefully considered in the evaluation process in accordance with the procedures and decision-making guidelines set out in Victorian planning law.

Will the Council accept increased rate revenue from the mosque?

No rate revenue will be collected on the mosque. Once constructed, the mosque will be deemed to be non-rateable as it is the case for all places of worship.

Why won't the Council allow a public vote on the mosque?

There are no plans in the new Residential Development Strategy to increase residential densities in the area around the Density Residential near the mosque site. Most importantly, the East Bendigo Structure Plan, adopted by the Council and which forms part of the planning scheme, discourages intensification of housing development on this LERZ land because it forms part of the rural character precinct near the Bendigo Racecourse.

Is it true not to have Home Safe (non-profit, emergency housing organisation) planning a major development near the mosque site?

No. Haven Home Safe (HHS) has rejected any and all such claims as false and baseless. HHS has neither the capacity nor funds to undertake a building program of such magnitude. HHS is a homelessness service and affordable housing provider. The organisation assists the homeless, people at risk or in housing crisis, and owns or manages fewer than 300 properties in Bendigo.

Is the construction of the mosque due to the recent Federal Government announcement that Australia will increase the number of refugees it takes from Syria?

There is no link between the Council's decision to approve the mosque development and the Federal Government's recent decision to allow refugees from Syria to come to Australia. The decision on the mosque was made in June 2014, over a year before the Federal Government's announcement.

Figure 17: Extract from City of Greater Bendigo advertisement, August 2015 (COGB records)
In a reflective overview of the controversy, a senior Council official discussed how the tide of opinion shifted at this time. He attributed the shift to action by the Council to correct misinformation, without commenting on the failure to take effective action over the previous twelve months during the long drawn out VCAT appeals process. There was a reluctance to acknowledge the significance of the failure to respond to misinformation in a timely and effective manner.

As time wore on, our civic pride was taking a hit. A negative reputation was starting to precede us and it wasn’t something we were used to. It appeared that people were starting to believe or at least repeat some of the mistruths that were flying around. Between the first and second rallies, it got to a point where the organisation took out full-page ads to correct this misinformation in a Q and A style. The ad was then broken down into images for use on social media and people started to share the information with their friends. This was when the tide started to turn. People become informed and
started to push back on friends, fellow residents and online commentary that was bluntly incorrect. (COGB records)

Further indication of the refusal to acknowledge failure of the Council’s communication strategy is a response on Facebook to a correspondent who pointed out that earlier action should have been taken:

Well done COGB [City of Greater Bendigo] for finally answering some questions instead of dodging them. Shame it wasn’t handled so well from earlier on ... May not be such a contentious issue now.

The reply on the Council’s Facebook page read:

The fact sheets have been available for quite some time now. Also, all the information has been readily available in the Council Agenda, which has been on the City’s website for over 12 months. (Facebook, 5 October 2015, COGB records)

The availability of information was not in contention, rather the issue was one of effective communication. It was unreasonable to expect a typical member of the community to locate and search Council Agenda to obtain information on the mosque. It was, rather, Council’s role to provide information in an easily accessible form, such as the fact sheets posted on Facebook in October 2015. One person interviewed for this project stated: ‘I’m in the middle. I’m neither for it nor against it. I’d need to be educated more as to why Bendigo was chosen and ... who are all the people that are coming? ... I don’t know enough about [it].’

What was required?

Council lacked an effective approach to communication to deal with the challenges posed by an orchestrated and emotive campaign, marked by harassment and vilification. Further, Council seemed always to be on the back foot: it did not set the agenda; it was reactive, not proactive.

What was needed, consistent with principles established by United Kingdom government authorities, was [1] ongoing attempts over a period of a year to build trust; [2] simple, clear, and repetitive messaging directed to the few key issues in contention; a simple and consistent message by the Mayor and Council media; [3] ongoing research to monitor community attitudes.

It is here argued that there were three elements that should have formed the communication strategy. These were:

The Australian Constitution provides that the ‘Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion’ (s.116).

This principle informs the 2006 Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act. The Act provides that ‘every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, including ... (b) the freedom to demonstrate his or her religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, either individually or as part of a community, in public or in private’ (s.14(1)). The Act further stipulates that ‘it is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way that is incompatible with a human right’ (s.38(1)).

There is no ambiguity in the principles enshrined in the Constitution and Victorian Charter. The Victorian Court of Appeal judgement handed down on 16 December 2015 quoted with approval the observation of McHugh J that ‘the preservation of religious equality has always been a matter of fundamental concern to the people of Australia and finds its place in the Constitution’ and ‘freedom of religion, the paradigm freedom of conscience, is of the essence of a free society’ (Court of Appeal, Hoskin & Anor v. Greater Bendigo City Council & Ors, 29).

[2] Clear and repeated statement of the limited power of the Bendigo Council

It needed to be simply stated and repeated that local planning laws cannot override a fundamental right established in the Constitution and the Charter of Human Rights. This was the central message to be conveyed by Council spokespersons, with this core message kept separate from advocacy of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Both messages were essential, but needed to be kept separate.

The first requirement was not to make Council the target of opposition when it had no capacity to make an assessment on grounds other than those relevant to planning.

The confused messaging is evident in statements by Mayor Cox. The simple message was:

Mayor Peter Cox says once it was decided there were no planning problems with the mosque, it was always going to win council approval. ‘No court would hold that a mosque shouldn’t be built in Bendigo,’ he says. ‘The question is, do you uphold the Australian constitution about freedom of religion? Our job is on planning matters.’ (The Australian, 26 September 2015)

This was on message and this is where the comment needed to end. But the full statement read:

Mayor Peter Cox says once it was decided there were no planning problems with the mosque, it was always going to win council approval. ‘No court would hold that a
mosque shouldn’t be built in Bendigo,’ he says. ‘The question is, do you uphold the Australian constitution about freedom of religion? Our job is on planning matters; we don’t have any jurisdiction whether we judge people on their religious beliefs — that’s being bigoted.’ (The Australian, 26 September 2015)

There was no need for comment on religious beliefs and ‘being bigoted.’

On another occasion, in the context of discussion of the mosque, the mayor outlined his beliefs:

Mr Cox believes the community and the country can be strengthened from diversity and unity. ‘It’s not as if Muslims have arrived just yesterday, they have been here for over a hundred years,’ said Mr Cox. ‘They’re Australians, we're Australians, we all share those values.’ ‘We probably have the best or one of the best democracies in the world,’ he said. ‘Bring your culture, bring your differences, and bring your belief systems.’ (Matt Dooley, SBS, 13 October 2015)

These are important issues to discuss and champion, but with the objective of calming tensions in Bendigo it is arguable that the immediate messaging should have been consistently directed to the principles enshrined in the Australian Constitution and the Victorian Charter.

The following response by the mayor provides an example of complex messaging that fails to deal simply and directly with the issue in contention. The mayor’s statement was in response to a call for a local ballot to determine whether a mosque should be built in Bendigo. First, the statement that could have been made:

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution states: ‘The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion.’ The results of a ballot cannot change the Constitution. (COGB records)

This is the actual statement that was released.

The results of a ballot will not change anything as the decision has already been made. The use and development of the land in question for a mosque required a planning permit. VCAT ruled in favour of the proposal and ordered that a permit be granted. There is no legal mechanism for such a decision to be overturned as a result of a local ballot at this stage in the process.

Secondly, there are sound practical and legal reasons why such planning matters should not and cannot be decided by popular vote. Council deals with such matters as a daily occurrence and people already have rights as part of the planning process. Victorian planning law provides a legal framework for planning the use, development and protection of land. It sets out processes and decision guidelines that are predictable, transparent and work in the present and long-term interests of all Victorians. The value
of property and the orderly planning of Greater Bendigo are underpinned by this framework.

Thirdly, Greater Bendigo is proudly a multi-faith community. The question is not whether a mosque is built in Bendigo, but whether we will continue to uphold the Constitutional rights of residents and visitors to freely practice their chosen faith.

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution states: ‘The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth. (COGB records)

Given the strength of local opposition, whether based on the views of a minority or majority, the strategy required consistent and repeated efforts to depoliticise the role of Council – to deny a target to opposition.

A complication to simple and clear messaging arises from the wording of Victorian planning legislation. The Planning and Environment Amendment (Recognising Objectors) Act 2015 provides that in recognition of objectors, tribunals need to take into account with ‘regard to the number of objectors … whether the use or development may have a significant social effect.’ (s.84B (2) (jb)) ‘Significant social effect’ raises false expectations and creates confusion, so that objectors to planning fail to understand that legislation cannot override a Constitutional right. The Victorian Court of Appeal clearly stated the basic principle:

The objective of facilitating development which secures a safe, pleasant and efficient working and living environment for all Victorians must be understood to embrace the development and provision of appropriate facilities for worship by those holding Islamic religious beliefs ‘as part of a community, in public’. Conversely, the facilitation of the practice of religious worship as such cannot itself be regarded as constituting a significant adverse social effect of a proposed use or development. (Court of Appeal, Hoskin & Anor v. Greater Bendigo City Council & Ors, 27, 28)

The failure of messaging with regard to the limited power of Council is made evident in Facebook exchanges in the aftermath of the August 2015 Bendigo demonstration – which came after almost 18 months of local controversy.

4 September 2015 – ‘poor Coxy, maybe it’s about time you started listening to the people and scrapped this unwanted mosque ... Don’t waste your money running for Council next year, you have burnt too many bridges, people don’t want you.’

10 September 2015 – ‘the ballot for the next election ... might teach the Council to LISTEN TO LOCALS.’
10 September 2015 – ‘as usual the Council has no intention of doing what the ratepayers want.’

11 September 2015 – ‘I just don’t see how they can build something in a town that the residents of the town who own the town don’t want. I will personally leave Bendigo with my new born daughter and partner if it’s built and I’ve lived here all my life ….’ (COGB records)

[3] An effective communication strategy

In summary, an effective communication strategy required the following elements:

[a] Simple messages, repeated as required, explaining rights guaranteed under the Constitution and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights. Fostering understanding that human rights guarantees are in the interest of all Australians. The Constitution defines the Australian nation, it is the founding charter of the nation.

[b] Explanation of the limited power of Council.

[c] Timely ‘myth busting’.

[d] Ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of the communication strategy.

There are two additional elements to be considered.

Prejudice feeds on abstraction; it seeks to strip its target of human qualities. An objective of communication strategy should be to foster sense of our common humanity by drawing attention to, for example, the impact of hostility and discriminatory acts on women and children. There would also be contexts to publicise the vile emails and threats regularly sent to Council staff and to fellow Bendigo residents.

Secondly, there is the issue of who should be the messenger, who should speak. If the key targets of the communication strategy are individuals in the mainstream of the community, then consideration is required to establish whom those in the middle are most likely to trust. In the current Australian political environment, those in the middle are less likely to trust politicians, the mayor and prominent business leaders than in earlier times. The need is to recruit trusted individuals through consultation, in part based on a common interest to uphold the good name of Bendigo.

One focus group participant addressed a parallel issue, the strategy used by an organisation, with which she was familiar, to win trust:

I'm doing some work up in Echuca with a not for profit, and they have got 20 ambassadors for the organisation. They've probably been strategic in identifying those
people. ... [The] ambassadors’ role is to go out into their areas within the community and provide information, explain what the organisation is doing. If they’re fundraising, why are they fundraising? This is what they’re trying to achieve. It uses the network of each ambassador. It’s that organic approach, and I think people respond to organic.
## APPENDIX

### MOSQUES AND PRAYER ROOMS IN VICTORIA

#### Mosques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Mosque Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albion – Khaled Ebn Al Walid Masjid</td>
<td>Albury Wodonga Muslim Prayer – Islamic Society of Albury Wodonga</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadmeadows Mosque</td>
<td>Ararat Islamic Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunswick Mosque</td>
<td>Ballarat – Abu-Bakr Siddiq Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campbellfield Mosque</td>
<td>Geelong Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carlton Mosque</td>
<td>Mildura Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coburg (ISNA) Mosque</td>
<td>Shepparton Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coburg Faith Mosque</td>
<td>Turkish Cultural Centre and Mosque, Shepparton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dallas – Ilim College Mosque</td>
<td>Shepparton Albanian Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dandenong Mosque</td>
<td>Afghani Mosque, Shepparton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dandenong – Emir Sultan Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deer Part Mosque (Albanvale)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doncaster (UMMA) Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doveton – Dandenong Afghan Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fawkner Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fitzroy Mosque (Turkish Mosque)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glenroy – Sunnah Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heidelberg Elsedeaq Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hoppers Crossing Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hoppers Crossing – Mary Mother of Jesus Mosque (Werribee)</td>
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<td>Huntingdale Mosque</td>
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<td>Keysborough Mosque</td>
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<td>Lysterfield ISOMER Mosque</td>
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<td>Melbourne City Mosque – AFIC</td>
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<td>Melbourne West Mosque</td>
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<td>Maidstone Mosque – West Footscray</td>
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<td>Meadow Heights – Hudson Circuit Mosque</td>
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<td>Newport Mosque</td>
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<td>Noble Park Mosque</td>
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<td>Prahran – Western Thrace Islamic Society</td>
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<td>Preston – Omar Bin Khattab Mosque</td>
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<td>Reservoir Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Springvale Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunshine Mosque (Ardeer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thomastown Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westall Mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>Windsor, Kent Street Prahran Mosque</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Musalla (prayer room)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Airport – Tullamarine</th>
<th>Bendigo (LaTrobe University)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box Hill TAFE</td>
<td>Horsham</td>
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<tr>
<td>LaTrobe University, Bundoora</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deakin University, Burwood</td>
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<td>Monash University, Clayton</td>
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<td>Monash University, Caulfield</td>
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<td>Monash University, Gippsland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swinburne University, Hawthorn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queensland University, Melbourne city campus</td>
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<td>RMIT, Melbourne</td>
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<td>RMIT, Melbourne</td>
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<tr>
<td>VUT, Melbourne city campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melbourne Royal Women’s Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Melbourne Hospital, Parkville</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Melbourne, Parkville</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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