



Local Government  
Rates Capping and Variation Framework Review  
Essential Services Commission  
Level 37, 2 Lonsdale Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000

15 May, 2015

To whom it may concern

### **A submission to the Essential Services Commission**

Maintaining and enhancing social cohesion and reducing social isolation are of utmost importance in a community where faith and cultural diversity and social disadvantage are crucial ingredients of the local community.

Greater Dandenong Council is the most socially disadvantaged Council in Melbourne. It is also the most culturally diverse in Victoria with 60% of its residents born overseas from 150 different birthplaces; two-thirds (64%) of the residents of Greater Dandenong speaking languages other than English and 1 in 7 residents - accounting for 19,000 people or 14% of the population - having limited fluency in spoken English. There are 2700 asylum seekers living in Greater Dandenong currently, many in dire need.

As the result of this enormous cultural diversity, there are a large variety of faiths and spiritual traditions. Both the cultural and faith diversity, as well as the low income situation of its residents, mean that maintaining and improving social cohesion is a must for Greater Dandenong Council. It cannot afford to restrain itself to core services – it needs to financially support the work of organisations such as the Greater Dandenong Interfaith Network.

The Interfaith Network is a group of diverse cultural and religious faiths, working in equal but independent partnership with the City of Greater Dandenong to promote peace and harmony within the municipality. Established in 1989, the Network is the first Interfaith Network in Australia (supported by the former City of Springvale which was a forerunner of the City of Greater Dandenong) and consists of various traditional and multi-faith groups who meet monthly at the Council offices.

The Network's goal is to promote understanding, respect and tolerance for each other's beliefs by living together in peace and goodwill. The Interfaith Network covers faith communities throughout Greater Dandenong - in the Springvale, Dandenong, Keysborough and Noble Park areas. The Network strives to achieve the vision of 'Many Faiths, One People'.

Many Tours to Places of Worship have been conducted annually for members of the Public, Schools and other interested groups. After many years as an organisation of volunteers supported by Council, to further improve our effectiveness, most recently the Council has funded an Interfaith Network Development Officer.

The financial support given by the City of Greater Dandenong would be at risk under a CPI rate cap or a Local Government Cost Index rate cap. The Council's recent policy of averaging a 5-6% rate rise each year has allowed it not only to continue our funding but support new initiatives like an Interfaith Network Development Officer. It has also meant that there has been an adequately resourced Community Development Team within Council to continue to support our work; there is also current and future community infrastructure provision to house Interfaith Network activities.

In summary, if rate capping must happen, we support Greater Dandenong Council to be able to continue to have a high enough cap to enable it to continue, and where community needs arise to enhance it's support of cultural and faith diversity and specifically to be able to support agencies and programs within the community that address disadvantage, improve understanding of different cultures and faiths and improve social cohesion.

If Greater Dandenong was to do that via a variation process as found in NSW, it may be seen as all too politically difficult to seek variations based on what are perceived to be non-core services. We support a high enough cap for Greater Dandenong Council to continue its reasonable and publically available Long Term Financial Strategy via normal budget processes.



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