



#RightTrack

Community Conversations

in Higgins

Our values, views and vision for a fair and humane asylum process.



#RightTrack Report Back in Higgins

As a caring people we have a proud history of defending what we believe in. Our values extend beyond our politics and this is why we're not afraid to hold our Governments to account when policies are at odds with our sense of fairness, respect and doing the right thing by each other. We stand up and we speak out.

There is a growing disquiet in our community about successive Governments' treatment of people seeking asylum. Over time we have seen many people, including health professionals, grandparents, mums, teachers, and young people, feel increasingly at odds with these policies and speak out. Corporations are under pressure to divest from doing business in the detention system. Communities are coming together to share their concern and take action; something very powerful is happening on the ground and you can feel the shift.

Getting on the #RightTrack is up to us!

During the next 12 months the ASRC's #RightTrack Campaign will work with communities to elevate their voices. We believe that when people connect with their values and trusted voices provide accurate information, the human impact and fundamental unfairness of these policies become obvious. We believe this has the potential to shift attitudes and provide a powerful space for new voices to stand up and speak out about fair and humane alternatives. #RightTrack is about bringing supporters and people who want to learn more together. When a community is aware and works together in defence of what is fair and right anything is possible.

#RightTrack in Higgins

For the last couple of months we've had the privilege of working with the first of these communities, in what is the traditionally conservative federal electorate of Higgins. We chose this community to demonstrate that the Government's treatment of people seeking asylum cuts deep into the hearts of many people regardless of how they vote. Here we have witnessed the power of a community coming together to talk and learn more about the most significant issue facing people who arrived by sea and are living in our community. What follows are the findings of their conversations on the Government's refugee determination process which has unfairly changed the way people's cases for asylum are assessed and wrongly puts their safety at risk.

WHAT WE DID

In just over three weeks **23 conversations** were held with **184 people**, 111 (60%) living in Higgins, 28 (15%) from the electorate of Kooyong and the remaining 25% from other neighbouring electorates.

Members of the community were invited to facilitate, host or join a conversation. Facilitators received initial training including a conversation script and recordings of two people: Raj, a man currently seeking asylum in our community, and Melinda, an immigration lawyer. Facilitators were matched to a conversation arranged by a host. 16 people placed their trust in the process and signed up to be facilitators, while 22 others agreed to host a conversation opening their homes and their hearts to family, friends and in some cases strangers.

OUR VALUES

Before discussing the treatment of people seeking asylum, we need to ground ourselves in our values and identify which of these guide us in the way we treat one another.

Following are the most common themes that emerged from our conversations.

Empathy & Care (cited 52 times)

References to empathy, compassion, kindness, humanity, understanding and having an open mind featured most heavily in the conversations as a whole. People expressed the need for us to “*act with decency*”, have an “*appreciation of difference*” and be “*curious about others in order to understand their needs.*” “*Helping vulnerable people*” was also important to many.

Respect & Dignity (cited 28 times)

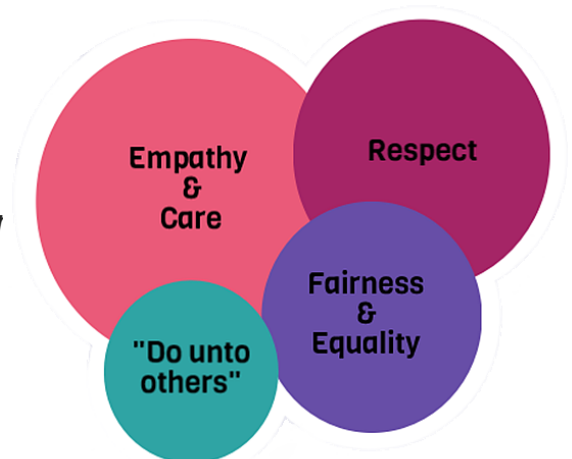
“*Respecting people despite their differences*” was a theme commonly raised in the conversations, with the word ‘respect’ being the most frequently recorded value across the conversations as a whole.

Fairness & Equality (cited 25 times)

“*Fairness without prejudice*” captures this theme nicely, which also includes references to justice and conscience. People cited “*equality of opportunity*” as vital, and a statement was made that “*people who don’t look like us are still people*”.

“**Treat others as you want to be treated.**”

This was the top saying throughout the conversations with “*do unto others*” also cited. To quote one participant, we need to “*recognise people as brothers and sisters.*”



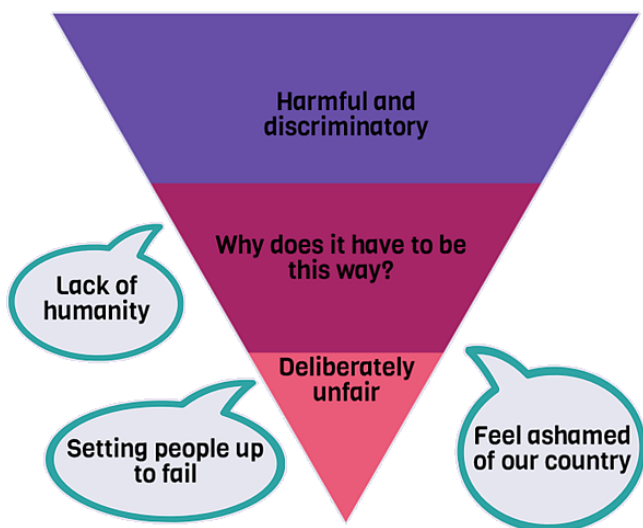
OUR VIEWS

When we learn about someone's experience of seeking asylum in our community, it becomes obvious that many of our Government's policies are at odds with our values.

In our conversations, we listened to two people speak about the human impact of current policies.

First, Raj (not his real name), spoke about his experience, his frustration about waiting for years before the Government would let him apply for asylum, and his concern for his future.

After listening to Raj, **harmful effects** (cited 29 times) was the top theme, including terms such as frustration, desperation and trauma, concerns about "*worsening of mental health*" and the process "*retraumatising people*". Next was **confusion** (cited 26 times), particularly the lack of logic and transparency ("*why does it take so long?*", "*even sympathetic people have no idea it's happening*"). Another top theme was **unfair and uncertain process** (cited 22 times), summarised by comments such as "*deliberately made as difficult as possible*" and "*limbo*". A "*fundamental violation of the judicial system*" was a particularly strong statement recorded.



In all conversations, participants voiced concerns that the process "*doesn't sit with our values*", and described it as disrespectful, inhumane, illogical, complex, unfair and hypocritical.

There were differences of opinion in three conversations. While most participants thought the process was at odds with their values, a small number of people acknowledged this disconnect but thought that we needed to maintain a level of deterrence. In one case, someone questioned Raj's story because he didn't say why he had left his home country.

Second, Melinda, an immigration lawyer, outlined the legal process Raj and others in his situation have to go through.

In all conversations people were deeply concerned about the changes to the legal process in terms of our values and humanity. The top theme that emerged was that it's **deliberately unfair** (cited 37 times). In many conversations it was described as "*designed to be difficult*", as "*a make believe process*", "*deliberately underhanded*" and "*set up for people to fail*". Other top themes included **discriminatory punishment** (cited 21 times, "*fear is a weapon being used*" and "*people being dehumanised*") and **against our values** (cited 20 times, "*shames us as Australians*" and "*at best we're incompetent; at worst it's monstrous*").

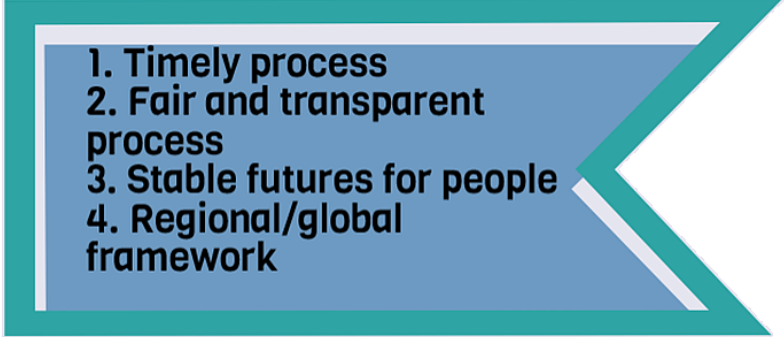
OUR VISION

To truly shift attitudes, people need to believe that change is possible, and that we can create a fair and humane process for people seeking asylum.

After hearing about the current process, including the time people have spent waiting to apply, the conversations turned to discussing alternatives.

The top alternative was **timely processing**, with people asking the Government to “*speed up the process*” and introduce “*clearly defined processing times*”. Next, people wanted the process to be **fair and transparent**, providing “*the same treatment for those coming by sea as air*” and calling for a “*robust legal system giving people a meaningful*

chance for making a claim for asylum.” Access to work rights, family reunion and permanent protection formed the third most common theme of **stable futures for people**. A greater emphasis on our responsibility to work with neighbouring countries, particularly Indonesia, and look to others for leadership, like Canada, formed the ideas around a **regional/global framework**.

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1. Timely process
 2. Fair and transparent process
 3. Stable futures for people
 4. Regional/global framework

At the end of the conversations, people were asked what they wanted the process to include.

Following are their responses:

We want the process to include:



GETTING ON THE #RIGHTTRACK

When a connection is made between people, their values, and this issue, it has the potential to shift attitudes and provide a powerful space for new voices to stand up and speak out.

As a result of people gaining an insight into the process, 47% shifted their views to support fair and humane alternatives, while 52% were already in support. The remaining 1% were in favour of maintaining the current process.

47% views changed
through the
conversations



almost 52%
already in support
of fair response

“ *There have been all backgrounds and political persuasions here tonight but we all agree it's unfair.* ”

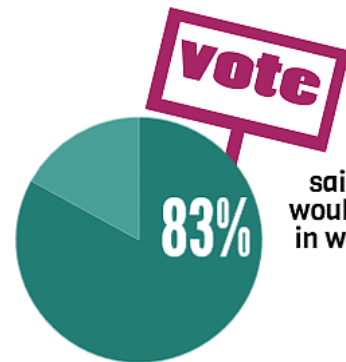
People overwhelmingly want to see their elected representative take leadership and move this beyond politics. “*We need bipartisan agreement to act humanely.*”

98%

want to see their politician engage more humanely
with issues affecting people seeking asylum

The majority of people in conversations said they would consider these themes when casting their vote on July 2.

“ *There is a group of voters that want a fairer system for people seeking asylum.* ”



said this topic
would be a factor
in who they vote
for

We can work together to make change happen

There was a resounding commitment to take collective action at the end of the conversations. **Working together to make change happen** (cited 60 times) was the most common key takeaway, followed by **promoting values** (cited 39 times).

People explicitly **named the actions they would take**, including:

- ✓ using media/publicity to get people's stories told and give the public accurate information;
- ✓ helping the sector and creating partnerships (working with churches, schools, councils etc);
- ✓ changing the conversation by connecting with shared values;
- ✓ creating buddy systems to welcome and integrate people in their communities; and
- ✓ holding the Government accountable through rallies, actions, emailing local candidates and creating political pressure.

“Have conversations with people you meet telling them about the 24,500 group and refugee issues.”

“We need to foster community connections between different groups of people to work together in society.”

“Local neighbourhood could act together as a support group in street where host and participants live. Get to know a local person/family seeking asylum here and include them to belong to street group.”

“We need to speak out about this. We need to make people understand. This needs to be exposed to the media. Look at who is actually our community.”

“It is up to those of us who can vote to put political pressure on this issue.”

Captured here are the values, views and vision of a committed community. We would like to acknowledge all of those who have participated, particularly those whose values were so at odds with the unfairness of this policy that they were prepared to bravely step up and take a lead role.

What you have achieved is powerful, and an indication of the power you hold as a community to make this change happen.

It is with great pleasure we deliver these findings to the Higgins community.

ASRC Community Engagement Team, June 2016

Data compiled and analysed by a team led by **Tess Altman**
PhD Candidate, University College London