



2022 RAR ANNUAL REPORT

Since 2001, RAR has developed into a network that is recognized and respected in rural communities for:

- Commitment to supporting people seeking our protection
- Determination in pursuing justice
- Advocacy for human rights.

1. The year that was

It's been another eventful year, with COVID-19 continuing to make a difference to our everyday lives. Once again, this has impacted on the intake of refugees through the Humanitarian Program, and those who come in are well short of the cap of 13,750. Coalition Government policies continued to be repressive and cruel, but there were some steps forward. Since 2019, approximately 200 refugees trapped off-shore were transferred back to Australia for medical treatment. Here they were trapped again, in run-down hotels, with no access to the outside world. In response to ongoing protests and campaigns by refugees, refugee advocates, faith groups and fair-minded people, all were finally released into the community by April. Once again the community were left to find the financial and social support for people with no income rights and 6-month Bridging Visas. Now the fight continues for a long-term solution.

The biggest impact on our activity this year was the fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15 August 2021. The Afghan community quickly formed the Action For Afghanistan campaign calling for 20,000 additional places for people in fear of their lives, having worked with Coalition forces, in NGOs, in Government roles and leadership for women's rights. (More on that later).

The March 2022 budget under the Coalition Government saw more changes. The then Government:

- increased the intake of Afghan refugees to 16,500 over 4 years (additional places)
- accepted the New Zealand offer to take refugees still in PNG and Nauru (over 200 people). RAR groups have been behind the #GameOver campaign for years.
- accepted the call for an affordable community sponsorship program. A pilot program was established and will be run by Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia, with 1500 places set aside for four years – not additional places yet, but hopefully very soon these will be additional to the Humanitarian intake.
- gave significant reduction of visa costs in the Community Support Program.

As Jana Favero from ASRC wrote after the Budget: “It is clear that demonising refugees is no longer the political weapon it once was. Public sentiment has changed and those in power are finally acknowledging that.”

The big news of the year is of course the outcome of the Federal election when the ALP won a decisive victory on 21 May. In addition to the ALP seats won, there are now four Greens Members of Parliament and 12 Senators. Six independent candidates with strong stated support for refugee issues won their seats. So opportunities for change.

The ALP Government kept to its election promise to allow the Nadesalingam family to return to Biloela, and then grant them permanent residence. Other policy positions related to refugees have yet to be implemented, such as abolishing Temporary Protection Visas. Queenscliff RAR have led a campaign “**Give them a future: permanent protection for refugees**”. We wait for this policy change to happen quickly.

RAR groups continue to lobby, campaign and provide practical day to day support for people seeking asylum, refugees on temporary visas and those denied basic human rights and treatment in accordance with the Refugee Convention.

2. Membership

Our membership numbers continue to hover around 70 groups. Orange RAR in NSW is our latest member. This group has emerged from the Orange Social Justice Group, who hosted a community information forum on Afghanistan in February where the National President spoke and met this committed group. They have been actively supporting the move of Ukrainian refugees to the Central West.

Several groups closed this year – Surf Coast, Winchelsea and Launceston.

We formed a partnership with the Hazara Women for Change and are delighted to have them as an affiliate group. Many RAR groups are raising funds to support the work they are doing in Afghanistan with women and girls, through education and employment.

3. Campaign action

The RAR Campaign Committee gives advice to the National Committee on campaign action. We draw on our engagement with sector meetings and other refugee advocacy groups to set our priorities. It is up to RAR groups to take these priorities and choose which ones work best for their local group.

Covid restrictions and lockdowns made it very difficult to take public action on key dates such as **July 19 #9 YearsTooLong** and the **20th Anniversary of the Tampa Affair** (26 August). But groups did what they could, often with other refugee advocates.

Major campaigns this year:

- **AFGHANISTAN.** We have actively supported #ActionForAfghanistan, taking direction from this refugee led group. We have lobbied and agitated for those RAR group members are sponsoring for Humanitarian visas to Australia. These RAR group

members have lodged applications for 92 families and individuals to come to Australia on Humanitarian visas (see more details in the Afghan sub-committee report).

- The **ELECTION** has been a huge focus, with lots of discussion about the best way to present our advocacy for fair and just policies, without creating opportunities for fear-mongering by the Coalition. We produced a detailed Election Kit which RAR groups took up and used in their electorates.
- Many groups wrote submissions in support of Andrew Wilkie's Bill: **Ending Indefinite and Arbitrary Detention 2021**. That Bill lapsed but was re-introduced on 1 August 2022 and was seconded by Kylea Tink, Independent Member for North Sydney.
- We continued supporting long-running campaigns such as #HomeToBilo, #GameOver, Permanent Protection for Refugees, #SetThemFree, #TimeForAHome.

In addition to these campaigns:

Refugee Week was widely supported by member groups though activities were restricted by COVID. Many on-line actions were held, with webinars and forums.

Palm Sunday is another significant day when the refugee sector groups draw attention to the need for humane and respectful policies and actions.

Letter-writing is an important element of our campaign work and this takes even more prominence during the pandemic. [ARAN \(Australian Refugee Action Network\)](#) has set up a letter-writing group to further coordinate letter-writing, and several RAR groups take part in this. Letter-writing kits are available from the RAR website.

[Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia](#) (CRSA) is now an independent incorporated charitable organisation and RAR is a founding member. This year saw a positive outcome from the long-awaited review of the current Community Sponsorship Program., as stated above. Several RAR groups took part in the Group Mentoring Program run by CRSI and a number are now active in the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP).

We are an active member of [ARAN \(Australian Refugee Action Network\)](#). This network brings together grassroots groups, to build some coordination in our work, share resources and leverage our impact.

4. Our organization

The National Committee took time this year to look at how we operate, and undertook a Strategic Review process, led by Josef Gardiner, an organisational development specialist. We are very grateful for the time and skill Josef put into this comprehensive exercise, which included a survey of groups, other refugee organisations, refugees and people seeking asylum, followed up by focus groups. National Committee members spent several long

evenings in on-line workshops and Josef pulled this together into a one-page Strategic Plan to guide our work over a three-year period.

We distilled our **PURPOSE** :

The National Committee provides RAR's member groups with the information, guidance and support they need to undertake their work with a sense of unity and shared purpose. By collaborating with our peers in the sector, we also advocate for changes in Australian policy and practice so that the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum are upheld and their needs are met.

We defined three goals:

MOBILISE

We will support, expand & diversify the membership of our movement

ADVOCATE

We will ensure that the rights of refugees & people seeking asylum are understood & upheld across rural Australia

CONNECT

We will connect & partner with our allies across rural Australia

This Strategic Plan is purely for the National Committee and has been shared through our groups.

Sub-committees: Our member groups take part in a number of sub-committees where much of our work happens. I want to thank the members of these groups for their work. Convenors are:

Detention - Marie Sellstrom

Campaign - Louise Redmond/ Rosemary Bishop

Human Rights - Marie Sellstrom

The National Committee, in discussion with members of the Campaign Committee, decided to absorb the work of this sub-committee in the coming year, to reduce the work load on people. The Detention sub-committee keeps in touch via email. The Human Rights sub-committee is watching the progress of the campaign being run by the Human Rights Law Centre and looking for opportunities to get involved there.

Communications:

The **Updates** continue to be our primary way of communicating with our member groups and supporters. Thanks to Jonathan Strauss for preparing and circulating these Updates. We used our survey to get feedback , which was very positive.

I said last year that our **website** had been a challenge for us this year. As part of our Strategic Review, we have developed a new and simpler website. It is still a challenge to keep up to date!

Social media: We manage to keep an active presence on Facebook and Twitter. We have grown Facebook followers from 5,781 to 6,006 this year. Special thanks to Jan Govett, Ian Milne, Katherine Stewart, Ellen O’Gallagher and others for their active engagement in keeping these current. We have 1,900 followers on Twitter. Big thanks to Jo Hicks from Yass RAR for keeping our Twitter account going.

We launched an Instagram account this year, in line with our goal of expanding and diversifying our membership. We have 191 followers which is a great start. We do need volunteers to keep up the flow of posts needed for an effective Instagram account.

Finances:

Geoff Byrne will present this report separately. We end the year with uncommitted funds of \$8,162 which is positive. We have membership contributions at \$4,130, a big increase from \$2,060 last year. These funds enable us to do campaigning work, and extend our reach. I hope that next year groups will continue to contribute, to the level that they are able to.

5. National Conference 2022

This national conference is happening this year, hosted by the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group. The theme is ‘Connecting for Change’ and will be attended by around 160 people.

RAR thanks the BMRSG Conference Planning Group for their work.

6. Thank you to National Committee and sub-committees

Finally, I want to thank the members of the National Committee and sub-committees for their work. It has been a pleasure to work with the members of the National Committee who are a dedicated, hard-working and interesting group of people. Steven Maude (Grampians-Gariwerd) resigned during the year, as he moved to Melbourne. Otherwise, all the outgoing Committee have nominated for another year of service.

I thank them all for their wonderful work and I look forward to working with them this year.

It is a constant challenge to find people who are willing to work at the National Committee level. Yet it is more important than ever, as we must hold the Albanese Government to their stated policies. Our individual groups are at the core of what we do, yet it’s our ability to stand as a national organisation where we can have the most impact at the national level. The fact that we speak for so many in rural and regional communities means we have a strong and distinctive voice.

Please consider what role you can play in keeping RAR National strong. Some of us have been on the National Committee for some years and it would be good to have some new faces step in this year.

Mike Griffin from Bellingen and Nambucca Heads RAR will take over the **Updates** from next month. These will go out monthly . This is a good example of people playing a part to sustain the overall organisation.

This is my last AGM as National President. It has been an honour to work with our member groups, others in the refugee sector and of course the many refugees and people seeking asylum I've had the opportunity to meet over these past three years.

7. The year ahead.

RAR began with a small group of women in September 2001. Sadly one of these women died this year, Anne Coombs. Still we continue. We grow older, but we do not give up, we will not stop until this country faces up to its international and domestic responsibilities and gives a proper place to human rights and justice for all.

As I said last year, RAR groups have shown their resilience, determination and strength to keep this work going and in doing so, we demonstrate the best of Australia and the values that we believe define who we are.

Louise Redmond
National President
16 September 2022