August 2023

Action For Refugees In Lewisham

Summer news from AFRIL

AFRIL Director - An uphill climb but we won't give up!

It is with mixed emotions that I share with you AFRIL's Summer Newsletter. I love sharing success stories - how committed people coming together can create real positive change. However today this is against a backdrop of the most hostile government policies that I have ever seen in all my 15 years in the sector. We are rising to the challenge - casework, policy, strategic litigation - but we are really really tired. It is the small charities and volunteer led community groups that are so often there when no one else is. The ones that people trust. The first call in a crisis because we will move heaven and earth to make sure that no child will sleep on the streets or go to bed hungry. So this month, I want to thank AFRIL staff and volunteers - those on the front line who are there when no one else is. Supporting your wellbeing is my paramount concern. Together we will come out the other end of this, and we will do everything in our power to create a more just and compassionate welcome for sanctuary seekers. I'm proud to say that in increasing numbers sanctuary seekers are coming back to volunteer and work with AFRIL because they know first hand the impact that they will have.

In this newsletter edition you will hear from Kieran about the progress and fun of Rainbow Club children during the summer term, culminating in a fantastic Sports Day that was planned and delivered by a group of Rainbow Club Year 6s and Dulwich College Year 6s - an opportunity for responsibility, leadership and sharing of experience both ways.

You will hear from Chloe, AFRIL's Advice and Advocacy Manager about the ever expanding work of AFRIL's complex casework team in response to recent government policies of 'maximisation' and 'decanting' (closing asylum hotels and moving people to other already overcrowded hotels outside London, military barracks or Bibby Stockholme Barge.) The team have been working tirelessly to assess and make representations for safe accommodation moves for vulnerable people since it transpired that the Home Office has no plans to assess for vulnerability under its own criteria. Our new PAP project has been having outstanding success in challenging unlawful decisions of public bodies, in particular the Home Office.. We have written formally to the Home Office detailing our concerns, together with Lewisham Councillors and sector partners. AFRIL is working with Legal Aid Law Firm of the Year, Deighton Pierce Glynn, and West London Welcome, to explore options for legal challenge to the implementation of the worst of these policies. I want to add a particular thanks here - our quick and effective response has been significantly enhanced by donations from members of Blackheath Quaker Meeting, in kind support from the Samaritans, and ILPA's Strategic Legal Fund. I also want to emphasise that this accommodation crisis and asylum backlog is being engineered by the current government, and

experts say is completely avoidable by redirecting the public money wasted on hotels and misguided projects like the Bibby Stockholme Barge, into actually making decisions on asylum claims.

Thanks to the hard work of our friends at ECPAT, the high court has at least ruled that 'routine' housing of unaccompanied child asylum seekers in hotels is unlawful. The recent ruling, that we very much welcome, stated that children should only be placed in hotels for 'very short periods in true emergency situations' and certainly not 'as a substitute for local authority care.' AFRIL supports unaccompanied asylum seeking children in hotels where their age is disputed by the Home Office

You will hear from Helen about the recent work of AFRIL's Foodbank, Art Group and Allotment of Refuge. AFRIL was one of 8 local partners chosen by Lewisham Local to provide small grants to some of the borough's most marginalised local residents most impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. Through this, AFRIL members with no income who had been sleeping on friends' floors whilst they await Home Office decisions were delivered mattresses and beds, and parents on low incomes were able to access small grants for school uniforms. We have had several new members join the allotment following outreach work, 60% of our Allotment of Refuge volunteers are now from sanctuary seeking backgrounds and you can read the impact in one of our members' own words below.

The harmful government rhetoric on asylum seekers and small boats has culminated in the passing of the Illegal Migration Act, an inhumane and dangerous piece of legislation that is not in our name. It, in effect, bans refugees from the UK. Applications from Afghanis, Syrians, Sudanese people fleeing atrocities will not make it in front of a decision maker if their route to safety was not deemed acceptable. There is a simple way of reducing the number of people who attempt, and sometimes survive, small boat crossings - create SAFE ROUTES. There have been no Ukrainian refugees on small boats. Why? Because there is a safe route for them under the government Ukraine scheme. Simple as that. In response, AFRIL introduces 'A Place to Call Home' - in this short film, you can hear from the remarkable children that AFRIL supports about their experiences, journey to the UK, and hopes and dreams for the future. All in their own words, as it should be.

I know that it can be difficult to find accurate media on migration issues at the moment, and for those of you who are interested I would highly recommend signing up to the IMIX newsletter.

AFRIL's impact

In the past year AFRIL has supported 501 individuals from 189 families. This is more people than we've ever supported before and our support is holistic - most families access more than one service. The majority of new clients have been supported thanks to the expansion of our advice and advocacy service, enabling us to do complex casework with more migrant Londoners than ever - resolving issues including homelessness, unsafe hotel provision for vulnerable families, and erroneous refusals for welfare benefits or access to healthcare. This growth is also directly related to the increasingly cruel immigration policies which are creating extremely challenging situations for our members and placing high demand on our services. Thank you to all of our supporters, volunteers and funders for showing solidarity towards people seeking sanctuary in your local community this year and supporting AFRIL to improve the lives of sanctuary seekers during these hostile times.

AFRIL Short Film Launch - A Place to Call Home

If you do one thing today - watch this 7 minute film.

No child should be forced to leave their home and seek sanctuary, however children currently make up a quarter of people seeking asylum in the UK.

It is with both sadness and pride that we launch - A Place to Call Home.

This short film was produced by AFRIL's funders the Childhood Trust and features the first hand accounts of the remarkable and inspiring children that AFRIL is currently supporting through our Rainbow Club, Foodbank Programme and Advice and Advocacy Service.

The children share in their own words what it is really like to flee your home, make a dangerous journey to another country seeking safety, and what their hopes and dreams are for the future.

Thank you to the AFRIL staff and parents who supported and empowered the children to tell their stories

People who make a difference: 'My summer with AFRIL' by Dounia Hadj Ali

As a French student studying communication and project management in Lyon, I was looking for an enriching experience in London. And that's where I found AFRIL. Working in a foreign country in a language that's not mine can be scary but the working environment I found at AFRIL allowed me to blossom very quickly and to become part of the team.

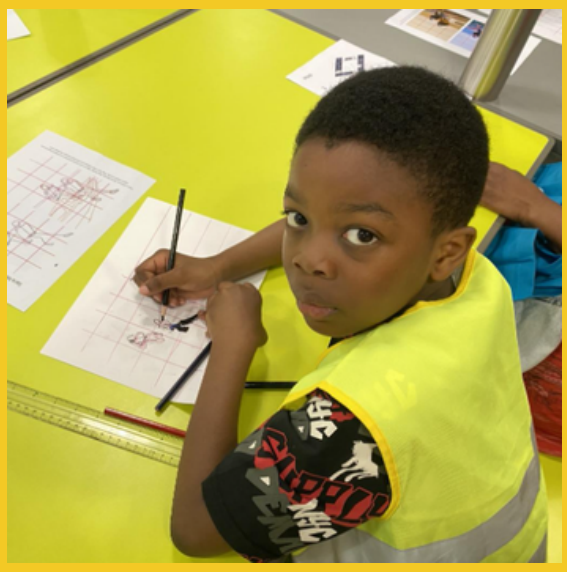
A day with AFRIL is a lot of emails and calls to ensure good communication, it's a strategic meeting to plan successful results. It's a to-do list that's impossible to do in a day, but can be reduced with a lot of willpower. It's lunch breaks, sharing crazy stories and a lot of cups of tea, with milk of course. Not all days are easy but at the end of your day you have the satisfaction of having really achieved something.

I can say that I was lucky to work in all services and discover the daily work of all. AFRIL uses small resources for big results. It's an expert charity that gives the impression of being bigger because of the work it does. It's a dedicated team that responds to meeting crisis needs with the trust from the communities it supports. Even though I've been working in the nonprofit sector for a few years now, the work that AFRIL does was unfamiliar to me. Not a day has gone by since I started my internship without learning from them.

It's with a heavy heart that I have to leave them in 2 months' time, but with the memory of having made a difference.

Dounia

Rainbow Club - A busy summer term!



Passion Fruit (Reception-Year 2) enjoyed our first full class trip to the AFRIL allotment, the children practised their English in a food growing workshop, learned about insects in a fun scavenger hunt and met the worms that are working hard to help us compost. The other 2 classes will have their visits early next term, as we incorporate the allotment into our regular curriculum as an outdoor classroom and introduce the children to climate resilience practices and the importance of protecting our natural environment.

Rainbow Club term time sees children working hard together with new friends to improve their attainment and confidence in English and Maths, which opens the door to success in mainstream education. Last year 100% of parents said that Rainbow Club was beneficial for their child, with one parent commenting on her daughter: “She's doing well. Learning and catching up. She loves the place.”
Rainbow Club also always makes time for laughter! During half term we were treated to another fun-filled performance by the Flying Seagull Project, during half term. Children enjoyed an energetic show followed by a circus skills workshop, which even got parents involved and trying their hands at spinning plates. For Refugee Week we had a full school trip up to the National Maritime Museum, where children explored the exhibits and joined an art workshop based on ‘The Swimmers’, a film about the two Syrian sisters who fled across the Aegean sea. Parents explored the museum, learning how much it has to offer and encouraging them to bring their children back.

Rainbow Club Sports Day in June involved a brilliant team effort with our Year 6s collaborating with a group of Dulwich College Year 6s to plan the activities for the younger children. This was the 3rd year of our partnership, and is a great opportunity for the older children to take on additional responsibility and leadership before moving into secondary school.

Dulwich College also holds an annual fundraising day, where their children run stalls with the proceeds donated to AFRIL. This year they raised over £800 to support our vital work. Thank you so much!

AFRIL’s Rainbow Club Manager is part of Lewisham’s Schools of Sanctuary working group, where we have been sharing resources and activities for schools to use during Refugee Week. Jess, Karleen, and Kieran ran workshops at Prendergast Ladywell School, Dulwich College and other local schools, based on this year’s theme of ‘Compassion’. All the children were fully engaged and enthusiastic, and their teachers were very appreciative that we could come and support their learning.

RAINBOW CLUB IN NUMBERS...

This term Rainbow Club has **85** students from **57** families.
We have **28** super volunteers who support the children and provide additional support for those who need it.

Advice and Advocacy - more important than ever.

We are seeing increasing hostility towards people seeking asylum from our politicians. In the past months the Advice and Advocacy Service has been working at capacity to respond quickly and effectively to escalating, and frequently changing, policy proposals.

Of most concern has been communication from the Home Office that the number of people placed in our already overcrowded local asylum support hotels will be increased by 60% and 75%. This will exacerbate the huge safeguarding issues we are already seeing, and place our asylum seeking communities in real danger. The Advice Team is meeting this challenge - sharing evidence and concerns with the Home Office, working together with partners including Lewisham Council and the NHS at a policy level to challenge this proposal, and undertaking a huge amount of casework with residents at risk. In the past fortnight, the Home Office then announced that one of the hotels would be closing by the end of August, leaving the future of residents uncertain other than that they will be moved to other 'asylum contingency accommodation' meaning hotels, barracks or barges, with no clear plan for assessing the suitability for this for the people concerned. The AFRIL advice team has been working day and night to identify residents most at risk of inappropriate and unsafe accommodation moves and make representations to the Home Office based on their own suitability criteria. We are working with Southwark Law Centre and Deighton Pierce Glynn on options for legal challenge and have welcomed Awaatif to the team as a temporary caseworker to add the capacity to make this possible. Awaatif has been volunteering within the Advice Service for several months and is a highly skilled caseworker.

The past few months have seen the team operationalise the Community PAP (Pre Action Protocol) project. This is our newest project, made possible by a successful grant from the Greater London Authority Migrant Advice Fund. All AFRIL caseworkers are now trained to write pre action letters, which are checked by Legal Aid Law Firm of the year, Deighton Pierce Glynn. These letters are a powerful tool to challenge unlawful decisions of public bodies and lead to quicker resolutions for our clients, preventing further crises and enabling the Advice Service to support more families. We have been working closely with Greenwich Winter Night Shelter, CHART and Housing Justice to understand the PAP project and curate referral pathways.

The Advice Service has continued to influence local policy and is now widely recognised as experts in South East London. In May we supported the Lewisham Asylum and Refugee Safeguarding Partnership to advocate for a policy on sleeping and bed allocations in Asylum Hotel Accommodation to the Home Office Head of Asylum Support for the South East. Engaging on a strategic level means that AFRIL is supporting the improvement of policies and practices that relate to our clients and it is enabling us to curate some enhanced escalation routes with local authorities to resolve casework issues efficiently for the most vulnerable.

In response to the Home Office announcement of the new 'Streamlined Asylum Process', the Advice Service quickly responded to widespread confusion and concerns amongst our asylum seeking members by producing translated advice letters for all residents of Lewisham's hotels and asylum seekers we are supporting in the community. These letters provided accessible advice and information in a language that residents understood. Feedback from residents was incredibly positive, especially considering the high number of residents with long standing claims and no legal representation.

The Advice Team have noted a marked increase in the complexity of challenges faced by clients and in particular the difficulty they have faced in the past in obtaining accurate advice. We are privileged to support these clients as they rebuild their lives in South East London and are pleased to report that we are currently doing move on casework with several foodbank members granted status so that they can finally access mainstream housing, income and work to support their family and rebuild their lives in

safety. Our objective is to support people from surviving to thriving - a wonderful case in point is a long standing foodbank member who experienced homelessness, destitution and trauma. Following a grant of status, AFRIL's advice manager supported her to secure safe housing and income, which took significant advocacy. She has started volunteering at Rainbow Club, which she loves, and this month has received a formal job offer from the British Red Cross.

ADVICE AND ADVOCACY SERVICE IN NUMBERS...

We have supported **76** clients with **97** dependents to resolve casework issues
The Immigration Project has provided advice and representation to **30** clients and **41** dependents
The Advice and Advocacy Service has **4** active volunteers
3 long standing clients were offered secure housing, **2** of whom had been street homeless and **1** in a precarious housing situation.

Helping Hands Foodbank - Food and Essentials, Allotment in Bloom

AFRIL's 2023 BIG GIVE Champions campaign - 'Food for Thought - feeding young minds of the future' was a success. This campaign raised funds to support the work of the food bank and allotment in providing healthy food for hungry children, and of artmaking to inspire self-confidence and resilience. The allotment has become a place of welcome, sanctuary and well-being.

Between 6th - 20th June we had just two weeks to raise £7,500. Reaching our target meant that the funds would be doubled by our pledgers and our match funder the Childhood Trust.

WE MADE IT!

Thank you all so much for donating, sharing and supporting our campaign. Thank you for being part of our community making London a place of safety and welcome for people seeking sanctuary.

Combined with Gift Aid, together we raised a magnificent £16,158 to deliver these projects to improve the lives of children in poverty. This is over a quarter of our Foodbank and Wellbeing Projects costs so it makes a huge difference. Without your support and this funding we would not have been able to sustain the delivery of our food bank on a regular basis to families who have experienced forced migration, many of whom have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and all of whom face increased food poverty due to the cost-of-living crisis. We would also not have been able to maintain our allotment of refuge project, where families can join together to grow culturally appropriate food and harvest it to contribute to the food bank fresh food. Our Foodbank art@home art group for families would not have been able to extend its connections to local galleries, which led to families connecting together and forming friendships and networks of resilience and self-esteem as they met on trips to see art by artists from around the world. Finally, we would not have been able to take advantage of the opportunity to hold our first public exhibition of art by food bank families at the Gerald Moore Gallery at Eltham College.

The food bank continues to meet every fortnight, with a free cafe provided by the church team. We have distributed donated Sim cards and now refurbished laptops to enable digital connectivity, supported people to access the Lewisham Household Support Fund for help with fuel costs, and grants through the Lewisham Essentials Fund that AFRIL has administered, and to volunteering and employability schemes. This month, two clients have found work or alternative support and been able to move the food bank, creating places for new families in need.

Foodbank member, 2023: *"I love the way you guys change the food items to voucher card and I think is the best way and people can get the things they want by themself"*

Our allotment of refuge team led by Rose continues to welcome new friends and AFRIL members. Allotment sessions have run on Tuesday mornings and every other Sunday, with Friday evening harvesting for the Saturday food bank. As part of the Grow Back Greener Project, Rose ran our first Rainbow Club Saturday morning outdoor learning session with children from reception class. Parents, volunteers and teachers joined children at the session to learn about sustainable food growing, identifying insects and how worms support AFRIL's climate resilience work!

We were also delighted to see so many of you at our Summer Celebration on June 18th. This was held at the Allotment of Refuge. At the Summer Celebration, the Allotment Ambassador Scheme was launched. They shared leaflets in English, French and Arabic with visitors and offered tours of the site and information about the food being grown. The Ambassadors will continue a programme of outreach to encourage people from their own communities to join the allotment team.

Sadly, we said 'goodbye' to our art@home group leader Elaine Homer. Elaine began with AFRIL in February 2020 and facilitated the fortnightly art sessions and gallery trips for over 3 years. She will be most remembered for connecting us to the Gerald Moore Gallery at Eltham College and curating our recent Art without borders exhibition. As is the AFRIL way, we look for silver linings: we are taking the opportunity to further develop our member's co-producing the art group.

More about the Lewisham Local Essentials Fund:
The Lewisham Local Essentials Grants Fund was a programme developed and run by Lewisham Local in partnership with 8 local organisations including AFRIL to provide small grants to some of the borough's most marginalised local residents most impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. It was funded by Lewisham Council. AFRIL assessed and distributed 41 grants to food bank clients.
"We set out to improve the quality of life and physical and mental well-being for grant recipients. Every grant did this in one or more ways; saving money on fuel or cooking, helping families make the most of free fresh vegetables, sleeping better, children having dry, warm feet, and not feeling different from their friends at school because they had the same uniform, or having some quality time with family." Helen, Food Bank Manager

HELPING HANDS IN NUMBERS...

Between June 2022 and June 2023 we supported **121** children from **51** families
We provided **1827** food parcels including food vouchers and fresh fruit and vegetables
In February 2022 we increased the value of food vouchers by **£5** per household to reflect the cost of living increase.
We provided **16** destitute families with regular supplies of nappies and baby wipes
Since January this year, the allotment team has involved **29** active volunteers, of whom **60%** are people who have sought sanctuary
We delivered **86** wellbeing activities (art, gardening sessions, allotment summer workshops and events) that provided education, fun and improved health and wellbeing for children and their families living in poverty.

Allotment of Refuge member, 2023: *"It is a place where you can escape from constant pressure. Therapeutic because you can get lost in the gardening. The land produces the food which you can get your hands on. Every 2 weeks you get to taste your efforts. Rewarding. All the staff give you reassuring confidence things will work out. Personally, I started contributing to the house I was in because of AFRIL. Before that not only did someone provide a roof but food too. With AFRIL the control dynamics became manageable. I was buying my own food. Changed everything. It went from being a burden, to at least I can feed myself. Without the allotment I am lost. With the allotment, I have a family. A community. Similar ppl going through similar upheaval. With staff to talk too when things become difficult."*

Summer Celebration - thank you for coming!

Thank you to AFRIL members, supporters, funders, volunteers, and staff for joining us at our Summer Celebration in June. We'd like to especially thank those who brought delicious home cooked food to share whilst everyone enjoyed music, art activities and hearing about AFRIL's work. We hope you had a relaxing afternoon away from the business of London at our beautiful Allotment of Refuge - it is always a pleasure to share this special space with the AFRIL community.

For those of you who weren't able to join us, you'll have another opportunity to meet the AFRIL team at our AGM in January.

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FAIRBEAT

Creating Ground

Church of the Good Shepherd with St. Peter, Lee
a growing Anglican church in Lee, South East London

City of Sanctuary Supporting Organisation

advice quality standard

Southwark Law Centre