October 2022

Action For Refugees In Lewisham

News and Events from AFRIL

A message from our Director

Welcome to our Autumn newsletter. As the leaves begin to turn at the Allotment of Refuge, our children return to Rainbow Club and we begin another year.

I can barely believe it has been a year since I joined AFRIL, I feel like I have been part of this community forever. I think that is not an uncommon feeling for anyone lucky enough to stumble across this little charity.

This is the time of year when we enhance our regular conversations with our clients and do a big feedback survey. Thanks to the efforts of our Monitoring Officer Jessica and our fantastic office volunteer Zakari, we have had our highest response rate to date. Punching above our weight, our part time staff (less than 4 full time posts) and volunteers supported almost 500 people this year, 171 families. Improving your life circumstances when you have insecure immigration status is a long term endeavour and most families have been working with us for 1-2 years whilst waiting for Home Office decisions. The nature of the support we provide is holistic, person centred and of the highest standard and over 90% of people said that coming to AFRIL has improved their wellbeing and helped them feel part of a community. Despite incredibly difficult home circumstances, raising children in insecure housing, immigration status and extreme food poverty, some of the many things families said about AFRIL were...

"It's not community, it's family. They give me support."

"It has given me hope and give me a meal" (Foodbank)

"They go beyond their way to assist you and to make sure that your problem is solved and make you aware of the progress of your problems." (Advice and Advocacy Service)

"I'm happy, I'm relaxed, I'm not scared. Everything is good."

"Thank you to AFRIL because they've been a very big support to me. Without them I don't think I'd have been able to get to where I am. I feel at home when I go to AFRIL."

We've had an exciting summer with a series of workshops for families at the Allotment including food growing, art and body percussion. We were asked by Refugee Council to deliver summer school workshops for new arrivals on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, and through the Lewisham Migration Forum of which AFRIL is on the steering group, we have been furthering the agenda of improving the welcome for refugees and migrants in Lewisham. Thanks to funding from the National Lottery Communities Fund we have this year maintained the increased level of service provision in terms of the number of foodbank families and enhanced advice and advocacy work. Importantly this also gave us the opportunity to fully launch our Together We Thrive programme, a women-led support network and series of practical capacity building workshops for our capable migrant women. We are hoping to be able to continue this work and provide more leadership and influencing opportunities for the people we serve.

In August we said goodbye to our Advice and Advocacy Officer Shahrazad Magrabi. After 3 years at AFRIL during the challenging pandemic, she has made an enormous contribution to our charity and will be missed. In December we will be welcoming two new members to the Advice Team thanks to funding from the Henry Smith Charity and are thrilled to be able to expand our casework provision and set up a volunteering programme within the Advice Service to address the unprecedented increase in demand due to the cost of living crisis coupled with the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic. Our immigration project with Southwark Law Centre has gone from strength to strength. The Law Centre does our file reviews and support - ensuring our AQS accredited advice work is at the highest standard. The project immigration solicitor, Ed, has supported over 30 families to take concrete steps to regularise their immigration status. Home Office delays are lengthy, but so far the project has reported 5 successful grants of leave, no refusals and 100% success rate in fee waivers. This is a game changer for our families who are unable to access sufficient legal aid and enables sustainable and long term solutions.

Thank you to all of our volunteers, supporters and funders reading this. You make it possible for us to be there to support people at the most challenging times. It's an uncertain time for funding across the sector and especially foodbanks who are facing pressure at all sides. We've had some difficult decisions to make but we're keeping going. We have a responsibility to our families, one of whom recently summed up the Helping Hands Foodbank as "It's holding me." Without further ado, I will let you get on with reading!
Best wishes,

Sophie Wickham
AFRIL Director

Summer Holidays and Start of Term at Rainbow Club

Autumn term began on 17th September, with children, teachers, and volunteers all excited to be back. Saturday starts with a healthy breakfast, then moves onto specialised English and Maths tuition following the national curriculum, art, sports and a very fun playtime. We have just started an exciting new project called '7 Poet Trees', part of the Lewisham Borough of Culture 2022 revolving around environmental themes explored through poetry. Workshops will take place at Rainbow Club and at the AFRIL allotment in One Tree Hill, culminating in the planting of a tree in Mayow Park on the evening of Thursday 10th November, with the children performing their own poetry at the planting. We held similar creative workshops at our allotment over the summer. about these and the other exciting events that took place over the summer.

"The Rainbow Club is rainbow and wonderful"; "What I want"; "It's a school with games"; "Normal"; "Amazing"; "Surprising"; "Just right"; "That Rainbow Club is very fun and we learn a lot"; "The best thing in my life".

Our last day of term was on 17th December and all children received Christmas presents, kindly donated to us by the Salvation Army and Lewisham 14th Scouts. Parents came to watch the children showcase this term's work and give music performances, followed by a celebration meal where parents and volunteers brought dishes to share with everyone. As always, a great way to close out the Autumn term before the Christmas break.

In celebration of Refugee Week, on 25th June, we held a fantastic school performance for all our parents. Showcasing the children's school work. Sadegh, Rainbow Club's art teacher, showed some of the artwork from this year, and encouraged parents to support their children's artistic curiosity and creativity. Fairbeats had each class perform songs and play their instruments, as well as a full school rendition of the song 'Hold Your Head Up High', a song written by our very own Rainbow Club students. Fairbeats also showcased their Young Leaders project, a fantastic opportunity for Rainbow Club alumni. Children attended a music production and songwriting workshop at the Albany in Deptford (more can be seen here: https://www.fairbeats.co.uk/)

Summer workshops and a trip to the Maritime Museum kept our Rainbow Club parents and children busy! Five workshops were held at the allotment and included gardening, art, and body percussion. Parents stayed for the sessions with their children, providing an opportunity for parents to relax and make friends. They were a huge success and we are planning regular allotment forest school in the coming terms.

Six AFRIL families had a trip to the Maritime Museum in Greenwich where they helped to design a new outdoor play space. Those involved will be invited to the grand opening of the play space, expected sometime in 2023!

Last week, our children were asked to describe Rainbow Club in their own words. Here are some examples of what they said, really highlighting the impact that the school has on their lives...

"amazing" "brilliant" "what I want"

"rainbow club is very fun and we learn a lot" "surprising"

"the rainbow club is rainbow and wonderful" "just right" special"

"the best thing in my life"

Thank you to our Rainbow Club funders: BBC Children in Need and the Leathersellers Company.

An Update on the Helping Hands Foodbank

The Helping Hands Food Bank has continued to provide essential food parcels and fresh food for the most vulnerable families in our community. Despite facing the challenges that food banks are experiencing - unpredictable supplies, lower donations, higher costs and more urgent demand - we continue to support over 40 adults and over 80 children. Find out more

Over the last 6 months, global food shortages and unreliable food supply chains have impacted on weekly supply of much needed items and on increased costs bag-for-bag, placing a huge strain on the foodbank budget - a partnership between AFRIL and St Peter's and the Good Shepherd Church, Lee. This is at a time when individual donations to foodbanks have fallen, as everyone feels the impact of the cost of living crisis, and when energy prices associated with community buildings including church halls, have risen sharply.

This situation has been aggravated by the increasing unreliability of pre-placed online bulk-buy supermarket orders. This came to a head in mid August, when Sainsbury's cancelled their full delivery to St Peter's church overnight, citing stock shortages. On that occasion 2 members of the church volunteer team visited 6 different supermarkets to pull together enough core food to ensure clients had some food bags to collect the following day. This scenario was familiar to the AFRIL team during the early months of the covid 19 pandemic. AFRIL is active in a network of foodbanks and across the country, and others were reporting similar scenarios. The situation became unsustainable almost overnight.

An emergency decision was taken to move immediately from a core food parcel to a voucher based system for food bank clients. Members still come to the food bank fortnightly and receive fresh fruit and vegetables (including produce grown at the

Allotment of Refuge). Instead of a core food bag, they receive vouchers that can be exchanged at ALDI.

This is a period of change - intensive research and modelling is being undertaken by both AFRIL and church members to reach a more permanent solution. Just like when the pandemic hit and we pivoted to a doorstep delivery service with amazing local volunteer cyclists, we are dynamic enough to weather this storm. Our concern, of course, is how this is impacting the families we serve. We have an ongoing conversation with our members. They have told us that a food voucher enables them to have more choice and control over what they buy and how they manage the balance between food costs and bills. Most families tell us the current voucher amount is not enough to survive. We still have fresh food through our partners at Lee Greens, and Fair Share Felix, alongside our home grown produce from the Allotment of Refuge. Our members come to collect in person, which they have said provides them social connections, community and support.

The food bank team remains steadfastly positive and we are reframing this crisis as an opportunity to fast track some innovation. With the change to fortnightly attendance, some time is now available for staff and volunteers to explore other possible sources of funding, and research sister projects such as social supermarkets that may help our longer-term families transition from the food bank in a supported way, meaning we can support families on our large waiting list. Lewisham Local have awarded us £500 match funding to explore these related models to enhance the sustainability of the foodbank. In order to unlock this funding, AFRIL needs to raise £500 from individual and community donations in December by a targeted campaign. Do get in touch if you would like to help us with this.

The foodbank free cafe re-opened this month, providing a warm drop-in where foodbank families and volunteers can meet, chat, and seek support. We will be delivering monthly advice sessions at the drop ins from AFRIL's Advice and Advocacy Service.

The art@home group had a lovely trip to Dulwich Picture Gallery in August to see the Reframed: The Woman in the Window, exhibition that the group had contributed to earlier in the year. The group have also been invited to plan and curate a public exhibition of their work at the Gerald Moore Gallery, Eltham College in February 2023.

During the growing season, our fantastic Allotment Gardener Rose has run fortnightly Friday evening harvest sessions open to members, volunteers and plot holders. She is exploring how to plan volunteer food harvest activity over the winter months. We have joined other One Tree Hill Allotment partners to share ideas and expertise in preserving crops and have ambitious plans for developing our allotment

practice to contribute to climate sustainability.

The story of the Allotment of Refuge, told by our clients themselves, will feature in the October edition of SAGA Magazine as part of their regular gardening column and a feature on allotments and well being. Do pick up a copy!

We are developing an exciting work plan for the Allotment of Refuge 2023 - building on the current planting scheme and volunteer activity, supporting the next phase of the allotment vision. This includes a programme of workshops aimed at increasing the number of people involved in the plot including Rainbow Club children who will integrate regular outdoor learning into the curriculum, wider AFRIL service members, partners and local volunteers. The workshop programme will focus on different areas depending on the group: environmental education, growing food, building and maintaining the plot, campfire cooking etc. We are working with our members to develop a more formal advisory board for the plot and to engage their expertise in community engagement as ambassadors. We are exploring the possibility of a quarterly 'volunteer day' to engage specific local companies in both allotment and climate agenda work, and awareness of the experiences of refugees and migrants.

Rose and our members are developing a 'code of care', which is a charter for working the plot in a more sustainable way, that takes greater care of not just the people on the plot, but also of the soil, saving resources and using practices, innovations and improvements to respond to the climate change and the environmental sustainability agenda. Practical ideas so far are to develop an irrigation system that relies less on constant manual watering and helps future-proof our site against drought, planting perennials to reduce replanting and support soil quality, building some permanent structures to protect crops and some raised beds to assist access for people with mobility needs. Our theme of climate-friendly practice feels doubly appropriate as it links us in solidarity with displaced people across the globe who are disproportionately impacted by climate change disaster.

Together We Thrive workshops off to a good start!

Thanks to funding from the National Lottery Communities Fund, these past few months we have been running a series of workshops as part of our women led Together We Thrive project, facilitated by Helen, our Foodbank Director, and Laura from Creating Ground. In recognition of the capability and strength of the women of AFRIL, many of whom are single mothers raising families in very difficult circumstances, Together We Thrive provides an opportunity to gain new skills, receive and give peer support and in turn increase confidence and feelings of connectedness to a community.

Workshops aim to increase understanding of how UK systems work to enable families to thrive in their new and challenging environment. Click to

The pilot consisted of four workshops and activities have included using creative mediums for women to identify and celebrate their strengths, sharing tips on saving money and things to do with children on low incomes, discussing and acting on aspirations for the future, and learning/role plays on how to effectively communicate with public bodies, such as the council.

Together We Thrive is one of the ways that AFRIL is working alongside the families we support to enable them to build their knowledge, confidence, and skills. Workshops are interactive and coproduced, with topics set by the women to ensure they are the most useful. We're currently evaluating the success of the project and the quotes and feedback so far has been incredibly positive, with one participant saying: "I'm so happy. The group is a discovery group, I can explore what I want to do, and I can achieve what I want to do, and never forget that I can do it."

Volunteering Opportunities!

We have several exciting opportunities coming up for regular and one off volunteering. Click to see a list of our latest volunteering opportunities and please get in touch with jessica@afril.org.uk if you are interested in finding out more!

Our current volunteering opportunities include...

- Project volunteering - AFRIL Project support; Campaigning; Art exhibition
- AFRIL food bank - alternate Saturday mornings starting Saturday 15th October 9.00 - 11.30am: welcoming families and chatting over a cuppa.
- AFRIL allotment gardening group - Tuesday mornings 09.30 - 1.30 (drop in when you can), Alternate Friday 4 - 6pm and Saturday workshops as arranged.
- Office volunteering - options include administration, contacting clients, research, social media and newsletter.
- Fundraising volunteers - grants research, crowdfunding campaigns, drafting correspondence, supporting funding bids.
- Rainbow Club teaching assistants (all training provided). Find out more here.
- Policy and external network meetings

- Co-treasurer to join our excellent board of trustees - must be accounting qualified
- Data input and monitoring
- Christmas volunteering! Don't worry this isn't Christmas Day but if anyone loves to source and wrap up gifts for children in December, or help with our Wrap up London coat deliveries then please get in touch!

Support our work for free!

Did you know you can support AFRIL without actually making a donation? Sign up to Easy Fundraising and Amazon Smile and a proportion of the cost of your online purchases will be donated to AFRIL.

It's completely free and you can shop as normal with no added costs - thanks to those who have already signed up! Find out more

Sign up to Easy Fundraising here and every time you shop online, eligible retailers will donate a proportion of the cost of the item to AFRIL.

It's completely free and you can shop as normal with no added costs. So far, we've raised over £300 from this platform - thanks to those who have already signed up!

The link to sign up is here: https://www.easyfundraising.org.uk/

Sign up to Amazon Smile and Amazon will donate a proportion of the cost of the item to AFRIL. This won't cost you anything!

To sign up, visit https://smile.amazon.co.uk/, sign in with your Amazon account, and select "AFRIL" as the cause to support.

Stay in touch...

Sign up to our mailing list to receive 3 newsletters per year and occasional mailings - click here.

Follow us on social media...

AFRIL Instragram
@afril.org.uk

AFRIL Twitter
@Afril

AFRIL allotment of Refuge
@allotmentofrefuge

AFRIL Facebook
Action for Refugees in Lewisham - AFRIL