August 2024

Action For Refugees In Lewisham

News and Events from AFRIL

A message from our Director

The tragic events in Southport last week shocked us all. It is unimaginable what the parents of the three children who were killed and their community are going through. The violence that has erupted since is an insult to the children's memories.

Sweeping through our communities, this white supremacist violence is racist and Islamophobic. A widely shared view is that this far right violence should be treated as acts of terrorism, particularly when you see mosques being targeted. Many people are showing their support for people affected by pointing out that the person who murdered these children was not an asylum seeker, or an immigrant, and had no connection to Islam. As much as it is important that we dispute the false information about him that is circulating, we should also be careful when saying this that we don't inadvertently justify the premise - it does not matter what his identity is, he is the only person responsible for his crime.

Sadly, the events of the last fortnight have been brewing for decades and our politicians and media have a lot to answer for - migrant scapegoating, racism and Islamophobia is nothing new, but this does not justify this racist violence. It is completely inexcusable. It is having a significant impact on safety, wellbeing, and mental health of the people that AFRIL supports and indeed our own feelings of safety as staff and volunteers at a refugee charity.

At AFRIL, we have been prioritising keeping our clients, staff and volunteers safe. We have been coordinating with sector and statutory colleagues to monitor the situation daily. Earlier in the week, we made the difficult decision to not post publicly on social media and removed outreach information from our website - as an on the ground service delivery charity we felt that this would mitigate the risk of our clients and staff becoming a direct target. It's been a hard week and it's not over. Many sanctuary seekers that we are supporting in the community, and particularly those trapped in asylum hotels where we do a substantial amount of work, are telling us they are scared to go out. We have support and safety planning in place, but we cannot change the fear.

As a team we were heart-warmed to see Wednesday evening's planned far-right violence turn into an outpouring of peaceful protest support for our communities and a rejection of hatred. I'm sure some of you were there. It made me proud to be a Londoner. AFRIL has come together with the Lewisham Community led by the Mayor of Lewisham and our Members of Parliament to issue a joint statement condemning the violence and making it clear that this minority does not speak for Lewisham, a Borough of Sanctuary that welcomes migrants and rejects hatred and racism in all its forms.

A supporter said something this week on social media that caught my eye – they mentioned the work that AFRIL does on an ongoing basis, saying that "light, hope and support is quiet rebellion at times like this". This is what we will continue to do, with even more determination than before.

You have below our newsletter updates from AFRIL's brilliant projects supporting refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants in our community. These were written before the latest outbreak of violence.

Sending our solidarity to all those reading this who are people of colour and/or are from asylum seeking, refugee, and migrant backgrounds.

Sophie Wickham
AFRIL Director

"For six years, I had the chance to be involved with AFRIL (Action for Refugees in Lewisham). Their help was invaluable to me and my family. They supported us on many fronts, including immigration, guiding us through often complex and daunting processes. Thanks to them, my children were able to receive free meals, which significantly eased our financial burden. In addition, AFRIL provided us with food and clothing, meeting essential needs and offering us security and dignity that we would have struggled to maintain without their help. Beyond material support, it was within AFRIL that I made some of the most meaningful connections of my life. I met people who shared similar experiences, and we formed a supportive and understanding community.This period with AFRIL not only helped me overcome daily challenges but also enriched my life with valuable relationships and a deeper understanding of human solidarity." - AFRIL member, July 2024

Summer Term at Rainbow Club...

Rainbow Club has concluded another successful academic year with learning, trips, and fun! Children worked hard through the year, improving their English and Maths, led by our excellent class teachers. We want to thank our team of volunteer teaching assistants, coming from all professions, including several Rainbow Club parents. They bring their passion and language skills to provide one to one support for the children who need it most.

Summer term saw each class enjoy exciting educational trips. Passion Fruit class visited the AFRIL allotment for a hands on workshop with Rose, learning about life in the pond and compost pile. The children used magnifying glasses to identify insects living in the soil, talked about why they are important to the health of the soil and pond, and how they help us grow food and care for our allotment. Starfruit class took a trip to the Horniman museum, where they learnt about sea life in the aquarium, and stepped into the past in the 'Dinosaur Evolution' exhibition featuring animatronic models, fossils, and interactive displays. Mango class jumped on the DLR for a tour around Mudchute farm, one of the biggest city farms in Europe, meeting lots of animals and even feeding some!

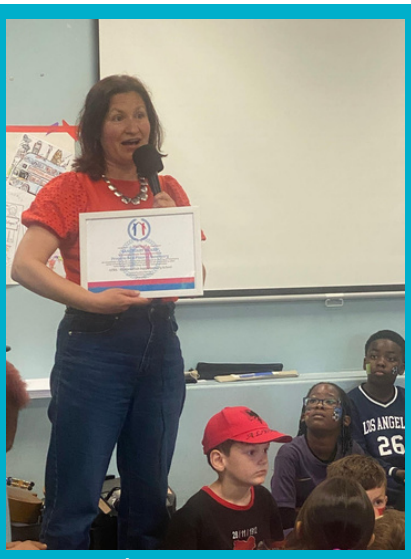
Rainbow Club sports day took place on a sunny June day in Ladywell Fields. Our Year 6s were joined by a group of Dulwich College Year 6s who together planned and ran the various activity stations for the younger children, including dodgeball, penalty shootout, skipping races, three-legged races and more. To end the day, children put their might into our customary tug-of-war contest in front of their cheering parents. A big thank you to our Rainbow Club sport teacher, Daniel, all of the Year 6s, and to Dulwich College, for coming together to create another fantastic day filled with sporting fun!

Creative sessions including Art and Music helped children to develop their confidence and self-esteem by providing alternative outlets to express themselves. Art workshops this year focussed on introducing new and resourceful ways of creating art and reinforcing to our children, who are from low income households, that art can be made from anything. produce their new resources for families. Sessions have included painting with natural dyes made from plants, kitchen spices and food waste including onion skins and avocados.

Using string to make textured drawings and paper pulp to make sculptures with our teacher Lucie, there has been a focus on multidisciplinary making with unconventional yet accessible materials. This offers the children the opportunity to explore ideas, and provides multiple sensory points to engage with art and develop their storytelling through making. Rainbow Club children participated in workshops with our teacher Sadegh and the National Gallery to co-produce their new resources for families.

Our Refugee Week celebration was a wonderful success, despite the predictably unpredictable British weather forcing us to relocate everything indoors. Children spent the morning hosting activity stalls that they planned themselves including face-painting, henna, hair-braiding, and arts & crafts. We invited parents, partners, funders, and friends to join us for our showcase where children put on incredible musical performances, heartfelt poetry readings, and an entertaining catwalk to show off their traditional clothes.

We are also very proud to have received the Sanctuary Award earlier this year, from City of Sanctuary, in recognition of our commitment to creating a culture of welcome and inclusion for those seeking sanctuary. Fittingly, as Lewisham was the first borough in the UK to be awarded Sanctuary status, Lewisham's Borough of Sanctuary Manager, Katya Griffin, joined our showcase to present us with the award.



A massive thank you to all of our Rainbow Club teachers, volunteers, partners, collaborators, funders, and supporters for yet another amazing year. Wishing everyone a thoroughly deserved summer break, and looking forward to September!

Stats for the 23/24 academic year:
- 88 children from 58 families were supported at Rainbow Club
- 140 hours of English, Maths, Art, Music, and Sport provision for every child
- 54 volunteers (including 17 youth volunteers) contributed over 3000 volunteer hours
- 98% of children felt happy at Rainbow Club
- 86% of children felt their confidence had improved
- 96% of children made new friends at Rainbow Club

Parent feedback
"I love the way they encourage the kids"
"My girls very happy and enjoy every Saturday was very kind respectful teacher thanks a lot for everyone"
"My child has improved in her relationship with her peers, her confidence has improved and she has improved in her English and Maths subjects both at Rainbow club and her mainstream school"

Children describe Rainbow Club in one word:

Welcoming new staff and members to our Food Bank

AFRIL's Food Bank in partnership with St Peter's Church has been busy, with the cost of living crisis showing no signs of abating. We have welcomed our new Food Bank Coordinator Louise Vangheluwe. Louise was previously our Food Bank Administrator so is a familiar face, and is excited about taking the Food Bank into its next phase in her new role.

"I was very excited to start as the new food bank coordinator last month and I feel very passionate about and committed to my new role. Since I started I have been working more closely with my colleagues in the Advice and Advocacy service to support some of our clients move on and to welcome new clients. I am very grateful to my colleagues who have been doing incredible work with some of our food bank clients who are now in a much better position and are able to work and access mainstream support. I have received new referrals for destitute clients whom we have welcomed this week. I also support people to access interim support such as one-off food bank vouchers to use with our partners, the Lewisham Food Bank, help to access free community meals, and referrals to our brilliant partners at GRACE Aid and MamaKind to access free clothing and baby items." - Louise, Food Bank Coordinator

In the last six months we have distributed over £5000 in individual grants for people and families who are struggling with the cost of living, thanks to Lewisham Essentials Grant and other partners. These have purchased beds and washing machines for refugee families moved into empty housing, cooking equipment for those who cannot afford it, and school uniforms for children. We have facilitated a researcher from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine who came to the Food Bank and interviewed mothers with young children about their thoughts and opinions of cash-first approaches, like Healthy Start, to inform Lewisham Council's policies going forward. AFRIL clients more generally advise Lewisham Council on their policy work through their Borough of Sanctuary project.

This month we have also continued to distribute the lovely harvested greens from the AFRIL Allotment of Refuge, led by Rose. The garlic was especially welcome!

In the words of our Food Bank clients:

"Is so nice walking into St.Peters seeing those lovely people handing over those food items with love and kindness through their eyes and this in a way gives me hope that some people care somehow like the group I met last week"

"Having food to eat and a sense of belonging."

"You have peace of mind-food on the table and personal cleanliness"

"The food bank has had a significant and positive impact on my children's health. Access to nutritious and balanced meals has improved their overall well-being, ensuring they get the essential vitamins and nutrients needed for their growth and development. This reliable source of healthy food has not only helped them maintain a balanced diet but also boosted their energy levels and immune system, contributing to their academic performance and daily activities. Additionally, for my son who has diabetes, the availability of suitable and healthy food options has been crucial in managing his condition effectively and maintaining his health."

Advice and Casework - Improving Lives

The Advice and Advocacy team have continued to work exceptionally hard, supporting 170 families over the last two months with 3 full time equivalent casework posts. We have seen a significant increase in street homelessness with complex cases. The Immigration Project, run in partnership with Southwark Law Centre, has worked with 21 clients and their dependents offering specialist advice covering 24 matters.

Together with Citizens Advice Lewisham we secured funding from Lewisham Council from the Shared Prosperity Fund. Through this project AFRIL will be providing advanced training to all Citizens Advice Lewisham staff on housing and entitlements for migrants. AFRIL will provide complex casework directly to Lewisham based clients through this referral pathway, alongside our existing work supporting asylum seekers and newly recognised refugees leaving asylum hotels in the Borough. We are looking forward to strengthening our co-working with Citizens Advice and supporting our local mainstream providers to incorporate support for migrants into their services to meet the ever increasing need.

In early July, AFRIL was interviewed and appointed to the London Housing Panel. As one of 15 members, AFRIL will help advise the GLA on housing policy across London and have direct input into the London Plan. We will collate information from clients and the broader voluntary sector, sharing policy suggestions on improving temporary accommodation, No Recourse to Public Funds housing and the provision of Social Housing as it relates to our client group. The Panel's other representatives are mostly from large organisations, so this is a significant achievement for AFRIL!

Our Lewisham Asylum Outreach at the Salvation Army and Family Hubs has continued to be well attended and significant capacity is dedicated to supporting complex cases of appeal rights exhausted asylum seekers in the community who are feeling the impact of successive legal aid cuts, as well as families living in the remaining asylum support hotel. AFRIL also supports several members in asylum hotels in Southwark, and supports vulnerable people to challenge threatened moves to ex-RAF sites and the Bibby Stockholm Barge. We are pleased that the government will not be renewing the Barge contract in January, though people still have five months of this inhumane place to endure.

In June the Advice and Advocacy Manager led two learning sessions on asylum support accommodation to caseworkers across the sector at the Praxis Migrant Homeless Symposium. Following these presentations we have been approached by a number of organisations for second tier advice and assistance to draft pre-action protocol (PAP) legal letters.

The whole team has worked with phenomenal dedication and compassion. We are very lucky to have such a fantastic team of caseworkers.

Allotment of Refuge is blooming

It's been a busy few months at our Allotment of Refuge. We have been recovering from storm damage, preparing for the growing season, harvesting crops for the food bank, building a shed, and shovelling 6 tonnes of manure! All of this took place alongside developing and facilitating our Allotment Advisory Panel which implements collective leadership and decision-making about plans and activities on the site.

In recent months, the allotment volunteer team, led by our Project Lead, Rose, have been working hard to repair the site after the damage of the winter/spring storms. March and April was a particularly challenging time for this as the impact of climate change was felt with full force on our lovely plot at One Tree Hill Allotment Society (OTHAS). Due to the unprecedented rain, our plot was first flooded, with several paths made impassable and several beds underwater, then our lovely willow tree camel down, narrowly missing the polytunnel. Thankfully no one was hurt, but the plot was unusable for activities for some weeks whilst paths were cleaned and restored. We successfully managed the crisis, and we want to say thank you to our friends at OTHAS, fellow plotholders and volunteers who rallied round to help with the remedial work to make us safe and accessible again.

The team is now happy to be regularly back onsite, getting their hands dirty and growing and harvesting crops for our food bank. Our dedicated team of old and new volunteers have continued to come along to regular volunteer growing and harvesting sessions. Tuesdays are for sowing seeds, planting out, tending to compost, watering and making plans. We continue to come together at the end of the session to refuel with a delicious shared lunch. Fortnightly Friday evenings sessions are harvest time when our fresh produce is transported over to the AFRIL Food Bank at St Peter's Church.

We have also run monthly weekend work days for larger tasks that require more volunteers. Recently, this has included shed building, and a hot day shovelling 6 tonnes of manure up to our plot - thank you so much to everyone who helped out!

In June, we held our Allotment Community Meal to celebrate Refugee Week. The theme of Refugee Week this year was "Our Home" and was described as "From the places we gather to share meals to our collective home, planet earth: everyone is invited to celebrate what Our Home means to them." Holding a community meal at the allotment was the perfect way to celebrate this theme - members, volunteers and staff brought delicious food to share, and learnt about the allotment from our allotment volunteer Saafa, Rose and Sophie. Thank you to everyone who came along to celebrate with us.

We continue to proactively welcome new volunteers to the project, and our Allotment Project Lead has been doing outreach at a local asylum hotel to encourage community members who have very little access to safe, outdoor spaces to come along and enjoy the beautiful site, grow food, and enjoy shared meals. We expect that this plot will become increasingly important as a safe space to calm the mind and body for those affected by the current violence. If you are interested in volunteering, please do get in touch.

We have developed our Allotment Advisory Panel to facilitate collective leadership and decision-making about plans and activities on the site. This panel exemplifies the community spirit of our allotment - it consists of a mix of volunteers with lived experience of forced migration and other local resident volunteers. All join together to share knowledge and ideas about the best ways to develop the project, united by a shared love and passion for growing food using climate friendly practices, and protecting the plot so that it continues to be a retreat for AFRIL members and their children to escape from the realities of the hostile environment, meet new people, learn about food growing, and play and relax in a safe green space.

AFRIL is recruiting!

AFRIL is recruiting a part time caseworker to expand our busy and friendly Advice and Advocacy team! We are looking for a motivated and skilled caseworker with an interest in using the law to empower marginalised people. They will have experience of supporting asylum seekers, refugees and vulnerable migrants to rebuild their lives and enjoy working in a friendly and dynamic environment.

See the posting on CharityJob for full details. Deadline for applications Monday 2nd September 9am.

Our wonderful Allotment of Refuge Project Lead will be going on maternity leave towards the end of the year and we will shortly be recruiting for the post. Please check AFRIL's website regularly for this and other opportunities.

Stay in touch...

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

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