December 2024

Action For Refugees In Lewisham

News and Events from AFRIL

A message from our Director

2024 has been a year of challenge and change. This time last year we still had the Rwanda policy and we were dealing with an acute refugee homelessness crisis with the move on period (the time refugees have to find a new home and secure income after receiving a decision on their asylum claim) set at just 5 days. Chaos and widespread destitution ensued. Then we had the Home Office 'maximisation' policy - forced room sharing without any suitability assessments - for people surviving in asylum hotels that were invariably in a state of disrepair with inedible food. AFRIL was a key sector voice in challenging this policy and supporting asylum seekers to navigate this when their human rights were breached. We also supported Lewisham and Greenwich Councils, and advised the Greater London Authority, on effective support for residents during hotel closures.

With a change of government this year we have seen some of the worst aspects of the hostile environment cease - there is no more Rwanda plan, and the disgraceful Bibby Stockholm Barge has thankfully been closed. However, ex-military sites like RAF Wethersfield are being increased for use as asylum accommodation for people who have fled persecution, not infrequently at the hands of state military. This is triggering and traumatic for many of our clients and we will continue to challenge it.

There will be an investment in legal aid for the first time in almost 30 years, which whilst very welcome indeed, will not bring it up to what is needed for real access to justice. Let's hope this is a good first step. After years of campaigning, the refugee 'move on' period has been extended to 56 days. Although this is a temporary measure, at least for now it gives us a fighting chance at preventing the homelessness and destitution that has always been a designed part of the 'protection' system in the UK, however it takes a lot of intensive work from our small casework team. We are not out of the woods yet. The cost of living crisis shows no signs of abating: people are unable to afford food and essentials for their children. Demand for our services continues to outstrip supply. We still battle gatekeeping from statutory bodies where people are wrongfully denied assessments that they need in order to access essential shelter and food. Our Pre Action Protocol (PAP) Project with Deighton Pierce Glynn has been instrumental in resolving these cases, with AFRIL caseworkers' legal letters having a 98% success rate to date. You will get a taster of our results in Jess' Impact section below, and our full Impact Report will be published in the new year.

AFRIL has undergone change this year too. We have grown to meet the challenges of our external environment, and turned opportunities into positive outcomes for the people we exist to support. Our team has grown to 7 full time equivalent staff, supported by ten times the number of volunteers. You will read in this newsletter the brilliant work of our AFRIL's core services that support families and individuals in our community.

Rainbow Club was assessed as a school of sanctuary and awarded this status in the summer, celebrated at our Refugee Week showcase. We have an exciting new partnership with the Mercers' Company to deep dive into our literacy work over the next four years, with a learning partner at the Open University. Our Food Bank said goodbye in June to Helen after 7 years at AFRIL, and we welcomed Louise Vangheluwe stepping up to her new role leading the Food Bank with St Peter's Church. Our Casework and Advocacy Service has gone from strength to strength, securing outstanding outcomes for more clients than ever before, being awarded the highest level Advice Quality Standard accreditation in a record five areas in November, and providing training and second tier advice to organisations across the sector. Lewisham and Greenwich Council have both recognised the value and impact of this work for their residents in commissioning us to provide services.

Our partnership with Southwark Law Centre remains one of our most important, unblocking the barriers to regularising immigration status for families with no recourse to public funds, thanks to the continued support of Trust for London. We were sad to say goodbye to CEO Sally Causer and wish her all the best in her retirement, and are excited and committed to continuing this work with her excellent replacement Stacey. On the subject of immigration, rather excitingly AFRIL is in the process of registering with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner to provide regulated immigration advice and representation in house, supported by Refugee Action.

Our Allotment of Refuge has battled the effects of climate change this year with floods and storms damaging the site and bringing down our willow tree. Never one to be deterred, Rose led the volunteer team to rebuild and plant a successful season of harvests that went directly into food parcels at AFRIL's food bank. We congratulate Rose and her partner on the arrival of their daughter and wish them a wonderful time as a new family. We are pleased to announce that Reu is joining the team in January to lead the Allotment of Refuge whilst Rose is on maternity, bringing a wealth of community food growing and volunteer engagement experience. Our Members Forum has grown and widened in scope, providing a client-led space for workshops and information sessions, and a feedback loop on AFRIL's services and development. We are thrilled to have been awarded a grant from the National Lottery Communities Fund to recruit a lived experience coordinator in the new year to expand this important work.

Finally AFRIL has focused this year on taking the knowledge and evidence from our frontline services and our trusted relationships with our clients, and channeling this into influencing policy change. We now formally advise the Greater London Authority on four different asylum related areas, are a key partner to local authorities, and in September

this year were appointed as the migrant voice on the London Housing Panel - advising on the Mayor of London's housing policy across the capital. All of this from our tiny base in the Leemore Centre, it is due to the hard work, dedication and incredible skill of our team. I am grateful more than ever to be working with such a committed group of people, wish everyone a restful and peaceful festive period, and look forward to making London a better place for sanctuary seekers in 2025. Special thanks goes to Maggie Gravelle, who volunteers in the AFRIL office every week, and makes our newsletters happen!

Sophie Wickham
AFRIL Director

"AFRIL is a place where you seek for help and you get more than you expected. You feel welcome and accepted no matter what you are going through. Is a solution place."
AFRIL Member 2024

Our impact...

As the year draws to a close, AFRIL's Monitoring and Impact Lead, Jess Hughes, takes a moment to reflect and share some statistics and quotes from our annual survey with people who have first hand experience of AFRIL services. Thank you to all of our supporters, funders, and volunteers for making this possible - we truly couldn't have done it without you. We're looking forward to sharing our full impact with you when we publish our impact report in the new year, but for now please see below to see the highlights.

We supported 682 people in the last 12 months - that's 59% more than the year before, and highlights the growing need for our services in the face of hostile immigration policies and the high cost of living.

What people said about AFRIL in our annual survey:
- 96% said that coming to AFRIL has improved their wellbeing
- 93% said that coming to AFRIL has helped to improve their confidence
- 94% said that coming to AFRIL has helped them to feel a part of a community
- 100% of parents said their child enjoys Rainbow Club and that it improves their child's wellbeing.
- 88% of parents said their child has improved at their mainstream school since joining Rainbow Club.
- 97% of food bank members said that knowing they will have a regular food parcel helps them to feel more secure.
91% said that the advice service helped them to resolve a difficult situation.
- 100% would recommend AFRIL's Immigration Project to a friend

A selection of our project outcomes:
- This year educational assessments showed that 91% of children made progress in English and Maths at Rainbow Club
- 86% of children at Rainbow Club improved in confidence and self esteem.
- 82% of children at Rainbow Club made progress in gaining the knowledge and experience to form and subsequently fulfil their aspirations.
- Our casework service resolved 94% of homelessness cases, rising to 100% on the same day for cases where children were involved.
- We supported 89% of client in unsuitable asylum support accommodation to obtain safe accommodation
- We had a 100% success rate in supporting people to access asylum support payments.

Our members are best placed to put into words the difference that AFRIL makes to their lives - here is some testimony which captures the impact of our services...

"*has been helping and has welcoming spirit*" - AFRIL member

"*They are doing well in school and always happy any time when I said let's go to Rainbow club*" - Rainbow Club parent

"*it's so amazing. When you get to the food bank in the morning, before you take your bag and voucher you sit around in the restaurant, enjoy your tea and talk to each other like a family. The second best thing is that the staff are really nice, they ask how are you? How are the children? When I go there, I really feel like I am at home. They really try.*" - Food Bank member

"*A place to meet friends, learn new skills on gardening and feel as part of a family*" - Allotment of Refuge member

"*They help me to feel better and believes that one day I will be okay in London.*" - Advice client

Autumn term at Rainbow Club

Rainbow Club has finished off a busy and productive Autumn term! Week after week, our brilliant class teachers have worked tirelessly to deliver engaging, enriching lessons that combine learning with plenty of fun. Our regular Saturday programme provides targeted support in English and Maths, ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive. This term, we were fortunate to be able to average 5 volunteer teaching assistants in each class, every week, offering invaluable one-on-one and small-group support.

Our new art teacher, Hannah, has been running our Rainbow Club art sessions this term. Most recently she has been teaching the children how to make a hanging storage monster using applique. They brought in some of their pattern work from October too. All pupils designed a monster then using scraps of material and buttons they re-created them on templates. These monsters are such fun, some children have already decided what their monsters will look after for them... for some it's the next days clothes, for some its their hairbrush.

Passion Fruit class were treated to a fun trip to Soft Play. It was a fantastic opportunity for the children to enjoy some active play while developing their social and physical skills in a safe and stimulating environment.

Starfruit class enjoyed a visit to the Cutty Sark, where they learnt the fascinating history of the legendary ship. They were lucky to meet one of the ship's enthusiastic character actors, Tamera the Time Traveller, as she travelled through time and place exploring stories of encounter, exploration and endeavour. Thank you to Dylan and Moa from the always supportive museum team, who arranged tickets and helped coordinate the trip.

Mango class had a wonderful day at AFRIL's Allotment of Refuge, taking part in an engaging workshop led by Rose. The children got hands-on with clay, crafting beautiful and unique cane toppers to decorate the plot. They then ventured into the surrounding areas to explore the vibrant colors and textures for some autumn nature photography.

In November, Rainbow Club hosted Bromley Council for a visit, to share experience and learning, as they consider the potential for a similar provision for secondary school age children in their Borough.

This term, alongside Rainbow Club, we ran five Storytime sessions, in collaboration with the BookTrust. The sessions were designed for parents and their pre-school aged children, to set the foundations for good, regular reading habits which can have a significant impact on their future educational development. Each session focussed on a different book, sent by the BookTrust, along with various activity sheets, songs and rhymes. Thank you to the BookTrust, and Emma for coordinating all the resources. Thank you to our three volunteer facilitators, Ann, Claire, and Sandra, from Blackheath Quakers, who made the sessions such a joy for the families to attend!

Our term will end with our Christmas showcase, where children will perform for their parents, showcasing this term's work, and performing all of the music they have been learning with Fairbeats this term. Each class will receive a special visit from Santa, giving out presents that have been very kindly donated by Lewisham Salvation Army and Lewisham Scouts. A huge thank you also to our funder, the Angus Lawson Memorial Trust, who have donated supermarket vouchers for all the families, and to WrapUp London who provided winter coats for all AFRIL beneficiaries this Christmas.

And of course, a massive thank you to our incredible Rainbow Club team: our Rainbow Club teachers, volunteer teaching assistants, youth volunteers, and Fairbeats music leaders, all whose dedication, hard work, and compassion make the Rainbow Club such a wonderful place that welcomes the families each week. Everyone is thoroughly deserving of a restful winter break, and we look forward to continuing the fantastic work in the Spring term!

Advice and Casework - Improving Lives

As we approach the holiday period it is an important time to reflect on the significant and impactful work that our clients and caseworkers have undertaken together this year. Following the far right riots in August, in addition to the daily challenges of living under the Hostile Environment, many of our community have experienced increased anxiety and mental health issues. Despite this, our small team of four dedicated caseworkers have continued to provide complex, holistic casework to 115 families, notwithstanding these additional challenges.

We have continued to meet a high number of clients through our regular drop-ins and outreach at a local asylum support Hotel. Thanks to support from Lewisham Council hundreds of asylum seeking and refugee families have been able to access free expert advice on their Home Office support, housing, benefits and access to health and community care. Since August 100% of our clients who approached us as homeless under this project were supported into suitable accommodation. We have also been supporting a high number of newly arrived young asylum seekers. Due to Home Office failings these young men were living in destitution. However, thanks to the hard work of our casework team we have been able utilise our Pre Action Protocol Legal Project to support this group to access all of their entitlements. We will continue to support these clients to settle into our Lewisham community as they rebuild their lives.

The Casework and Advocacy Team's policy work has continued to grow this year. Responding quickly to casework trends on the ground, AFRIL's policy work is recognised across the sector as being dynamic and impactful. We have been working on amendments to extend the important housing standards under the Renters Rights Bill to Asylum Support Accommodation and NRPF housing. AFRIL has also used its place on the London Housing Panel to influence the Mayor of London's Rough Sleeping Plan, ensuring that this is effective in tackling migrant homelessness.

In October, AFRIL submitted a response to the call for evidence from the Department of Health to extend Healthy Start Vouchers to all children, regardless of immigration status. Our Senior Asylum Support Caseworker, Jess, co-produced this research with a group of AFRIL clients, placing the voice of families at the centre of AFRIL's response. AFRIL's advisory work with the Greater London Authority has also continued and our Casework and Advocacy Service is currently undertaking a piece of research on migrant resilience in London.

Despite the many challenges facing our community, in 2024 we supported a record number of clients, welcomed new families into our service and saw many of our community receive formal status in the UK. We look forward to continuing this work into 2025. Thank you for your support.

The Food Bank

AFRIL's Food Bank with St Peter's Church in Lee continues to be in high demand and fills a much needed gap in supporting families with no recourse to public funds on the 10 year human rights based route to settlement. Whilst our Immigration and Casework Projects work to resolve the underlying issues that lead people to poverty, the Food Bank provides safety, some food security, and community. This year we supported 199 people with regular food vouchers, fresh food and essential household supplies. In our annual survey 97% of food bank members said that knowing they will have a regular food parcel helps them to feel more secure.

Since her promotion in the summer, our Food Bank Coordinator Louise has focused on strengthening our valued partnerships with St Peter's Church, and the other brilliant Lewisham community organisations that we work with to meet our clients needs beyond food. These include MammaKind who deliver high quality baby items to parents in need, the church team who work tirelessly to gather donations from local schools and Women's Institute for the annual harvest. This year again we received support from Suttons Community Farm and Fareshare who donated fresh fruits and vegetables during the year.

With the success of our casework support and Immigration representation from Southwark Law Centre, we have supported several clients to improve their living circumstances and move on from the Food Bank to mainstream services.

The Food Bank was thrilled to receive a Certificate of Recognition from Good Food Lewisham for our work to support the good food movement which helped Lewisham to secure a Sustainable Food Place Silver Award. Our Food Bank Coordinator has proactively contributed to research on the impact of cash first approaches on people's quality of life for the local authority in partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. This included facilitating client interviews with people keen to contribute their experiences and views to this important body of research relating to food security.

We closed the year with a brilliant visit from Brenda Dacres, Mayor of Lewisham, to see the Food Bank work in action in the community. We are now preparing for the Festive Season and have many presents to distribute to all the children attending the Food Bank, alongside seasonal treats. Presents were donated by The Scouts, NEPOMAK, ABC Books, MomBooks, The Salvation Army and Lush; and families receive extra food vouchers this week thanks to the support of our funders the Angus Lawson Memorial Trust.

Winter at our Allotment of Refuge

Our Allotment of Refuge has spent the last few months transitioning from harvest season to winter, with help from our wonderful community of allotment volunteers and members. We're also very excited to have welcomed Reu to the team who will be taking over from Rose whilst she is on maternity leave! Congratulations Rose and welcome Reu!

Our fortnightly harvests have provided much needed fresh greens for the AFRIL Food Bank. As the growing season ended (and whilst we still had sunlight!) we replaced the harvest sessions with shed building! We are currently overwintering lots of seedlings in our polytunnel in preparation for spring, and have made sure our beds are all thickly mulched with delicious organic manure.

One of our regular volunteers built a new bed around a very healthy perpetual spinach growing out of the path in the area where we lost the willow tree to floods in the summer. While the new bed area looks really smart, we hope we haven't broken the spinach plant's spirit by enclosing it inside a border!

Rainbow Club children from Mango class came to the allotment as their outdoor classroom in October. They really enjoyed exploring our varied green space, seeing organic food growing and biodiversity in action. The children then used their creative skills to make cane toppers from air dry clay.

Our volunteers with lived experience of the immigration system continue to navigate the UK's hostile immigration system, which purposefully makes their lives difficult. They regularly report feeling supported and cared for by other volunteers when they talk about the impact of it within the Tuesday group.

And last, but not least, our Allotment Project Lead went on Maternity Leave - we would like to take this opportunity to wish her and her family all the best for their new chapter! In January, we will welcome Reu as our Allotment Project Lead whilst Rose is on maternity leave. Reu brings a wealth of experience in community food growing and engaging projects with volunteers, and we are very excited for them to join the team!

AFRIL's AGM!

Please save the date! Saturday 1st February at 2pm at the Salvation Army in central Lewisham for AFRIL's Annual General Meeting. You will hear from our Project leads, Trustees and most importantly the people who AFRIL supports. It's always a vibrant event, and child friendly!

Ways to support AFRIL...

Make a donation to support our work https://www.afril.org.uk/donate/

Volunteer at our Allotment of Refuge - email info@afril.org.uk

Ask a friend to sign up to our newsletter by clicking this link.

Stay in touch...

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

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