

Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)  
Charity No. 1177990

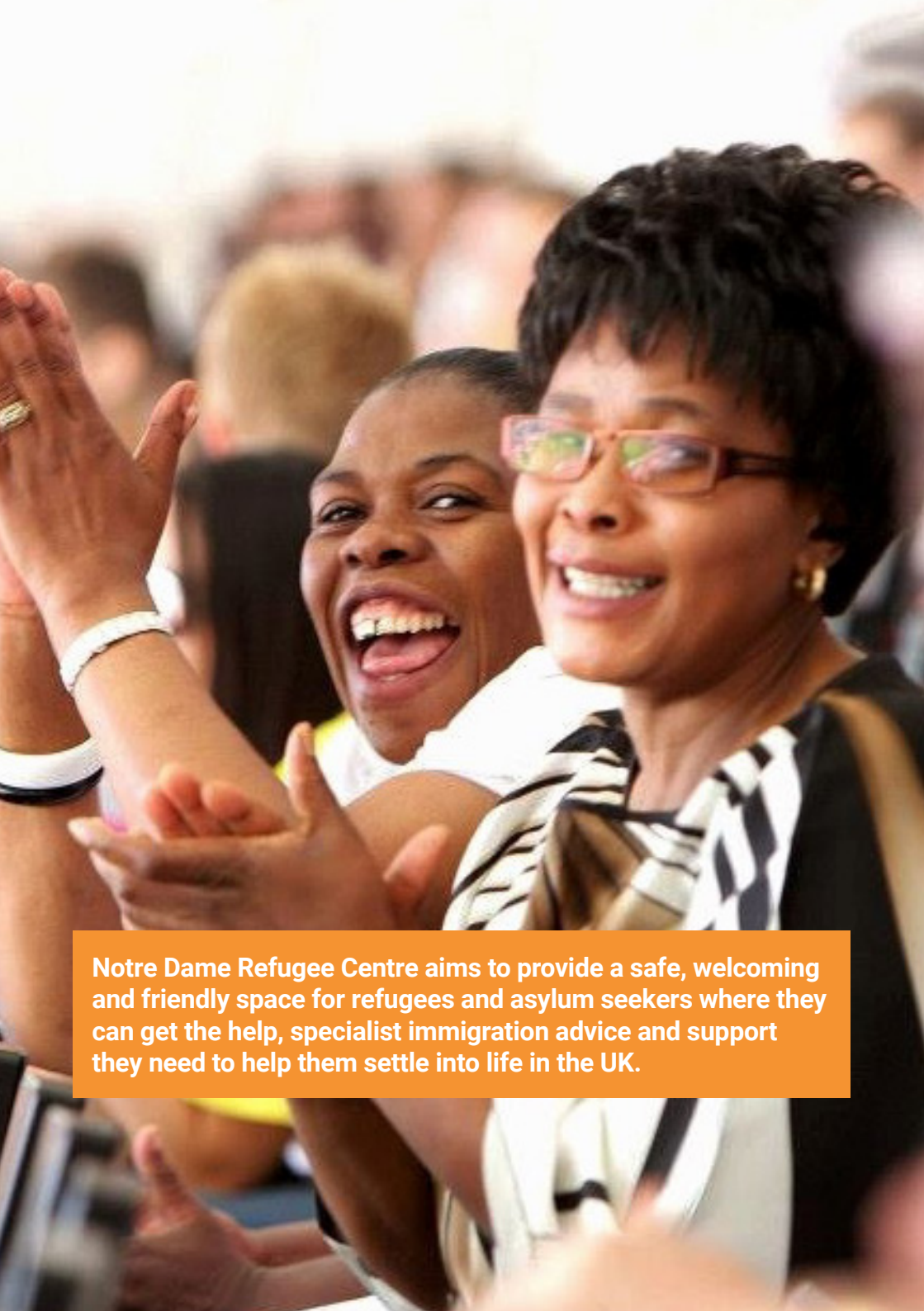
# NOTRE DAME REFUGEE CENTRE



## Annual Review 2022-23

*For the year to 31 August 2023*





**Notre Dame Refugee Centre aims to provide a safe, welcoming and friendly space for refugees and asylum seekers where they can get the help, specialist immigration advice and support they need to help them settle into life in the UK.**

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# A Word From Our Chair

Notre Dame Refugee Centre **performs a vital service in London to the many migrants and refugees seeking to achieve legal status in the UK.** Advice from lawyers is costly and prohibitive to those who have little or no recourse to public funds, so that centres such as ours provide a lifeline, in terms of free immigration advice, support in applications to the Home Office, and where necessary, general advice on health and housing.

While focusing mainly on legal advice, the Centre also offers language classes, access to clothing and food help, and hot meals once or twice a week, since our clients need more than simply to obtain the correct papers. Visitors are welcomed at the Drop In by volunteers who are anxious to show that there is indeed a welcome for those who have arrived without papers, despite the negative attitudes in many quarters of society.

The Centre obtains its funds from donations and charitable foundations, but it could not exist without its many sympathetic volunteers, and the generous support of Notre Dame de France, the French Church adjacent to the Centre, its original founder.

I myself have been involved in refugee issues for many years, whether as a campaigner or a supporter of a homeless shelter, so I appreciate the dedication of the Notre Dame Refugee Centre staff. They offer a very focused service to large numbers of people trying to establish

a dignified and settled way of life for themselves and their families.

It has been a privilege to be a Trustee of the Centre for the last few years, and a Chairperson more recently, so as to support the hardworking and efficient staff of the Centre. Despite its modest premises, our staff achieve excellent results for hundreds of clients every year. **I am proud to be associated with the team.**



**Barbara Kentish**

*Chair of the Trustees*



Client trip to visit the sights of London



# ABOUT US

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Based in the vibrant heart of London's Leicester Square, Notre Dame Refugee Centre was first established in 1996. The centre was originally founded by the Notre Dame de France Church. Our mission is rooted in the commitment to providing a safe, welcoming and friendly space for refugees and asylum seekers by offering essential assistance and support as they navigate life in the UK.

At the core of our services is the Immigration Advice Line, where people receive free advice from our Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC)-registered immigration advisers. Our advisers address a spectrum of complex immigration issues including Immigration Appeals, Family Reunion, Leave to Remain Applications and Refugee Settlement applications.

Our commitment to holistic support is evident in our bi-weekly drop-in sessions, offering a range of activities. During our drop-in sessions, we run English classes (9 classes each week) from Beginners to Intermediate. We have also run several art classes.

On drop-in days, our committed team of volunteers provide general advice and support to address a wide range of tasks such as applying for travel documents,

liaising with councils, registering at the GP and applying for replacement BRP cards. We also offer food and companionship, creating a space where people can experience a sense of belonging.

Until March 2023, we were offering 1-1 counselling, a service which was ceased as the charity decided to concentrate its resources on the specialist immigration advice and the associated services offered through the drop-in. However, referral links are now being made with specialist agencies that offer therapeutic support, particularly for those who may be traumatised through their experiences of war, torture and persecution.

In line with our commitment to collaboration, we also work in partnership with Women for Refugee Women. Through this partnership, two of our advisers extend an Outreach advice service to WRW's clients ensuring a broader reach in supporting those in need of immigration support.



## Welcoming a New Director

In July 2023, Notre Dame Refugee Centre welcomed **Christina Ball** as our new Director of Operations and Fundraising.

Christina brings with her a wealth of experience in managing and developing charities, having worked primarily in homelessness and addiction services. She was recently Director at a night shelter in Hackney where she developed a year-round shelter as well as a unique women's shelter for the most vulnerable homeless women. She was also Executive Director of a large foodbank in Tower Hamlets, and has a passion for providing high quality services that are aimed at those who are most marginalised and excluded.

Christina also has a strong commitment to equality and diversity within charities and strives to ensure that all people are included and valued.

“ “ “

*I am delighted to be working alongside such a great team of staff and volunteers who show such dedication, passion and commitment to our clients and visitors. I'm looking forward to being part of this truly inspirational charity and helping to sustain and drive forward our work over the coming months and years.*

**Christina Ball**

# A FAMILY REUNION

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A client from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who had served in the Congolese army was granted Refugee status in 2022, having faced persecution from the military. After bravely exposing the military's atrocities to international NGOs she was ultimately arrested and imprisoned until she was able to escape.

She would later find refuge in neighbouring African countries, hoping for an opportunity to return home following a regime change in 2015. But, despite the regime change, the new President's ties to the old regime left our client feeling insecure about returning home. Seeking safety, she found refuge in a European country before arriving in the UK in 2018. Her refugee status was then granted in 2022.

**Our involvement enabled us to support this client with making a family reunion application so that she could be reunited with her three teenage boys who she had been separated from for 11 years.**

Tragically, as we awaited a decision on the application one son was brutally murdered by a gang associated with our client's persecutors which placed the remaining children in imminent danger. Following her son's shocking death, our adviser managed to get the visa applications expedited and entry clearance issued within weeks. With

expedited visas, the two sons arrived in the UK, traumatised and shaken by their experiences, especially the eldest son having narrowly escaped a similar fate to his deceased brother. Both teenage boys also experienced a great culture shock as they tried to adjust to life in the UK.

We discussed the best way to ease some of the stress and anxiety the boys felt, particularly for the eldest boy. He was offered a place in our twice-weekly ESOL classes, and we supported him with his travel costs from Bromley. He regularly attended our beginners ESOL class on Mondays and Thursdays where he made new friends among the other students.

Unfortunately, the family were recently made homeless and were forced to relocate to Peterborough and are currently in emergency accommodation. We hope they will find secure permanent housing in London so we can continue to provide them with our services.

***The resilience of this family underscores the importance of ongoing support and understanding in their journey to rebuild their lives.***



## Immigration Advice

Over the year, 1,022 people sought the help of Notre Dame Refugee Centre, the majority wanting immigration advice from our specialist advisers, who are regulated by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner at Levels 1 to 3. This ensures that we offer the highest standards of advice to our clients. In addition, we are registered with AQS (Advice Quality Standard) which guarantees that we work within a rigorous framework of policies, procedures and quality measures.

There were 1,299 separate matters dealt with. Some of our most successful outcomes were in Human Rights applications, which included securing

Leave to Remain for 82 individuals, Refugee Settlement obtained for 42 people, 38 successful fee waivers were granted, 9 registrations as a British Citizen and 10 successful family reunions. Our advisers also gave housing and benefits advice on our Advice Line during one session each week.

Our visitors originated from more than 80 countries across the world, with many being from French-speaking African countries. Notre Dame Refugee Centre is the only London refugee charity which has advisers who are bi-lingual in French and English.



*I love the caring atmosphere here, I feel good here with you all, you help us to integrate into British society- I congratulate you!*

## Women for Refugee Women

The specialist outreach project run in collaboration with Women for Refugee Women supported 139 women with immigration advice, and pastoral support for vulnerable women, some of whom were victims of torture in their home countries and continue to suffer extreme hardship here in the UK.

Since 2017, Notre Dame Refugee Centre has partnered with this specialist women's charity and we employ two part-time female immigration advisers to work exclusively in supporting WRW network members, who are asylum seeking or refugee women.

## Some of the ways we made a difference in 2022-23:



**1,022** people sought our help



Immigration Advisers case-worked **466** cases



**10** successful family reunions



**1911** visits to our Drop-in



**42** people obtained Refugee Settlement



obtained **82** Leave to Remain



**33** volunteers supported our work



Free Advice Line open **9 hours** each week



**62** learners attended English classes



**139** women supported through specialist Outreach\*

*\*partnership with Women for Refugee Women*

## Learning English

Notre Dame Refugee Centre ran nine free English classes every week during term time. The lessons are popular, with tailored lessons from pre-beginners through to intermediate levels, with most classes now taking place on site, with between 3 and 12

learners attending each class. Our tutors are all ESOL qualified and work with us as volunteers, generously giving their time and expertise.



*The best thing is the way you help people, particularly with learning English. When I arrived in the UK I didn't speak a word of English, but thanks to your lessons, today I am starting to be able to get by in English, little by little.*

## General Support

Alongside our specialist immigration advice, we provided general support and advice on a variety of matters - getting travel documents, replacement BRP cards, registering with health services such as GPs and dentists, understanding official

documents and correspondence, and signposting to other support agencies. As always, our volunteer advisers were on hand to give advice, support and guidance.

## Welcoming at Our Drop-in

Our drop-in runs twice a week on a Monday and Thursday and anyone who is a refugee or asylum seeker can come along and have snacks and hot beverages, and we try to give a hot meal when food donations and the availability of cooks allow. Over the year

we received a weekly supply of donated food from the Felix Project, which we are able to either cook and serve or pass on to clients through a small "foodbank" facility.

## Clothes Store and Hardship Grants

Our clothing store offers good quality donated used clothing for those who are in need and often destitute. We also occasionally receive donations of new toiletries and other essential items which we distribute to our visitors. For those who

are destitute or struggling with money, as many of our clients are, we offered small hardship grants and help with travel costs to the Centre to attend English classes.

## Other Projects and Initiatives

Clients of Notre Dame Refugee Centre took part in a project run by Caritas Westminster and Mayday Trust which asked people seeking sanctuary what a “good life” would look like. The resultant “Wisdoms” report was highly thought-provoking and we hope to work alongside Caritas to continue these conversations into the future.

Over the year, we took part in Advice UK’s Measuring What Matters project, with 11 other advice-giving charities who all work

with marginalised and disadvantaged people. This partnership work is going to continue over the next two years and will be looking at the way advice charities work with funding partners and whether there are better or different ways of monitoring and evaluating our work which can provide more meaningful data, including how we listen to the voices of those who use our services.



I was given *100% support* by my Adviser.

The caseworker was very *helpful and professional and knowledgeable*.

Great community, great advice, *very warm*, so professional.

The centre is *humanely great*.

The *caring* atmosphere; it’s very *sociable and personable*.

My experience *was excellent*.



## Case Study

# HANNA

*a Women for Women Refugee Outreach Client*

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Hanna, a resilient Eritrean refugee, lives in a council home with her six-year-old son, Samuel. Having arrived in the UK in 2009, Hanna finally received refugee status in 2020. Throughout her six-year journey within the *Women for Refugee Women* network, she has faced a myriad of challenges and has been supported with asylum support assistance, asylum maternity payments, immigration and asylum advice as well as a successful Family Reunion Visa (FRV) application for her elder son, Isais, who she had been separated from since 2008.

Despite positive progress being made in many areas, the past year has brought its own set of tribulations for Hanna as she required intense support in several complex and emotionally fraught matters. Although granted an FRV in 2020, Isais has faced obstacles leaving Ethiopia due to the challenging political situation for Eritrean refugees as the authorities continued to refuse him an Exit Visa. Our adviser liaised with the International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the British Embassy in an attempt to resolve the situation. Unfortunately, there is still no clear path for Isais to leave but negotiations with the Home Office offer a glimmer of hope as they are taking an active role in resolving the Exit Visa issues.

Hanna's transition to a new council flat in September 2022 was met with yet another hurdle. Universal Credit failed to correctly reorganise Hanna's housing payments which led to massive underpayments and rent arrears being incorrectly attributed to her. *Hanna's experience depicts the struggles that many refugees face as they navigate systems within the UK. We supported Hanna with appealing to Universal Credit and prevented her imminent eviction through close communication with the rent team.* After a year-long struggle, the situation has now been resolved.

Despite Samuel being British by virtue of his British biological father, Hanna faced challenges when she applied for his first British passport. A misunderstanding of her marital status by HM Passport Office resulted in a rejection. *Working with a pro-bono solicitor, we embarked on the process of registering Samuel as a British Citizen*, with an application submitted in July 2023, awaiting an outcome.

Hanna's case highlights the interconnected support needs of women like her, demonstrating the importance of an holistic adviser who can address their needs simultaneously. Navigating various agencies can often be counterproductive and stressful, *so we are proud to be able to support clients in this way.*

## Spotlight on Volunteers

More than 30 volunteers supported Notre Dame Refugee Centre throughout the year, taking on a variety of vital roles within the charity, such as general support advisers, teaching English, preparing and serving food, extending a welcome on our reception desk. Many of our volunteers are both French and English speaking.

Not being able to speak English can prevent many refugees from getting a job or making new friends. One of the fundamental ways to assist people to settle into their new life is to help them to acquire the language skills that enable them to feel less isolated, by integrating into British society and its way of life.

*Lewis and Joseph, Notre Dame Refugee Centre Volunteers*



# JANE

*A Volunteer English Tutor*



““““

I have been teaching at Notre Dame Refugee Centre for many years now. We are a close knit team and I really enjoy the strong sense of camaraderie.

I also get a lot out of teaching the students. They come from many different countries, have very different levels of education and life experiences, so it is very rewarding discovering things about them and their cultures.

Teaching here is different to a more traditional school, and it can be more challenging. Students usually have very difficult life stories, so cannot be asked too much about their history for example. They also can have hugely variable levels of education, some having barely attended school with poor literacy and some who are university educated. However, this makes it extremely rewarding. Although students

can have chaotic and difficult lives here in the UK, they are generally very motivated to learn everything about the UK, not just the language. We don't work from standard text books or a set syllabus in order to meet their varying needs, so that makes it more interesting and creative. The lessons have to work for all the students.

It is also nice to see how the students progress. We always aim to move them up to more advanced levels when we can, with the objective of moving them into more formal classes at traditional colleges. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to move them on when we would like to, due to lack of availability of classes for those who do not have settled status. When it works out, and we see that progression, it makes it really worthwhile.

# Our Finances

## Income and Expenditure Summary 2022-23 To Year End 31 August 2023

<i>Income</i>	£
Grants	260,143
Donations	84,525
Donations in kind	70,000
Interest	995
<b>Total income</b>	<b>415,663</b>

Most of Notre Dame Refugee Centre's income is from charitable trusts and foundations, with in-kind donations (for accommodation and some administrative support) also forming a significant proportion of our income. [2022-23 donations totalled £84,525](#) (primarily as the result of two large one-off donations).

<i>Expenditure</i>	£
Staff costs	265,439
Administrative costs	15,000
Client counselling and advice services	12,370
Client services	6,107
Relief grants	724
Accommodation	55,000
Premises and maintenance	7,570
Telephone	3,346
Other costs	31,464
Governance costs	2,760
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>399,780</b>

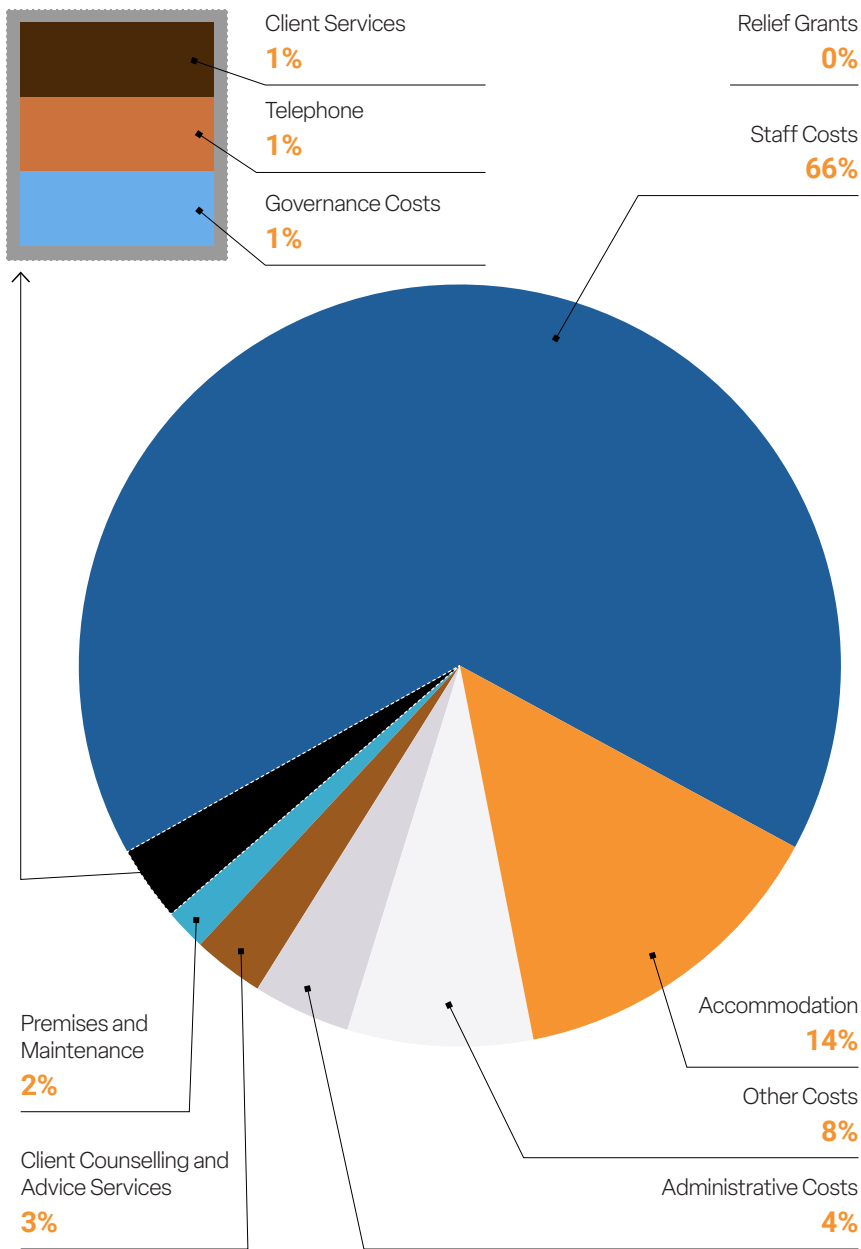
## How we spend our money

The largest proportion of our outgoing expenditure is for staff costs, with the second largest category being accommodation and administration (which is donated as gifts-in-kind and matches income shown above).

Notre Dame Refugee Centre's full accounts are available on the Charity Commissioner website.



# Expenditure Breakdown



# Thank You to All Our Supporters

We would like to thank everyone who has supported the charity throughout the year. Special thanks go to the volunteers who have given their time and energy so willingly to provide a warm welcome to our visitors, and to the many individuals who have supported us financially through donations and regular giving. We would also like to thank those who have given used clothing, toiletries and gifts for our clients.

We are also very grateful to the charitable trusts and foundations, local companies, faith organisations, schools and others who have been so generous.

There are too many to acknowledge here, but everyone at the charity appreciates the support you have given us.

We could not have achieved so much over the past year without this support and encouragement. We know that we speak for our clients and their families when we extend a heart-felt *“Thank You”*.

## *Supporters over the year have included:*

- Notre Dame de France Church (London)
- London Churches Refugee Fund
- Lloyds Bank Foundation
- Trust for London
- City Bridge Trust
- Women for Refugee Women
- The Charles Plater Trust
- London Catalyst (Samaritan Grants)
- St. John Southworth
- Porticus
- Advice UK Cornerstone Project
- London Community Foundation
- Garfield Weston
- The Marist Community at NDF

## Future Plans

Over the coming year, the Charity's key areas of focus are:

- To develop our strategy to ensure that we are sustainable in the longer-term and to ensure that we are offering the services that people want and need
- To review our fundraising and communications and develop plans to diversify our income, and raise awareness of the charity and its work
- To develop the drop-in and community café so that it is a welcoming space for clients and offers the activities that they would like to participate in
- To offer a wider range of volunteering opportunities, recruiting and training volunteers
- To develop an "Experts by Experience" client involvement project



### London Legal Walk, 2023

*Every year, a group of staff, volunteers and clients take part in the London Legal Walk to raise money for the Centre's work. In July 2023, a group of these intrepid walkers covered the 10K route from the Royal Courts of Justice around London's parks and waterways and raised over £6,000.*

## Contact us:

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