

REFUGEE LEGAL SUPPORT

2017 - 2020

This report covers the period from our foundation in 2017 to 2020

Refugee Legal Support works in solidarity with refugees in Europe who seek asylum and reunion with close family members in the UK and EU member states. From 2017-2020 the majority of our work has been in Greece and the UK.

We provide free, expert legal support, casework, outreach, training, partnerships, capacity building and support strategic litigation.



RLS lawyer advises a Syrian refugee on family reunification matters. © Sarah Booker

- We assist vulnerable, marginalised adults and children who seek sanctuary from war, persecution and famine. We provide free face-to-face legal advice, conduct casework, and represent clients in family reunification claims to the UK and other Member States and in asylum claims within Greece.
- We disseminate information on asylum and immigration to refugees in settlements, camps and online in a range of languages.
- We lobby the UK and European governments and advocate for the rights of refugees in the media.
- We build expert capacity by providing training in asylum and family reunification for lawyers, law firms and NGOs.

We provide desperately needed legal expertise in a climate of political instability and uncertainty, providing a lifeline of hope and legal routes to safety for refugees.

Refugee Legal Support was awarded the Lexis Nexis Pro Bono Award 2018.

Our impact in figures

We have assisted more than 550 primary applicants with their legal cases, often for families with four or five children.

- 70% of asylum claims for our clients succeeded, resulting in either refugee status or subsidiary protection (Greek average 49.6%)
- 66% of our family reunification cases have been successful
- 30% of the family reunification applicants we represented are children
- 100% of our family reunification cases unaccompanied children have been successful

We have provided training to more than 100 lawyers in Greece and the UK to build capacity to provide legal support to refugees in Greece. 76 experienced refugee lawyers volunteered in Refugee Legal Support clinics supported by our coordinator, legal assistant and community interpreters.



Syrian refugees journey from the island of Lesbos to Athens. © Sarah Booker

Our clients in person

- A boy who lost his entire immediate family to a bomb in Afghanistan was living on the streets in Athens despite being highly vulnerable. Our legal team represented this Afghan boy through the legal systems in Greece and the UK to reunite him with close relatives in the UK where he will be safe and cared for, as every child deserves.
- We assisted a woman from Turkey to join her husband and three children in the UK. This case would have not been successful had the husband not received legal support from one of our UK volunteer lawyers.
- We assisted a Pakistani unaccompanied minor who arrived in Greece at the beginning of 2017. When he came to our clinic he was only 16 years old, without documents. Our team registered his asylum claim and lodged his application for family reunification with his uncle in Germany. Sixteen months later he was finally reunited with his uncle in Germany.



Syrian refugees relocate from camps on Lesbos to Athens. Few are accompanied by UNHCR or provided with accommodation - the majority are left to fend for themselves while they wait for a decision on their case. © Sarah Booker

Casework

We work on complex cases of asylum and family reunification. Our work has ranged from challenging the poor decisions of the Dublin Unit of the German Federal Office for Immigration and Refugees (BAMF) to identifying and assisting asylum applicants who had been lost in the Greek Asylum Service system for years.

We have worked on a wide range of cases Dublin Family Reunification cases where the UK is the receiving state. To date all of these cases have been successful. Our UK immigration and public law expertise enabled us successfully to challenge excessive delays and poor decision-making by the UK Home Office.

For some who approach us for assistance what is needed is simply advice about options or indeed the lack of options. Information may need to be explained and unpacked several times before it is fully absorbed.

What marks us out from others doing similar work is our proactive determination to achieve an improvement in clients' situations and our persistence. We have been one of the few organisations taking on difficult-to-win discretionary applications for Dublin family reunification.

A respectful focus on the empowerment of our clients and enabling them to take informed choices underpins everything we do.

Outreach

In Greece we conduct outreach in refugee camps and informal settlements, providing reliable, up-to-date information to help refugees and NGOs working with them to access legal advice and uphold their rights.

In a world of shifting positions and misinformation, we aim to ensure children and adults are informed of their rights and make timely applications for family reunification.

Capacity building

We provide training in person and online to lawyers, law firms and NGOs to build expertise in immigration, asylum and family reunification law. We also provide updates on changes to the law. Lawyers who volunteer with us or partner projects are supervised and gain invaluable experience.

Advocacy

We lobby the UK and European governments and advocate for the rights of refugees in the media. In partnership with other NGOs that work to uphold the rights of refugees, we lobby the UK and EU governments and institutions on urgent and emerging issues.

Why Greece? Why Athens?

Greece has become the border guard of Europe. Every 20 minutes across the world someone flees their home to escape war, persecution or terror. Many end up trapped in Greece.

The United Nations' latest figures show more than 79 million people globally were displaced by the end of 2019. Today, an estimated 115,000 refugees are in Greece. Approximately 40,000 of these people are living precariously on a handful of Eastern Aegean Greek islands, far outstripping the islands' capacity.

In Athens, thousands of refugees stay in ad hoc settlements such as squats and abandoned areas. Many are unaccompanied children and families unsupported by the Greek state or NGOs. They may live in limbo in this way for years.

- **Unaccompanied children face homelessness, destitution and are vulnerable to abuse and trafficking**
- **Families are separated** for years while their applications for reunification are processed
- **Living conditions** in refugee camps are horrendous and in breach of international standards and obligations
- **Detention** is being used arbitrarily, including for minors
- **There is no state funded legal aid** for asylum interview preparation or family reunification, demand for lawyers far outstrips supply

None of this is controversial. It is well documented by international and EU institutions and monitoring bodies. The majority of our clients say that they want to leave Greece but that they would want to stay if the system was more efficient and if they knew they would have the support they need to rebuild their lives in safety and security.

The high levels of new arrivals into Greece mean some of our clients who applied for asylum have interview dates as far ahead as 2026, while appointments for 2021 or 2022 are routine.

Many of the unaccompanied children we represent have been waiting for a response to their family reunification applications from other Member States for more than eighteen months, leaving them depressed, anxious, panicked, suicidal and at risk of falling prey to smugglers and traffickers.

Finances

Below is an extract from our latest certified accounts, ending 31 March 2020

Statement of Financial Activities
for the Year Ended 31 March 2020

Unrestrict fund Notes £		
INCOME AND ENDOWMENTS FROM		
Donations and legacies		81,688
EXPENDITURE ON		
Raising funds	2	5,921
Charitable activities		
GRANTS		21,776
Other		9,373

Total		37,070

NET INCOME		44,618
RECONCILIATION OF FUNDS		
Total funds brought forward		11,095

TOTAL FUNDS CARRIED FORWARD		55,713

The future

Refugees and the NGOs that support them are facing unprecedented challenges in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affects displaced people. Refugee camps have been locked down in efforts to prevent the spread of the virus in a highly vulnerable community, but this leaves people trapped indefinitely and denied any but the most basic support. NGOs like Refugee Legal Support are largely prevented from providing the services we exist to deliver under these conditions.

Political developments in Greece and the UK have created further obstacles. The British government has removed commitments to children and for family reunification from the EU Withdrawal Act. For many this means there will be no clear legal route to the UK from December 2020. New regulations in Greece require NGOs that work with refugees to restructure.

Refugee Legal Support is committed to continuing to uphold and defend the rights of refugees, ensuring access to justice for some of the most marginalised people in the world today. Like our clients, we are resourceful and determined.



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