

Rising to the challenge



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RLS at a glance

Our work

Refugee Legal Support (RLS) has three key areas of work, delivered by a small dedicated staff team and our network of volunteers:

● Legal support

We support families to be reunited with their loved ones in the UK and provide asylum and family reunion support in Greece.

● Community outreach

We reach out to migrant communities to provide up-to-date legal advice, both in person and online.

● Systems change

We provide a vital link between the legal sector and what's happening on the ground, as well as advocacy and raising awareness of the issues that are facing people forced to migrate.

“Contacting you was the best thing I’ve done for my family in the past year”

Key

- RLS location & clients
- Location of RLS clients



Welcome and contents

Our first annual report as a charity

Welcome to our impact report, covering the period October 2020 to September 2021.

We've been delivering services since 2017, but this is our first impact report as an established charity in England and Wales and as a civil non-profit company in Greece.

In the following pages, you'll find an introduction to RLS and our activity over the last year and a preview of what's coming up next year.

We've also included a quick snapshot of our financial info. For our full accounts, please contact nick.pilkington@refugeelegalsupport.org



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Our year

A message from our trustees

This year we've faced increasing hostility from European governments towards people on the move and those who represent them. Add Covid and Brexit to this and our legal expertise, creativity and sense of humanity were more important than ever. We're incredibly proud of how Refugee Legal Support has risen to the challenge.

In Greece, the lockdown forced us to rearrange our casework as Greek asylum procedures were suspended. We shifted focus to get post-Brexit information to migrant communities, produced online information in a number of languages and prioritised UK family reunion applications before the end of the Brexit transition period.

In the UK we responded to Brexit with the launch of a collaboration with six commercial law firms. Together, we safeguard the narrow safe legal routes for refugees with family in the UK. We're now OISC registered, allowing us to provide vital immigration advice.

In response to the unfolding situation in Afghanistan we've again demonstrated our agility with the rapid development of our new Afghan Pro Bono initiative.

In many ways, organisationally, we end the year in a stronger position than ever. We're now an independent charity in the UK, registered in Greece and we've dramatically increased our delivery capacity.

However, the UK's response to small boats crossing the Channel and the Greek government's persistence with life-threatening pushbacks and hostility to migrant communities mean that life is as dangerous for people seeking asylum as it has ever been.

A strong legal voice is essential to support people forced to migrate. We'll continue to provide legal support to those who need us and use the tools available to us from domestic and international law to safeguard the last legal routes available to those on the move.

A message from the team

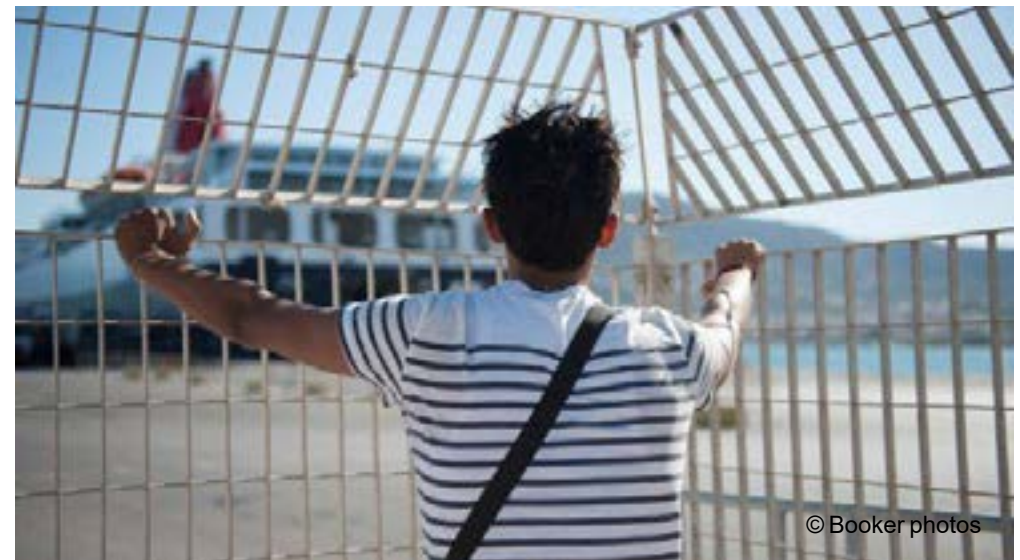
This year was extremely difficult for the people we work with as the Covid-crisis and Brexit complicated an already inhumane and exhausting asylum process.

The Greek government has made every effort to exhaust refugees and those who support them. Asylum support cuts, decreeing Turkey a safe third country, arbitrary cancellation and rescheduling of asylum interviews and penalties for asylum seekers who arrive without a Covid test paint a picture of the EU drifting away from its founding principles.

In the UK things are no better, illustrated by preparations for pushbacks for small boats in the Channel and the ongoing confusion that Brexit has created.

Add to this the shortfall in Legal Aid immigration provision and we had our hands full.

Our work's been more important than ever. As you'll see in the pages that follow, this has been a transformational year for RLS and we'll continue to do all that we can to fight for the rights of people forced to migrate.



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Our impact

Samir's* story

Samir's just 17 but has already spent two years on the run after fleeing detention and torture in his home country. He's been living on the outskirts of the squalid Vathy camp on Samos, which was built for 650 people but hosts 3,000. Outbreaks of scabies and bedbugs are common and rats run freely between the tents in search of food.

At Vathy, Samir was afraid to leave his tent due to the severe bullying he received, which he puts down to his speech impediment. He often had rocks thrown at him, has had his phone stolen after being stabbed and has even been the victim of sexual assault from older men. Samir was reluctant to leave his tent even to go to the toilet and couldn't get food from collection points as it would be stolen. The food he was able to secure and store in his tent was often eaten by rats before he could get to it.

It's no surprise that Samir's welfare and mental health suffered.

Samir has two brothers who have been granted asylum in the UK but his application to join them was rejected as he was registered as an adult in Greece. This followed a controversial and unscientific dental examination in place of a proper age assessment. After the UK left the EU, judicial review was Samir's last hope.

"I'm not safe here. Whenever I leave the tent I'm scared. I feel I might die before I see my brothers"

Through a collaboration between Refugee Legal Support, Garden Court Chambers, One Pump Court Chambers and Bindman's Solicitors, we launched a successful public law challenge. Samir recently arrived in the UK. He's finally been reunited with his family and can begin to find the stability to get on with his life.



100 families given advice to reunite in the UK



450 people helped through our social media and direct channels



98 people signposted to other organisations for support

*Names and other personal details have been changed to protect identities.

Legal support: Greece

“I waited so long, but I’m happy now”

The situation in Greece



This year, the coronavirus crisis and hostile Greek government policies have presented new and unprecedented challenges to people forced to migrate.

The Greek asylum process has become more challenging than ever, with authorities now giving extremely short notice for asylum interviews, making it almost impossible for people in the process of seeking asylum to find a lawyer in time. At the same time, changes to admissibility rules and an opaque move to online applications have made the process more difficult than ever.

Greece’s Eastern Aegean islands continue to be the first place in Europe that people fleeing violence and persecution often land. And that’s where they’re often stuck, crammed into prison-like camps and appalling conditions. People are often isolated on the islands and those with family in the UK are left uninformed following the end of the Brexit implementation period.

In October around 36,000 asylum seekers and refugees across Greece were left without cash for weeks, while replacement catering services weren’t available to all who were eligible and the food was often inedible as it was undercooked. In addition, unaccompanied children are currently unable to access any cash support.

This all comes on top of significant unmet need as people are struggling with no legal advice and with rumour and misinformation rife.

Our response in Athens

Our Athens team provides asylum interview preparation, support with family reunion applications and outreach and signposting.

We’ve had to be as agile as ever this year. We took **37 cases on for direct casework and gave 305 people information, signposting and other support**. We’ve made a number of changes to ensure we’re meeting emerging needs, including:

Short-notice interview preparation

We’re providing help to clients on-demand to ensure that asylum claims aren’t knocked off-course by unreasonable scheduling.

Focussing on admissibility interview preparation and representation using expert evidence following changes to Greek admissibility rules.

Our response on the islands

In January we established an RLS presence on Lesbos for the first time.

We launched the project with three key aims:

- to provide expert legal information and casework assistance targeting family reunion cases to the UK
- to assess and document the systemic barriers that people seeking asylum are facing in accessing UK family reunion procedures
- To increase the casework capacity at Legal Centre Lesbos

The Islands Project was first established as a 6-month pilot. With need in the region clear, we’ve committed to a permanent presence here through our Islands Coordinator.

The situation in the UK

The last year has been a traumatic one for migrants and asylum seekers in the UK. Since January, the end of the Brexit implementation period has killed one of the very few safe and legal routes for them to bring their loved ones to join them in the United Kingdom: the Dublin Regulations.

Through the chaotic journey that follows when people flee their homeland, they're often separated from loved ones. The EU's Dublin system, though flawed in many ways,

is designed to cater to the needs of displaced people in the process of claiming asylum and family reunification at the same time. The Dublin Regulations provisions had less stringent evidential requirements than the UK domestic laws that have taken their place.

The end of the Dublin Regulations left people seeking family reunification almost completely uninformed, unprepared and with a host of questions.



Legal support: UK



Our response in the UK

We've launched the Family Reunion from Europe project in collaboration with six commercial law firms - Allen & Overy, Orrick, White & Case, Ashurst, Reed Smith and Simmons & Simmons - to provide accessible and high quality legal advice. Delivered remotely to people across the UK and their family members in Europe, this service keeps this vital route to family reunification open.

Under our expert supervision, our partner law firms provide pro bono legal support to separated families in the UK. We've primarily assisted people with family members stranded in Greece and France, as well as advising clients in Germany and Malta.

We provide specialist advice, guidance and information about UK

Immigration Rules, UK Legal Aid scope and Entry Clearance. We then prepare cases so they can be taken on by Legal Aid providers. In the event that a case can't be referred, we take on a limited number of cases for direct casework.

Though in its infancy, we've already helped 200 people through this project. We've also identified a number of unlawful decisions by the Home Office to refuse family reunification applications that predate the UK leaving the Dublin regulations. We've worked with partner law firms and barristers to challenge these decisions at judicial review. Permission to proceed has been granted to three cases, the Home Office agreed to settle five and litigation is ongoing for others.

Community outreach

The scale of need continues to present a challenge to RLS and the sector more widely. A key strategic aim this year has been reaching more people with information and signposting in a way that's accessible to everyone who might need it. This is particularly important in refugee communities who are often isolated and where rumour and misinformation are rife. People seeking asylum face complex and hostile legal systems where one wrong turn can be life changing.

This year, we've made significant strides in meeting these challenges as we've increased our reach and impact in three key ways.

1. Up-to-date online legal information



Our website is a key resource for Europe's refugee communities. It contains up-to-date legal information for people seeking asylum in seven languages and, crucially, in six languages in audio. This resource has

been vital this year due to Brexit and significant changes to Greek and EU law. Our online advice has allowed us to get high quality legal advice to people who need it.

2. 450 people helped via social media and other direct communication



Our social media support has continued to grow this past year. People who seek asylum often only have access to the internet on their phones and have limited data. Social media is a key source of information

and we field queries through our Facebook and WhatsApp accounts, where we provide basic advice, signposting and refer people to our caseworkers and other projects.

3. Outreach sessions and outreach collaborations



We've increased our physical reach this year with outreach activities.

Information sessions

We provided 18 sessions to 115 people last year, providing information on asylum claims and finding new clients.

Touring migrant camps with the mobile library

Working in collaboration with local

partners, we tour the camps that surround Athens and provide essential information in a number of languages, alongside outreach to find clients who need our support.

Presence in Lesvos camps

Our Islands Coordinator provides outreach to ensure that people on the islands are able to access legal information and support.



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Systems change - a bridge to the frontline

No matter the quality of our legal advice and support, the migration and asylum system remains the biggest factor in determining the experiences of people who are forced to migrate.

With the rights of migrants and refugees under threat across Europe, systems change is an essential

aspect of our work and our voice is a vital one. With decisions about the shape of the asylum system generally made far from the frontline, our presence on the ground, partnerships with the sector and legal expertise provide a vital link between elite audiences and the experiences of people forced to migrate.



Key activity

Documenting migrant experiences on the ground



With the situation changing rapidly, our work on the ground has been a vital source of information for the legal sector this year. This year we've:

- **Introduced our Islands Project** to document the systemic barriers faced by people on the Greek islands seeking asylum via UK family reunification procedures
- **Prepared UK civil society of what to expect from pushbacks in the Channel**, using our experience supporting pushback victims in the Aegean. Find the link [here](#).
- **Spoken at a number of events** to inform the legal sector of the challenges on the ground, including Garden Court Refugee Week, the Families Together Conference, and Khora's Beyond Barriers event.

Working with partners to amplify our voices



As events have unfolded over the year, we've worked with partners to bring the experiences of people forced to migrate to the authorities and advocate for change. Examples include challenging cuts to welfare support, ensuring victims of the Moria camp fire are rehoused and the decision to designate Turkey a safe country for migrants to return to.

Advocacy



Our presence on the ground and legal expertise provide a unique perspective that is vital to high level influencing. In May we provided a detailed response to the government's New Plan for Immigration consultation and responded to the Borders Bill when it was introduced.

Art at RLS

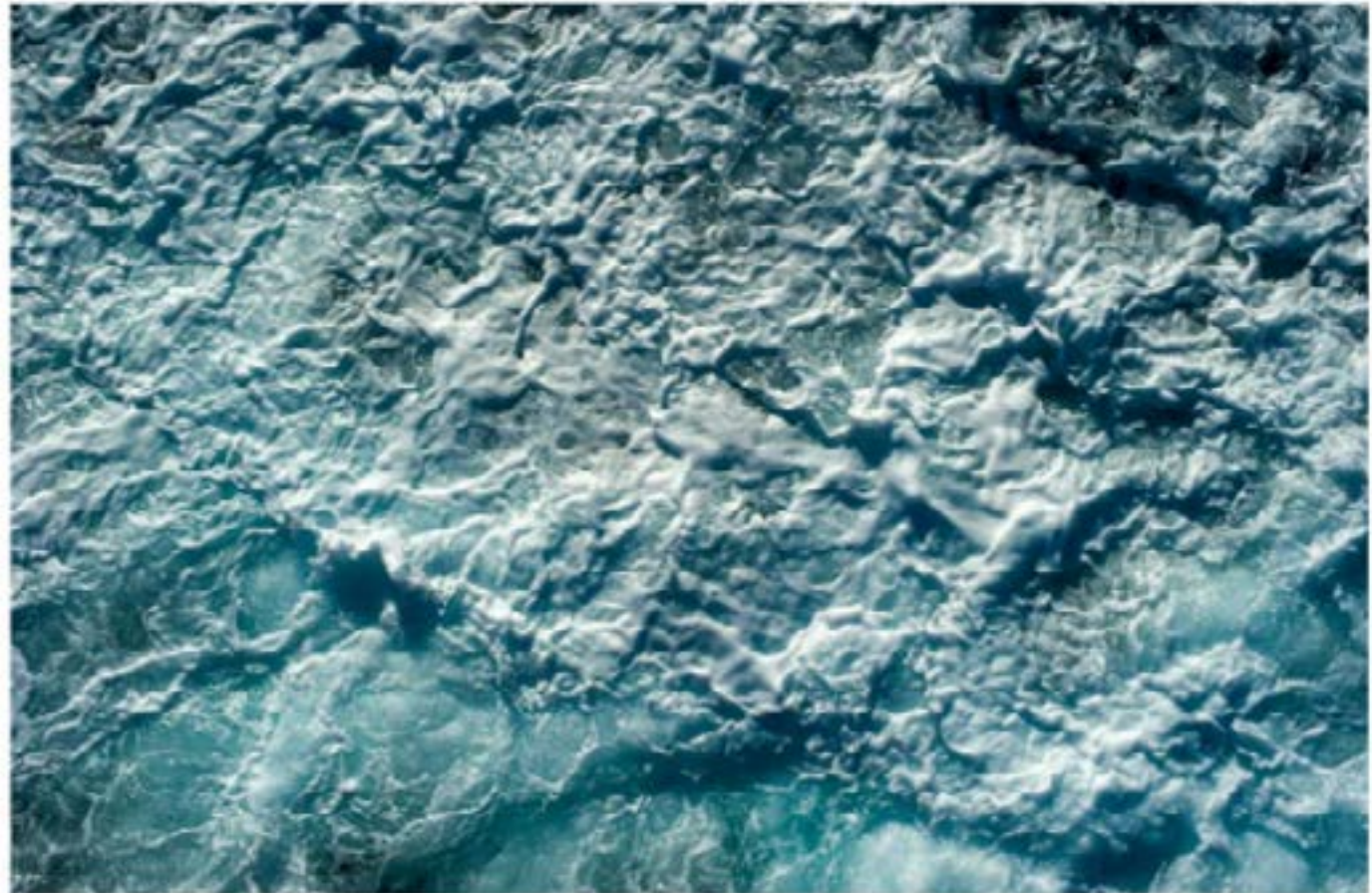
THE THREAT OF DAWN

The power of art

At RLS, we understand the power that art can have in providing a voice, building confidence and relationships and rehabilitation from trauma.

Our latest project, The Threat of Dawn, uses poetry and photography to help people forced to migrate who find themselves on Greece's Aegean islands to tell their stories.

Click on the image to see the work in full.



Looking forward

Our plans for the year ahead

The challenges that people forced to migrate face will continue to change over the next year and into the future. We're determined to be there to make sure that everyone who needs us has access to high quality migration and asylum information and legal support.

To make sure that we're meeting the need, we have 5 key priorities:

1 Increasing the number of people we can help

To help all of the people who need us, we need more capacity in the UK and in Greece.

2 Getting help to people fleeing Afghanistan

Our new collaboration with 14 commercial law firms will provide vital support to people forced to flee Afghanistan.

3 Supporting family reunion to the UK from Europe

In partnership with our law firm partners, we've worked hard to keep a route to family reunification from Europe to the UK open. Over the next year, we'll continue to fight for people's basic right to family life.

4 Community engagement and experts by experience

The law is often inaccessible to people who are forced to migrate. This has two main effects: people aren't getting the help that they need and therefore having their right to asylum denied; and that they have little influence over the laws and systems that affect them. This year, we plan to work with refugee communities to address both of these challenges.

5 Empowering people forced to migrate through art

We will use art as a tool to engage people with experience of migration and as a platform to share stories and experiences.

“the session was so informative - it was the first time I understood why they took my fingerprints and what had happened to me”

Armani & Amanuel's* story

Armani and Amanuel were forced to flee Eritrea's totalitarian government with their two babies. A difficult and dangerous journey, the family was separated along the way. Amanuel made it to the UK but Armani was stuck in Greece with the children. One of the babies was so young that his birth was yet to be registered, further complicating the asylum process.

The family was desperate to get back together, with Armani and the children suffering in highly inappropriate housing in Athens.

Through our community links, they found Refugee Legal Support. We helped Armani find housing and welfare support more appropriate for a woman who has just given birth.

We then helped the family to work through the steps that would be key to their application. This included helping Armani through the highly bureaucratic procedures for issuing documents for a newborn baby in Greece. We also accompanied Amanuel to the Greek Embassy in London to acquire all the documents they would need for their application.

Finally, we supported Armani with an application to join Amanuel in the UK, which was successful.

The family was recently reunited in London and continue their journey together.

*Names and other personal details have been changed to protect identities.



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Financial info

A special thank you to our supporters over the last year

Total income: £176,368



RLS Greece, the Greek non-profit company, had an income of €21,782, all of which is included in the above figure for total income.

For our full accounts, please contact Nick.Pilkington@RefugeeLegalSupport.org





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